

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract

This thesis consists of a manuscript of original Creative Nonfiction essays and a critical forward that makes a case for the use of Zines in secondary language arts pedagogy. The foreword situates Zines as self-published, counter-culture magazines that utilize materiality in order to enhance their rebellious narratives and rhetorical messages. After exploring the history of zines and creative nonfiction, the foreword highlights the use of zines as third spaces that utilize mundanity and personal experiences to create personal/political messaging. From these rebellious spaces, the foreword maintains that creative nonfiction provides a means for exploring and questioning the nebulous structures of genre. The foreword proposes that because zines are self-published and counterculture, their production becomes a liminal practice in the secondary classroom that moves students from personal writing to academic genre study and on to the act of self-publishing. The foreword argues that integrating zines in the secondary language arts pedagogy can enhance engagement, teach the rhetorical use of design, promote co-authorship and co-operation, and enhance ownership in student editing. The original manuscript includes thirteen creative nonfiction essays and a Zine. The concepts of mundanity and rhetorical use of lived experience are demonstrated in the creative nonfiction and Zine, which interrogate the intersectional space of education, family, art, and gender.

Keywords:

Zine

Pedagogy

Genre study

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*FOUNDATIONS: A COLLECTION OF CREATIVE NONFICTION ESSAYS WITH A ZINE
AND A CASE FOR CREATIVE NONFICTION AND ZINES AS A SECONDARY
LANGUAGE ARTS PEDGOGY PRACTICES*

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INTRODUCTION

Situating the Zine and Creative Nonfiction

The nation shut down mid-March as we began to see the unimpeded spread and disastrous effects of the Coronavirus on our citizens. Reporters have shouted new numbers, nightly intoning doom over color-coded maps and charts. We have watched infection rates grow exponentially as scientists and doctors scrambled to treat the infected. Those of us who have been lucky have stayed home in our pajamas as our children participated in online emergency schooling. Meanwhile, first responders and essential workers were sent to the front lines with less than adequate protective garments. As diverse citizens of a powerful nation, we are also coming to terms with racism and prejudices, residuals of long years of enslavement and later repression. Protests and riots have become daily happenings as society calls for an end to police brutality enacted upon our black brothers and sisters. The inciting point has seemed to be the suffocation death and subsequent video of George Floyd, but his death was merely the last straw for a tired, fearful, and therefore angry nation. Our national leaders have mentally absconded and are leading from places of denial and rejected responsibility. State and city governments and leaders have rallied to protect and instruct their citizens while simultaneously balancing the very real fear of economic collapse. To put it bluntly, 2020 has been a traumatic and emotional year.

So, what does this time and place have to do with academic inquiry? And, more specifically, what does 2020 have to do with zines, creative nonfiction, and writing pedagogy? In a time that is arguably a watershed moment (a borderland between old and new), a time when many more stories and viewpoints need to be shared, and zines have once more come to the attention of the general populace as a way to work through many of the troubling happenings and record the personal histories of our time. As PBS reports, there is a resurgence of zine writing,

making sense out of humanity in a COVID-19 Quarantine, and examining the intersection of LGBT and race (Hastings). In light of this resurgence, both scholars and teachers should look to zines to shake up the world of print with new authors, writings, and publications. When combined with the scholarship of creative nonfiction writing practices, Zine production troubles the narrative of writing for the academy as it situates the writer in the place of expertise. Zine writing asks student writers to look to life experiences and new materials to build and develop personal and often political rhetoric from the borderland of their youth and the intersections of their gender and race.

DIFFERENTIATING AND DEFINING GENRES

Creative nonfiction and zines are personal and sometimes informal writings; however, creative nonfiction is formally acknowledged through publications and scholarship to have a place in the academy as a writing genre. Creative nonfiction is edited and published widely to the reading public while the majority of zines are self-published with little to no active distribution and little to no attention from the larger culture, except for a few scholars and librarians. The genres also differ in material composition. Creative nonfiction lives in blogs, magazine articles, and in books of collected essays, but the zines have a far greater reliance upon visuals, the concreteness of the publishing materials, and counter-cultural publication and distribution methods.

As creative nonfiction has had a longer, more scholarly history, there is more research to help situate the genre. Although many think of creative nonfiction as confessional musings, the genre is multifaceted, Wendy Bishop and David Starkey argue with their book *Keywords in Creative Nonfiction*. Not all of creative nonfiction is represented by its forefather, Montaigne, who “meanders from thought to thought, like a child chasing a butterfly, who stops to examine

the flowers each time the butterfly alights” (Bishop and Starkey 64). Instead, they insist on a deeper purpose for the genre, writers “who are far more concerned with persuading their readers to do something differently than they are in revealing the charming, idiosyncratic details of their own lives” (Bishop and Starkey 64). Creative nonfiction, then, is a personal and artistic expression of words often with an argumentative purpose. Bishop and Starkey go on to name and define the ways in which writers might examine ideas and experiences; they note that these forms have much to do with “New Journalism, which came of age in the 1960s and 1970s” (65). In addition to this literary journalism prized by Capote and Wolf, Bishop and Starkey list cultural criticism, i.e. “writing about other writers and their work,” nature and travel writing, “autobiographical craft” writings (such as Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird* or Steven King’s essay, “On Writing”), and straight autobiography as ways in which writers might explore this genre (66-67). These many forms are organized loosely, allowing for authors to experiment and expand the genre.

Zines—short for “magazine” or “fanzine”—often cover personal ideas much like the genre of creative nonfiction: some are written in the style of confessional essays, but others are written as political rants. Much as creative nonfiction scholars have delineated the many forms of their genre, zine experts have attempted the same. Personal zines, those which tell personal narratives, have been named “perzines” (Hays 88). Another researcher expands on this concept of personal writing; in her essay, “Zine Making as Feminist Pedagogy,” Kimberly Creasap divides zines into two categories: “cultural and experiential,” explaining that many zines reflect and examine the culture of the zinester while others reflect their personal experiences (161).

Additionally, Stephen Duncombe, the zine scholar and author of *Notes From the Underground:*

Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture, goes further in his examination and demarcation as he lists a page and a half of zine permutations in his text (13-14).

Zines are DIY publications that (irreverently) report upon every topic from Agnosticism to Zombies. Titles, like much of the rest of the publications, follow few rules or conventions and are as idiosyncratic as their writers and contributors. For example, *MaximumRockNRoll* covers alternative music (Duncombe 15), while the *Illuminati Girl Gang* “publishes art and writing and aims to act as an oasis in the dick desert that is publishing today” (Oyler). And the work *From the Punked Out Files of the Queer Zines Archive: Project #3 (QZAP)* along with *Hair* deal with more personal and rebellious ideas (Vedawala). Critics might argue that creative nonfiction could cover such counterculture topics, and could be entitled such, so where is the difference between creative nonfiction and zines? The answer lies in the zinester’s rebellious act of self-publishing.

While some might point to historical examples of counterculture self-publishing as the beginning of zines to include the reformation and Martin Luther’s “Ninety Five Theses” broadsheet, or the pamphlets of the American Revolution—think Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*—most argue that zines were first created and published to bring attention to that which was being ignored in 20th century American pop culture (Liming 125). Zines, therefore, began not as political publications but social communications to connect like-minded individuals, and were produced to, “fight the drone of mainstream media” (Wan 15). Amy Wan, zine and pedagogy scholar, goes on to argue, “As a medium, zines got their start in the art world during the 1920s, when artistic and philosophical movements such as the Surrealists could use small runs of magazines or booklets as a forum for their ideas (15). However, Duncombe claims that zine writing grew out of the abundance of science fiction fanfic of the 1930’s (9). Regardless of

their birth, by the 70's zines were used to report on the punk movement. It is at this time that the purpose of zines changed from informative or entertaining to rhetorical and political. Zines acted "as a form of correspondence and a way to write about issues not tackled by the mainstream press. Punk zines introduced the core anti-capitalist and DIY ethics" (Hays 88). These DIY ethics carried over to the Riot Grrrl movement bringing about a new voice to third wave feminism where zines "became such a popular publication vehicle for marginalized and alienated writers whose ideas could not be found in mainstream media" (Hays 89). Many thought at the close of the Riot Grrrl scene at the end of the 1990's, the rise of personal computers publishing software with the growing internet and easy-to-start blogs would herald the end of the zine; instead, the net has supported the distributions and community building of a zine movement that has only grown larger.

ZINES AS LIMINAL SPACES

It is easy to see Zines as a plaything of disaffected youth because their scribbled pages, strange topic choices and amateur printing and distribution; however, feminist and third space scholar Adela Licona argues that with these acts, "zines manifest myriad (micro) practices of resistance to enact social transformations" (110). Duncombe agrees with this idea of zines as an act of rebellion and focuses his scholarship on the zine ideals of counterculture and anti-consumerism, arguing that zine writing is an act of loving revolt by losers against pop culture and the mainstream (17). As seen in the rise of the Riot Grrrl movement, and in the current use of zines to highlight the Black trans experience (Hastings), this place of counterculture rebellion opens space for those who are typically ignored by the hegemonic mainstream media, especially queer women and women of color. Licona sees this as a "third space" made available to the writers of zines:

This creative recoding practice, while irreverent and even at times illegitimate, is a representational tactic of the decolonial imaginary offering a third space to explore alternatives in their fullest potential. In zines, third-space subjects are creating spaces from which to re-vision history and to recover (queer) women's voices (113).

It is important to note Licona's embrace of the "irrelevant" and the "illegitimate." Her focus, then, is on the borderland workspace that allows writers the freedom of expression and experimentation away from and regardless of its reception by others. While a zine might challenge the view of what is typically considered "publication," the choices brought through form and topics makes zines a place of freedom to write and publish what is important to the individual or marginalized groups rather than a patriarchal society.

Because of the space for examination, the borderland calls for a rebellion in both topic and form. As counterculture publications, many zines are written to share personal stories or information that explore the narratives around a cultural identity in everyday life: a mundane biography that challenges the hegemonic expectations of pop culture and consumerist publication. This definition of biography, however, is complicated by the typical scholarly expectation of the genre: that is the reporting of significance (Poletti, "Popular Meets Mundane" 333). Typical, published biographies represent cultural importance, i.e. lives and actions that make a difference and are typically in paragraph and narrative form. They are narratives of "doers." Zines, instead, report upon and in fact elevate the mundane in both topic and form in order to demonstrate the importance of connection and knowing.

Pop culture eschews the idea of mundanity, rejecting the lived reality of its constituents, whereas zine culture embraces and celebrates the mundane in order to connect the personal to

political ideas. One of the foundational yet mundane forms in many zines is the use of lists. These lists may encompass band recommendations or suggestions of new songs that others might want to explore, lists of men dated, or of vegetables that were planted in this year's garden; they are oftentimes simultaneously personal and rhetorical in that they give greater insight into the writer and situate the writer as an expert of sorts. "Thus, these kinds of lists are sketches that seek to establish the author as discerning but also seek to deploy cultural capital in the construction and representation of identity" (Poletti, "Popular Meets Mundane" 340). The list highlights the importance of things, using the items as symbols that signify both personal identity and political leanings. Poletti notes in the same work that lists are important connection makers because "The oppressed deploy lists to demand recognition, while the dominant remain 'unlisted,' possessed of a hegemonic, 'natural' identity that needs no such justification" ("Popular Meets Mundane" 336). As representatives of counterculture morals, the zinester uses lists as a place of connection outside of the realm of hegemony. The shared list is not one that many others would recognize, instead it is an invitation into the life and the mind of the writer who is creating her/his reality. Poletti goes on to argue that "The list and its suggestions places the zinester in a place of knowledge, allowing them to share ... the mundane but also by imbuing it with an idea of expertise or authority" ("Popular Meets Mundane" 139). The authority that is claimed by the zinester is one of connection to the audience. Brenda Helmbrecht and Meredith Love explore the connection with audience, the building of ethos, in "The *BUSTin'* and *Bitchin'* Ethos of Third-Wave Zines," acknowledging that the writers of zines utilize its unconventional forms "with the goal of transgressing the conventional rhetorical tradition and opening up new spaces that make meaning and create knowledge" (151). This shared connection of a list of the

mundane between zinester and reader allows for the construction of new personal, political, and othered knowledge.

Licona agrees that mundane experiences, shared through zines, is a path to new knowledge and ways of knowing: “The point of the theoretical undertakings in third-space sites is to uncover Other ways of being, and of knowing, in order to make meaning of the everyday” (106). Licona situates the “Other ways of being” as the result of using zines introspectively. The zine is a place of communication, not with others but with self. The contemplation of one’s lived experience and expertise helps to move the personal to the political, making a zine a gateway to “more than” a liminal writing experience. Because of this, publication and readers are secondary concerns. Anne Hays in “Reading the Margins: Embedded Narratives in Feminist Personal Zines” reiterates this movement from personal to political in an observation of a young zine writer, “The zine format makes a few things possible ... the ability to easily incorporate varied textual and visual elements to grapple with personal-political identity markers; and a culture that supports working through those issues directly on the page” (101). In using zines, the members of the Black Queer and Intersectional Collective (BQIC) are able to change the narrative of their community by leveraging their work in the third space. Instead of a focus on pain and rejection, “zines created by trans people for each other often aim to balance both trauma survival but also that joy” (Hastings). Zines make it possible for the writers to define a better life: “What I hope from the zines is that I can again add to Black trans histories and also keep building Black trans futures” (Shackleford qtd. in Hastings). Zines provide the working space in which writers begin to see and understand themselves and their personal writings in a political light.

MATERIALITY AS REBELLION

The material yet simultaneously ephemeral state of the Zine supports the genre's rebellious yet liminal nature. They are neither book nor pamphlet, neither serious literature nor ridiculousness, neither personal journal nor normal biography, but they are a gateway into knowing both self and others. Their materiality gives zines a counterculture value; they are prized, not just because of their rebellious messaging and original voices, but because they are easily portable and easily traded. Poletti notes, "These modes of distribution, coupled with comparatively small production runs...position zines as ephemera; lacking the constancy of an on-line presence or the permanency of the bound tome" ("Self-Publish" 185). The act of being ephemeral, is, in itself an act of rebellion as the flimsy materiality and the reckless and random trading of the zine is not controlled.

Despite this ephemeral state, zine messages are enhanced by the materiality of the text. Instead of relying on mere words to convey content, the entirety of the zine, from the cost and the feel of the copy paper, to the use of art, melds with and extends the message of the zinester (Duncombe 14). The writer/editors of these publications rely upon the materiality to complicate and extend what others might assume are simplistic, mundane, or error-ridden texts. One form of materiality is the "cut'n'paste" use of other's words (Poletti, "Self-Publish" 187). Cut'n'paste looks like a ransom note or a collage, but the page has a double meaning; it exists in one reading as the creation of the writer, but in another light, it is much more political and rebellious. Poletti argues that in using the text of the oppressor, the text of the consumerist culture, the artist/writer has appropriated and therefore co-opted a part of the oppressor's power in changing the meaning of the original message ("Self-Publish" 187). Zine writers do not just co-opt and challenge the words and messages of others; often, they add layers of meaning to their own words. These

layers manifest in both materiality, the cutting and pasting of collage pages, and in the writer's ability to comment upon and enter into conversations with her/his own writing. Hays examines texts where writers “use handwritten notes either surrounding, interrupting, or cohabiting their many narrative essays (100-101). Hays notes in her material analysis of zines that this handwritten interaction with the original text simultaneously indicates introspection and invites interpretation: “Grey uses narrative meta-text in her zine to complete her handwritten notes, but also to leave them intentionally open-ended, so that her reader must analyze her work the way a viewer takes in a painting” (100). These alternate layers of meaning and conversation go past the one-way communication of a conventionally printed text. In questioning her own beliefs and understandings, the zinester not only grows in her comprehension of complex texts, she also invites the reader of the zine in to add his or her own questions. The authorial annotation also leads, not only to greater layers of understanding self, but also a better grasp of the ambiguity between personal writing and political and rebellious positioning: in questioning one’s own thoughts, the writer is better able to comprehend and deconstruct many meanings in their own and in other publications. Far from easing readers into knowledge, zine writers challenge their readers with both topic and form.

Zinesters intentionally trouble the narrative of reading in the production of their texts. By using marginal commentary, lists, cut and paste, and collage, they have created texts that no longer represent the closed definition of a written text. Oftentimes this troubling of the narrative or of the publication form is an intentional rebellion. Liming argues that “Zinesters ... want, instead, to publish a literary product that ... requires new and thus transgressive reading practices” (Liming 137). And in producing anti- or counter texts, the zinesters manage to write a message that complicates and others their text. Liming argues that “chaos” acts as a “marker” of

zine texts. They are filled with, “Photographs, mini-comics, reprinted news items, and personal anecdotes are... given equal weight, made to overlap each other and, in doing so, impart a discourse of chaos that aims at counterhegemonic signification” (Liming 135). In doing what mass media does not, the zine editor uses the chaotic in order to rebel and to create a new space for communication.

Zine creators utilize the “discourse of chaos” in order to “stick it to the man.” This seemingly small rebellion is actually much more significant. In using text and pictures that are produced by those who are trying to sell to them, zine writers take over and change the message intended by the consumerist culture that idolizes yet preys upon youth. Poletti calls for this small act of rebellion when she insists that the collage, “creates a space within the auto-biographical text (the zine) for the zinester to engage in the reclamation and resignification of mass media texts (“Self-Publish” 188). While Poletti sees the reuse of mainstream media materials as a zine-building technique, Duncombe notes that this practice of co-opting or outright theft of other’s work is a calling card of the zine producer (Duncombe 91). It is important to note here that the “theft” of pop culture’s text and pictures is a part of a larger rebellion against being consumed. The zine underground understands that in a consumer society, their youth, and the symbols thereof are often co-opted by the mainstream. Young zine writers reject the place of “desired objects” by refusing to bow to consumerist practices (Poletti, “Self-Publish” 187). Many of the artists and authors of the zine scene are those born to the middle class but have chosen bohemia; for them the zine is a symbolized rejection of mainstream culture, a rejection of the idea of profit for art or self-expression. Liming, in her examination of historically rebellious works, helps to interpret the not-for-profit trade of zines, for she sees this act as “an assault on the meaning and tradition of ‘value.’ Zines embody and repackage a variety of dialectical problems: their

producers receive no profit, yet they continue to produce, for zines are autonomously created outside of the purview of the market” (137). Duncombe concurs that zines are not just places of self-expression; they are markers of anti-consumerism (115). Licona furthers this rejection of the mainstream, noting that writing from the borderlands (writing zines) is an act of rebellion that reverses the public’s outlook of mass media and questions its validity, “Through the concept and practice of *reverso*, zinesters are taking discursive control of the disciplinary mechanisms and reversing their collective gaze in order to reveal the sicknesses inherent in their societal contexts; both local and global” (Licona 119). In writing what they want and in self-publishing and distributing material work, showing society back to itself, zinesters reject the reality peddled by those who would profit off of them. They avoid both academic and consumer gatekeepers, those who would stifle or change their messaging.

Counterculture is not only a rejection of society’s morality or conspicuous consumption; it is also a rebellion against the publishing tenants that traditional scholarship holds dear. This rejection is seen in the curious and independent content of the zines, in the loosely networked distros and zine festivals, and in the many zine websites and Etsy stores available online. Traditional publishing has silenced the voices of the oppressed, but any author can find outlets and connections in an alternative publishing route. Whereas the current model of publication is one of scarcity, academic gatekeepers, and hegemonic messaging that prioritizes popular culture’s morals, zines are places of abundance and sharing. Zines allow for immediate access as all one needs to create a zine is an idea, a piece of paper, and a sharpie because “zines are participatory” rather than restrictive (Wreck 6). The zine community is one of inclusion; the goldilocks of publishing, a zine can be as widely or as singly distributed as needed or wanted. Alternative or Self-Publishing acts not just as a practice in self-sufficiency, but has a larger, more

political interpretation as well. Self-publishing allows for a “practice a politics of articulation—linking class, literacy, sex-uality, and gender to environmental and feminist interests” (Licona 122). This intersectionality is reinforced when readers in oppressed communities become creators or co-conspirators. Elke Zobl, in her essay examining the importance of Grrrl zines, “Persephone is Pissed,” insists on the act of publishing in which, “Every reader can be a cultural producer, and this is where social transformation begins...Grrrl zines in particular can be powerful tools to mobilize feminist cultural and political Resistance” (Zobl 169). Zines take on the voices of many marginalized groups, and Zobl argues that “In creating one’s own Zine, the writer takes back the power from publishers and editors who act as often closed doorways to many messages. Political empowerment can be expressed on a personal level--but also collectively when a number of voices merge” (Zobl 168). Licona reinforces Zobl’s claim, noting women take back power when writing in the borderlands" of zine productions, “(B)orderlands’ rhetorics offer an exciting potential to speak that which has been overlooked, underrepresented, and actively Obscured” (Licona 124). It is this freedom to write with power and to publish with impunity that has been obscured, not just from entire cultures, but from our youth as well.

COMBINING THE GENRES

Both Licona and Zobl position zines as a space for othered and obscured voices. Licona sees the zine as a place of intersectional writing: her focus is largely on the nexus of race, gender, and sexuality, while Zobl is concerned with teen girls, all populations who have been silenced. However, in combining and expanding this “(b)orderland” of expression to include the intersection of youth, a new space is created for student writers who are capable of exploring and comprehending personal and social issues, but who have been belittled or silenced due to their age. Freidberg et al. argue in the essay, “Making the Authorial Authoritative” that students need

to be seen as the experts in their own lives, “they need to perceive themselves as authors not only of written texts but as the authorial voice of their academic experience. Our students don't lack voices; rather, they are lacking the guidance and creative context” (Freidberg 4) Writing zines and creative nonfiction allow students to find their authorial voice and “to enter the classroom as knowledge producers, not merely passive receivers of knowledge” (Klotz and Whithaus 85). Writing from the borderlands of zines and creative nonfiction allows students an experience rather than just an assignment. Licona touts the publication of zines and personal/political stories as places for knowing and of change. She sees them as “transformative potentials...More specifically, these zines reflect hope through their potential to generate a new value system” (Licona 124). Because the zine is a space that allows students to write about and examine both personal and social struggles, it also acts as a liminal genre that can include creative nonfiction and rhetoric; these zines bridge the gap between personal and scholastic writing.

Zine production has been the focus of much of this study, but the content of the zine, past the lists, collages, and annotations, is largely the personal writing of the zinester: creative nonfiction. Until this time, both genres have been studied separately, seen as individual entities. But genres are constantly in flux (Mays 324). This is apparent in the material study of Dinty Moore's novel, *Dear Mr. Essay Writer Guy: Advice and Confessions on Writing, Love, and Cannabis*. Moore identifies the text in his introductions as “a writing guide of sorts.” And while the writing guide is replete with pithy answers that match his informal and rollicking tone, the book is intriguing in more important ways. Instead of organizing around his own ideas about writing, Moore answers letters that are addressed to “Mr. Essay Writing Guy;” then, he gives an example of his writing in an essay in order to expand and explicate. While the organization adds a layer of interest, what is most beguiling is Moore's experimentation with form. Chapters begin

with a picture of the envelope that was supposedly sent to him, and the essays range from grammar lessons on the m-dash to an entire piece written on napkins and aided with informal sketches. One essay about zebras and later zebra sausage runs as a one-inch line of narrative down the page. The pictorial element of the tightened margins leaves the stripe to the reader's interpretation. Does it indicate the form of the sausage, or is it a zebra's stripe? Maybe it is both. Another essay/chapter uses Google maps as both a visual and a symbol of his journey from an adolescent high to the benefits of a staid maturity. The maps reinforce place and imbue the narratives of the temporal with permanence.

Moore's experimentation with form in a widely published text leads one to speculate about the future of creative nonfiction. If a gifted and well-respected member of the creative nonfiction community is publishing pictures of an essay written on a cocktail napkin, then what other freedoms might be taken with the form? It also forces one to ask, is there really a demarcation between writing creative nonfiction and publishing zines? Moore's writing also acts as a sample of creative nonfiction in an academic space, for he names the work writing instructions implicitly suggesting both experience and expertise that is backed by the gatekeepers who have published him. While challenging the form of creative nonfiction, he implies that change is coming to the genre.

Academic writing has often found a writer's experiences to be immaterial to the act of composing, but creative nonfiction and zines refute this practice. Typically, teachers might advocate for the use of a personal anecdote as a lead for a formal essay, a writer's tool, but the narrative itself is not considered worthy of building the rest of the argumentation. bell hooks, in an interview with one of her mentees, speaks to the uneasy relationship between writing as a creative act and as a scholar. She says, "I wanted most to be a writer, but also an academic.

While these two conflicting desires created tensions and anxiety, the longing to be a writer enabled me to rebel against the academic status quo” (hooks qtd. in McKinnon 814). hooks highlights the duality of writer/scholar: one task asks her to look to her own experiences in order to write and convince others, and the other task, that of being an academic, asks her to refute the knowledge of her own life and to look to “experts” in order to qualify her experiences with the intersectionality of race and feminism. Just as hooks argues for scholar/experience, Creasap notes that zine writing in the classroom “explemlif(ies) both development of critical thinking and validation of personal experience” (156). The genres of creative nonfiction and zines allow writers to situate knowledge at the level of their own experiences. They need no other sources to report on their truth.

Mundane, biographical zines report and reflect the truth of a lived experience. In order to teach zines and creative nonfiction in the classroom, a conversation about “truth telling” is essential. Writers approach this truth in many ways. “Whatever they call it, though, all writers and scholars of nonfiction agree that the form's essential purpose is to reveal some type of truth: a personal, subjective truth (Bradley 204). But Mays cautions, “artistry and factuality can be restless companions” (322). As writers of both genres attempt to define the capital “T” truth, the capital “P” problem for authors of creative nonfiction and zines is in defining what is true while fighting with personal memories and perceptions. Writer William Bradley recounts a conversation with his mother about the “truth” within his writing. When he is confronted with his mother’s possibly more accurate memory, he stops to theorize about a writer’s responsibilities to the story that she or he is telling. Bradley comes down on the side of accuracy over representation while other practitioners of creative nonfiction are well known for their use of compound characters and imagined conversations. The line of demarcation between creative

nonfiction and fiction seems to be one that is personal, and it hinges solely upon the imagined relationship between writer and reader, “one of trust” (Bradley 204). Lynn Bloom negates Bradley’s claim that absolute truth is necessary because as she sees it, there are many “true” versions of the same story, and as writers, it is our responsibility to narrate our own: “I will be telling other people's stories as well--whether they like it or not, whether they know it or not. Whether my true stories are the same as theirs, or different” (277). In mixing her own creative nonfiction text within her academic argument, Bloom illustrates her choices as a writer in shaping the argument about her relationship with her parents. Some might see creative nonfiction and zine production as writing for entertainment, but as a pedagogical undertaking, it is a framework that allows students to practice writing and to examine the many truths in their own lives.

Writers of mundane, biographical zines and creative nonfiction might mine the everyday experiences for writing fodder, but what keeps a zine from being a confessional whine fest with little social significance or political value? hooks addresses this problem in her writing by using experiential examples in order to connect with the reader. Additionally, she cautions writers to abstain from confessional writing as it has little rhetorical power. She insists that “Private life as exhibitionism and performance is not the same thing as a politicized strategic use of private information that seeks to subvert the politics of Domination (hooks qtd. in McKinnon 823). hooks advocates for a controlled sharing of self to affect change. According to hooks, writing about a personal experience should edify readers and introduce the ideals of feminist rebellion through a moment of shared recognition. Writing from experience then, is not a time of personal reflection or a place of self-abasement¹⁵; rather it is a place of connection. hooks notes that sharing her private life, her lived experiences, was a calculated rhetorical move. Black trans zine

writers use hooks' practice of sharing lived experience because it is a narrative that is often left out of typical places of publishing, "Among queer communities, zines can be a form a documentation, a capturing of U.S. history that may not appear in textbooks" (Hastings). These lived experiences told in zines then become "essential as a tool for organizing for and with Black queer, trans and nonbinary people" (Hastings). The rhetoric of their stories is just as important as their history.

Many other zine writers are just as effective in their use of ethos, connecting through experiences, even if they are not as calculating as hooks or as marginalized as the BQIC writers. When writing a work that is self-published, the author does not have to convince the publisher or the reader of her/his worth. It is automatically assumed that the zine will be traded with or bought by a likeminded or open-minded individual. Helmbrecht and Love see this ethe reflected in two well-known zines, *Bitch* and *BUST*, as a "consubstantial relationship with their readers, as they do not so much argue for an ideology as embody" (153). Because the zine writer imagines that their readers are already convinced of a shared body, a shared mental space, they can write and publish their truths without worry of defending or justifying themselves. Although "Most *Bitch* and *BUST* writers begin their arguments from a personal standpoint ... the most successful arguments effectively move beyond their own solipsism" (Helmbrecht and Love 162). These writers share experiences in informal diction, highlighted with anger and sarcasm, in order to connect with their readers and to bring them to a realization of social or political truth that is greater than the personal experience or narrative (Helmbrecht and Love 162). This strategy gives students freedom to share their own experiences, connect with their readers, and to speak the truth in their own writings and zines.

Teachers value student truths but sometimes are leery of bringing the counterculture to our classrooms. Will zines filled with creative nonfiction and artistic interpretations by teens be seen as rebellion? More importantly, can teachers defend the practice of this writing as preparatory for argumentation and scholastic research? The zine's designation of counterculture is not necessarily accurate. "Counter" indicates the idea of against, placing the zine as anathema to traditional curriculum practices. Here it is helpful to fall back to Licona's concept of "(b)orderland." She argues that in zine writing, the purpose of the zines is to become a "third space," a place of expression for those that feel that their voice might not be heard in traditional writing spheres. In this way, zines are not necessarily "counter" or against, they have merely grown past their bohemian, middle class, angsty, white roots and have become a place of inclusivity and power, of claiming or reclaiming voices that are left out of the mainstream. They are a place in which students can practice their own rebellion while holding space for the voices and rebellion of others. Zines are a perfect place for all students, regardless of the intersections of race and gender, to experiment with rhetoric and rebellion.

While it is important to see Zines as counterculture or living in the borderlands, there is a problem with teaching zines in the classroom: will assigning zine writing change its punk, DIY aesthetic? Does this mean that classroom zines are less authentic? Liming puts this idea to rest. Zines are not just about rebelling to be "cool," "zines are print communication, designed to emulate, pervert, and assault print media--specifically magazines and newspapers. This is their primary objective, not the peddling of coolness or subcultural dissent (136). If traditional scholastic writing is perceived as hegemonic, zines then become an educational rebellion. Poletti dissuades these worries of "selling out" as she advocates for zine writing in the classroom as a practice of connection in which, "participatory communities... erase the distinction between

those who consume and those who produce culture, people involved in these activities feel more connected to their culture of choice...less harassed by the demands of consumer culture” (Poletti, ‘Self Publish’ 186). Zines in the classroom are places of knowing, of dissent, and of connection. In short, they are a new place of production for students tired of teacher-centric writing assignments.

TEACHING WITH ZINES

In-service teachers are typically concerned not with rebellion, but with improvement to pedagogy. Teachers would like to be able to introduce a new concept or two, add some fascinating new sources, and provide a framework for feedback and assessment, and then “get out of the way” as students dig into the joy of learning. While that structure will surely work for a college-bound class, it is rarely successful in on-level classes as students are less academically motivated or are simply less confident. While on-level and tech students are brilliant in their own ways, they have rejected or are leery of the scholarly experts in academia. They typically refuse “scholastic” assignments that deepen understanding of rhetorical and academic writing, rejecting messages of writing for college readiness. “College readiness” is simply a skill that has little to no value to them. Such approaches can lead to loss of engagement and even trust. However, the truth of the matter is, even if students only want an associate degree, be it in welding or auto repair, they still have to be able to attend and pass a first-year college composition class. Teachers cannot ignore the skills that the class demands but can no longer ignore the student’s needs by continuing to teach argumentative writing in the same ways. Christopher Emdin noted the same troubles in inner city schools, students who need skills but who also felt that they were giving up part of their identity in bowing to the dictates of traditional learning (Warner 132). This is similar to the feedback from many tech school students. Their feedback essentially asks,

“why are my interests and skills not enough?” Most importantly with this feedback, students are asking, “Am I enough?” Warner and Emdin challenge secondary ELA instructors to teach in such a way that recognizes students as valued and valid individuals and to design instruction that encourages students to use writing in order to make their own lives better. All students demand and deserve effectively designed, authentic writing experiences that build real world skills that can be used in academic and personal writings and that have an audience well past that of their English teacher.

Oftentimes, writing in the classroom is in service to a prompt or idea of the teacher, and students work to finagle bits of information and evidence to fit what the teacher is asking for, but Guzzetti and Gamboa write in “Zines for Social Justice: Adolescent Girls Writing on Their Own,” that language and writing has a much more important role: “Students use language (both oral and written) to form and represent their identities. Hence, literacy work is identity work” (413). Many times, students, especially those who are in our tech programs or who have disadvantages in their home lives, feel that they are less scholarly and have been led to believe that they have less to say. Their interpretations or experiences are made to seem less valid than those of their college bound peers. Reading, creating, writing, and editing creative nonfiction and zines leads to students who have a platform and the ability to express their expertise and to value and share their opinions. Licona argues that student zines elevates, “legitimizes and validates lived experience as valid and valuable” (122). While scholarly readings and writing assignments manage to “other” teens and their lack of experience, zines and creative nonfiction give students the ability to call upon and give value to their own areas of expertise. Further, because zines combine materiality with authentic student voices and the option to self-publish, they are the

liminal space in which students can tackle personal ideas, see the social and political intersections, and build rhetorical skills that can be used in academic settings.

Before assigning zine writing to disenfranchised students, best practices indicate that students should read and examine the genre. Rachel Buchanan advocates for reading zines in the classroom in “Zines in the Classroom: Reading Culture” as, “The texts in zines use words, images, art, and other tools of production, creating usable multimodal literacy sites (71). Reading zines allows students many places of entry into the text. Students may flip through to look at the original art or collages, stop to peruse cartoons, compare notes about a list of new songs, or read some original poetry or a personal essay. These various points of entry allow for engagement of all readers. Not only do zines allow for various sites for engagement, Wan argues that the use of Zines places the reader closer to the site of the actual writing: “Using zines like these in the classrooms allow students to hear alternative information in the voices of their peers, rather than the more distant voice of the text book or journal article (18). Reading zines is also fun for students because zines are counterculture, even rebellious. Liming observes: “zine readers are invited to step closer to the line that separates producer and consumer in a format that celebrates not professionalism and polish but, rather, amateur-ism and anarchy” (137). Reading zines allows students to see others sharing ideas and experimenting with form and function. John Warner, author of *Why they Can't Write: Killing the Five Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities*, argues:

There is no direct route to learning to write. We should be giving students a range of experiences so they can build an array of tools and approaches to turn to for any given writing situation. We must stop asking student writers to adopt a kind of generic ‘scholar’

persona simply to perform competency and pretend erudition, and instead give them the necessary room to develop their own beliefs about the world around them (140).

By assigning multiple genres and forms of writing including zines in early reading activities, the teacher can lend credence to these counterculture publications. When asking students to produce zines, the process should be participatory and leave much of the power in the hands of the student writers to erase the stigma of writing as scholarly or writing as a requirement. Genre study also allows students to act as experts in the classroom, a place where they are often powerless to make choices. In asking students to examine multiple zines, looking for the moves that the writers have made, the student is situated as an analyst rather than a receiver of requirements. Warner advocates for this type of gradual academic skill building in non-scholarly genres: “I believe there is a way to help students develop ‘scholarly’ ways of thinking ... By disaggregating some of those critical thinking skills and allowing students to practice those skills before throwing them into ‘academia’” (193). Genre study is a skill that will allow students to participate in later, more complex writing scenarios because it is a tool that can be applied to and demystify any genre. Pedagogy experts agree that analysis of like and difference is one of the most powerful teaching moves that we can make in our classrooms (“Essential”). In practice, the genre study can be as simple as a T-chart or Venn diagram filled in through discussion and help to consolidate the observations of an entire class.

After noting the many traits of multiple zines, the class could formally vote or informally discuss the requirements and options for the assignment. Alternatively, for those who crave a bit more control, a teacher could create a menu of options or a bingo sheet for the student publication, taking into account the students’ earlier discussion and observations. This menu would allow students to pick and choose zine articles and traits to include in their publication and

would help to ensure a more homogenized effort at different levels of learning by all students involved (SIP). To aid in idea creation, it is important to inundate students with options for publications both artistic and practical. The teacher might share Duncombe's list of many zine types, and Warner suggests a simple prompt that could be used here as well, "Why am I so Angry?" (205). Students might choose to produce literature for a future tattoo parlor, prepare a portfolio of auto body work, represent a band or artist, or produce a zine for entertainment or even social protest. The focus should be to find a topic about which students can situate themselves as experts regardless of its academic cache. In light of the political, social, and emotional struggles that students are living with in the wake of the Coronavirus Pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests, teachers should be prepared with examples of perzines that tackle death, poverty, and race written from many different tones and points of view. With enough examples, students should be able to find or brainstorm an option that applies to personal interests. Wan argues that the use of zines as assignments serves teens well because "Creating a zine brings the power of the media and the printed word into the hands of someone who may not be able to or may not want to work with traditional media channels" (18). Writing zines allows students to take on the responsibility for their own messages and representation and the challenge and the onus of writing for an audience who is not the teacher.

Often, zines are the production of a single author; however, this does not have to be the case in the classroom. Group produced zines can be accommodated by a mere multiplication to the requirements of the menu or bingo sheets. Students can then decide to co-author in tandem or to work and write in parallel, producing individual works that support a central theme of their shared zine. While this is a classroom assignment, Wan suggests additional buy-in for students: zine copies for the class-wide distribution or beyond. Warner supports the ideas of group work

and publication noting that “Students find writing meaningful when they view it as a ‘social act,’ as part of an ‘environment’ much larger than the assignment. In other words, students are more engaged when they believe the writing has a place in the world beyond school assignment” (Warner 151). Co-authoring is proven not only to build social and group skills, it also helps to build better writers as the discussions throughout the writing process acts as a scaffolding tool that supports writers and pushes them past their own writing experiences (Eodice and Day 197). Another support is available using technology. “Speaker notes” and “comment” streams hold space for the phenomena that McDonnell and Jefferson calls “Comments on Comments” (112). Writers, co-writers, and editors leave running commentary under or alongside the page that allows for the growth of writing analysis. Writers and editors can “talk” about why and how parts of the article work. This allows for greater conversation in later meeting, where “judging sessions offer opportunities for staff members to interrogate the intersection of aesthetic and political concerns” (Melbye and Tassoni 294). Student writers not only have to navigate the ways in which their words make meaning and communicate to their audience, they also are asked to question rhetoric of materiality and form.

Because zines are not just an essay, the assignment pushes students to make many decisions about how they are interacting with their audience, how they will organize their thoughts, writing, and art, and how the audience might receive those offerings? Working from student expertise and choice means that their zines will look much different than a typical essay. Students will have to make rhetorical choices, not just in diction and syntax of their larger works within the zine, but in design and material as well. Since many zines are still published with copied or printed papers, the charm and authenticity of such makes the zine something “different” than the slick commercialism of today’s social media. Creasap notes that her students

prefer this materiality and the cut and paste tactile activity of producing zines “sharing supplies that they had brought to class” demonstrating the zine as a ““gift culture”” (160). On one hand this rebellious attitude is ripe for social and political protest. Rallin, a college composition instructor, organizes an entire curriculum around the creation of Zines. She recognizes the break from technology and the essay form as a place of authentic student writing and ownership that is enhanced by a greater understanding of audience. She also notes that the traditional form of the zine, a photocopied amateur production, also takes pressure off her writers (Rallin and Bernard 49).

Students should be given the option to produce their zine with technology or by embracing the very material, hands-on practices used by many zinesters. Regardless of the choice, the rhetoric of visuals and layout become a foray into a larger task than the use of one-inch margins. Students might discuss the implications of color choice and layout and additions of links to music or video as they wrestle with the concept of “what counts as text” or writing (Rogers et al. 200). Because our students are inundated with many visuals through TikTok and Instagram, they may not consider all of the arguments that they are ‘reading’ in those applications. In becoming visual authors and editors, students gain a greater appreciation for how graphics and colors bolster or minimize their words and overall message. In abandoning the basic essay produced in Times New Roman and MLA formatting, our focus as teachers expands as well. Eyman and Ball, of *Kairos*, a website dedicated to publishing rhetoric and pedagogy, note that design and even code is a new part of teaching rhetoric and composition. When helping students choose colors or manipulating a layout, teachers must also know and instruct upon the meaning that corresponds with design choices. While this does seem out of the purview of writing teachers, it is easily taught in a couple of mini lessons in which genre study is applied to

magazine or website layouts. The benefit is two-fold: students get to see genre study applied outside of writing, and teachers expand their interpretation of both rhetoric and design.

Molly Scanlon encourages this interplay of design and words. Writing about the use of comic strips in and as composition, she noted that the interplay, the conversations and negotiations that accompany the production are also a part of the learning that happens. Warner encourages interplay and even failure for his writers. While he agrees that giving detailed instructions might produce a better paper or product, “the product isn’t the point. For students to learn, we have to make them run over as many potholes as possible” (167). Melbye and Tassoni remark on the act of process, from idea generating through writing to layout and design as one that “might be viewed as a pedagogical inquiry, one through which the difficulties it entails and the dialogues those difficulties generate become as much a goal of the activity as is the publication of the journal itself” (290). Wrestling with all the decisions that come with producing the publication becomes a place of negotiation and learning. The research of Rogers et al. supports this concept, suggesting that the success or failure of a product is often immaterial and the learning that happens in the process and can be better revealed in the student reflection after publication (206). To truly assess student learning, we should be asking not only what the student did, but also what the student learned and can reflect upon in this metacognitive practice.

Publishing zines to the class or the school at large can increase student attention to convection choices. Sharing these zines gives the composers a foray into the concept of audience past that of the teacher, expands and makes real the process of revision and editing in order to be published (Lunsford 20) (McDonell and Jefferson 109). Error is no longer only in the eye of the teacher; students will have more skin in the game. Friedberg notes that when producing a student

publication, using peer committees led to an increased investment in analytical conversations about error: “When students read peers' creative writing, especially poetry, they eagerly immerse themselves in close, analytical reading with far greater attention to grammar and punctuation, figures of speech, structure, and meaning... They are tough critics and equally generous praise-givers. They are each other's audience and models (6). Freidberg goes on to argue that students claimed that the time spent sitting on the submission board “helped with grammar, sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, and paragraph development” (6). Publishing highlights those skills that students have long thought were the job of the teacher and transfers the work to those who wish to support their message.

Grammatical errors and teacher corrections are an everyday part of student writing, but ownership of error is transferred with the use of genre study. It is no longer the “job” of the teacher to mark and correct, rather, acting as a guide to publishing, the teacher can discuss the rhetorical and social values that surround error. During the early examination of zines, it will be instructive to have students note lack of punctuation, spelling, or capitalization. If these conventions are presented as choices that might obfuscate writing or lower readers' opinions, then students, acting as authors, will use conventions as choices and tools in communication rather than places of contempt or contention; they are allowed to keep their autonomy as authors and creators. Discussions in genre study allows for students to choose which conventions they want to follow and which they wish to ignore. Melbye and Tassoni suggest the practice of student editors as well, using the “editorial process to turn our student editors' gaze upon the notion of literary standards itself, so that whatever standards they decide to exercise might take into consideration their very disputability (296.) By allowing students to debate the worthiness of the genre conventions, we open more conversation about the reasoning behind them. Warner

enjoins more teachers to use genre study to improve writing syntax as students who practice through imitation of good writing are much more likely to be successful than those who are elevating their diction to fake intellect: “This imitation will be significantly more readable than the pretending that happens when performing intelligence” (Warner 207).

Regardless of teacher buy-in to bringing zines into the classroom, one needs to recognize that zine production and zine topics have the possibility of being problematic. Not only will there be magazine fragments, desks sticky with glue, and a possible glitter outbreak, there is also the specter of counter-culture publication in a highly traditional space. Will all the writing be “school appropriate”? Should it be? What are the parameters on “truth”? If students chose to write creative nonfiction as an option within the publication, what rules hold them to respectful representations of themselves and others? What about sex, drugs, and rock and roll? Once again, class discussion can help build parameters that allow for student expression and experimentation without providing more professional opportunities to call child welfare services or to be summoned to the office to speak to administration. An anchor chart that lists “allowed” and “restricted” topics might be helpful. Publishing to the classroom at large will also work as a natural deterrent to writers sharing too many personal details. Some zine purists might argue that these acts stifle the counterculture mores, but according to any secondary teacher’s “lived experience,” such parameters are necessary, but they do not preclude encouraging students to branch out into a personal zine practice. With these caveats in mind, we cannot forget the purpose of bringing such modified rebellions into our classrooms. Students deserve to have a place in which to share and publish feelings, thoughts, and art. Students deserve a place to practice and build rhetorical, creative, and editing skills before being required to write research papers. Students deserve a larger audience for their writing than a single teacher. When the unit

is finished and zines have been distributed, students will have written and learned from composing narratives, drawing pictures, gluing and pasting. The making of a zine will have moved students to a new way of thinking and of writing outside of the academy, allowing them to understand the power of their own voices and stories.

ELEVATING CREATIVE NONFICTION WITH ZINE WRITING

What follows is a collection of creative nonfiction essays, *Foundations*, paired with a perzine, *AngZine*. While many of the topics and in fact essays are shared, these works provide a very different message to their readers and demonstrate the efficacy of zines as a physical and visual conduit to very personal stories.

The collection of creative nonfiction narratives works to make sense of a typical, confusing, yet very mundane life. The topics range from life as a teacher, mother, wife, sister, and daughter, and in examining these relationships and the interplay therein, the narratives dig deeply into what it means to play these roles, but also examines the problematic overlay of societal and familial expectations for women in and around each relationship. A multiplicity of relationships and identities is examined through the many different scenes: the classroom, the kitchen, the garden, on the tractor, in front of a sewing machine. Through these, the narrator points to the complexities of knowing and being known. The essays begin with scenes built through traditional fictional elements: descriptive settings, mostly real characters, and authentic dialogue figure strongly in the works, but the essays build to a point greater than that of a narrative. Instead of just telling stories, the narratives are built as a foundation for contemplation, a place for wrestling with meaning and belonging. While much of the writing focuses on matriarchy and relationships between women, there is still room for further exploration in woman's relationship to the land, agriculture, and the power structures of stewardship.

Although built with many of the same elements, the zine elevates the chosen narratives by building focus, including visual rhetoric, and adopting a more irreverent and sarcastic tone. By choosing to highlight two feature narratives, “Foundations” and “Just a Man and a Buffalo” the publication brings focus to the contemplations of the teacher in the classroom. Other themes like motherhood and societal expectations of women, are dealt with more covertly and less formally than in the creative nonfiction, through how-to articles, lists, shared recipes, and craft projects. The visual design helps to reinforce many of the themes. Color usage is dramatic and high contrast. The aggressive red background featuring the pie crust recipe reflects the flippant disrespect in the writer’s tone toward the supposed inept audience. Later in the work, “Foundations” does not just use a collage of women in underwear, the bold interplay between yellow and purple pages creates tension for readers. The other articles are less serious and more invested in the mundane. This is reflected, not just in the softer colors or more informal page design, but in the use of lists and informal essay constructions. The tone shifts direction as well, and instead of being invited into a contemplative narrative, the audience is invited to share in the experiences of the author (either imaginatively or actually) by following directions. The lists, directions, and recipes serve to connect readers to the needful minutiae of everyday life while simultaneously poking fun at its absurdities.

The zine, produced online with samples of the writer’s other art, points to the ease of sharing and publication, two acts that are often absent from the secondary classroom. Based on experiential writing, the zine allows for the writer to reflect upon and bring light to the very personal yet political observations of life as a teacher/woman/mother. Zines will allow students to write about the happenings and troubles in their own lives, allowing them to make meaning from their own observations or experiences. Besides gaining agency as authors and “just

writing,” the production of a zine helps student writers develop revision and design skills, and leads to a greater understanding of how other documents and media work. The example given here illustrates that zine writing/creation can be both creative and scholarly, both entertaining and edifying.

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FOUNDATIONS

Foundations

How are we defined by what we wear? How are we “clothed” or covered? The better question might be, why does anyone care?

I.

As a High School teacher, my goal is to be a leader of people who don't quite know what they are doing yet, but they know deep down that they are destined for greatness, regardless of the fact that they had a Pop Tart for breakfast and have lost a signed permission slip somewhere between their car and my classroom. Some of them are doubtful of their gifts, their youthful confidence has been eroded by conditions outside of their own control: parents who are trying their level best just to make ends meet or overcome an addiction, or inborn conditions like ADD or anxiety and depression that make life and school harder. Despite this, they manage to hold down jobs, take care of their siblings, compete in debate tournaments, and gear up and battle on the playing field or court. They are pretty amazing, and I am lucky to be able to share my time with them. When they come into my classroom, I may not be able to solve their problems at home, but I can make them think about their place in this crazy world, and I can give them skills that will allow them to communicate with a larger community than the 27 or so yahoos who inhabit my desks.

Many roles fall to teachers. We communicate with school psychologists, attend IEPs, track and analyze data, flag down the custodian when a latte has been spilled during the Flag Salute, and hold steady when a kid complains that their grade should be changed because they need to play in the big game. In many ways, it has been my job to be the solid place from which

to launch. It is my job to stand firm on the school rules, and because I have always been a rule follower (believe me, I will make some up just for fun) I have rarely questioned the handbook and its pronouncements.

In a past, more conservative school, it was my job to tell kids, ok mostly girls, that their clothing wasn't appropriate. My male counterpart couldn't comfortably "dress code" a girl, even if he had noticed something inappropriate, so it was easier to call me over and point out the offending child with a pointed nod of the head. It followed a predictable pattern of offense, boys wore ridiculous tees, girls showed skin.

"Jordan, you can't wear a tee-shirt that says 'Grade 'A' Kush.'" I was kneeling by his desk, looking over his writing when I noticed the graphic.

The 17-year-old retaking Freshman English didn't even sweat.

He pitched his voice low, "Mrs. Slabaugh, I'm just supporting legalization" his face was earnest, but his shirt continued to blatantly advertise recreational marijuana.

The freshmen behind him whispered from row to row; a wave of giggles and nods followed; they had just learned a new name for weed. Later, another malcontent, Tanner, managed to wear a shirt half a day before he arrived to English class, it announced that he liked "Big Racks," and it had a buck imprinted on it.

"Go home or turn it inside out," I spoke matter of factly. I wasn't mad. This wasn't a battle, but it was a rule. We had known each other for a while, so he knew where the line was drawn.

"Awwwww, man. Slabaugh, no one else cares." He grinned; he had been waiting all day for someone to notice his clever entendre. He had been waiting all day for someone to notice

him. He followed a couple of weeks later with an advertisement for an apparent hotdog company: “Tasty Wieners.” Strangely, that one was noticed during his first hour.

With girls it is different. They rarely wear raunchy shirts, but there is always something on display: a big rack in a straining push-up bra, a new belly button piercing, cut-off jeans that for some unfathomable reason are too short for both ass cheeks and pocket linings. Kids ask me why we have the policy; my only answer is that we were practicing respectful attire. But when I think back to the policing that I thought was my duty to the school and our standards, I can only remember a couple of instances in which I was helpful rather than harmful to the kid.

“Hey Emma, your leggings are almost transparent under the stage lights. Do you want to go home and change?”

“Nah, it’s ok, Slabs.”

I signaled her even closer to me. I whispered, “What if I could tell you that you are wearing a lime-colored thong?”

She blanched, her normally porcelain skin turned even more translucent against her blonde hair, “I’ll be right back.”

I felt confident that I saved this woman-child a little embarrassment from her peers, but any other time I have dress-coded a girl, I later wonder what message she got from me? You are only valued for your looks? Don’t share your shameful body? Don’t tempt teenage boys, because the poor dears might be distracted? How dare you flaunt your wares? I obviously noted that the Tanners of the world needed attention and love, the concern and watchfulness that comes from a caring if exasperated adult, but I have rarely dress-coded one of my own gender with the same quiet affection. Why is that?

Maybe I am distanced from the conversation because I have already effectively policed my own body to the standards that are demanded by work dress codes and errant eyebrows. I worry about looking professional; however, I also partake in a profession in which I might sit cross-legged on the top of a table, crouch near desks, and check in with groups of kids sprawled across the floor working on posters. I have developed a formula that seems to work (thrift store pants + colored tee/tank + cardigan + funky accessory=teacher). I add layers depending on the ferocity of the air conditioning or the paucity of the heaters. My teacher clothes are designed to cover my personality and all of my femininity so that boys will listen to me rather than concentrate on my sagging boobs, but let's be clear, I don't think that they know that I'm female, I fall more easily into that delineation of 'mom' that is both genderless and asexual. This is the only explanation that I have for the amount of crap that they leave in my classroom: pairs of shoes, phone chargers, smelly lunch boxes, hoodies, "Slabs will get it." I've even considered putting up a poster that reads something like, "Your Mom Doesn't Live Here. Pick Up Your Own Crap" but the administration doesn't always enjoy my sense of humor or my language, and some kids don't have a mom at home, and they don't need to be reminded at school.

Regardless of my uniform formula, my clothes don't really feel like "me." There is still a sense of costuming that goes into my choices, which answers the question, "What should a middle-aged teacher wear?" as if I weren't the middle-aged teacher standing by the rack of clothes. The logical answer is that "teacher clothes" are what I choose to wear, and this has been pointed out by my ever so logical husband. He doesn't seem to imagine or even care what message he is sending with his body usually encased in plaid and khaki other than on Saturdays when his chest is emblazoned with a message that reads something like: "K-State Football is awesome, believe me or I'll punch you in the face."

But that's the thing, isn't it? That our body and the clothing on it are both part of our messages to the world. When a loved one dies, there is always the conversation that the family has, how do we dress this body in the coffin, what do we use to demonstrate who this person is to us, was to the world? I have had this convo with others. My sister and I laugh and say that dad should be buried in his "denim tuxedo," jeans and a jean shirt, the sleeves cut off so that it is cool enough to wear on the farm. After little thought, I decided my burial clothing of choice would be my summer uniform, a close approximation to my father's.

My summer outfit is almost risqué compared to the conservative parameters of my teacher uniform. It consists of a dark tank top and jean shorts, typically cut-offs that have strings hanging from the raveled hem, and a pair of sturdy sandals that rotate every two or three summers. After I announced this in a conversation, I cringed a little. What do a tank and cut-off shorts look like at 65? 72? 87? What will my sagging body look like in such an outfit? The bigger question might be, do I care? If I make it to any or all of those ages, I will be thankful for my wrinkled and sun-spotted skin. Fortunately, I'd rather be reduced to ashes and thrown in my garden, an homage to Whitman, "look for me under your boot-soles." I want my message to be one of compost and flowers, of dirt and sweat, and a whole lot of I don't give a damn.

But the situation becomes even more muddied as my daughters become teens, and I find that I do give a damn, several damns in fact. Once, growing out of clothes was a matter of pants hems becoming "highwaters" and exposing ankles to the world. Having teens grow out of clothes is an exercise in surprise. "Oh, you need a new pair of shorts," I say as evenly as possible while inside I wonder if the 8th-grade teachers have discussed the new prevalence of my child's ass cheeks that have escaped the now too small shorts that I swear were long enough just three weeks ago. We bought jeans and shorts in a larger size and sent her back to school sans cheeks.

Should she have been “dress coded”? Is she at fault because her body’s natural growth exceeded her mother’s attention?

Another daughter texted me yesterday on the verge of a Homecoming dance meltdown, “can u grab my spanks? they are on the floor by my bed. orange and purple.” I delivered them at the meeting place where teen cars had parked haphazardly with a little thought about the parking lines, and I found four junior girls, sparkling in the evening light, smiling, piling into a car full of friends, free of dates and full of expectations. I threw the spandex pants at her through the window and she leaned in, her fine hair tousled around her head, electric with her excitement.

“Are you sure you need these?”

“Well, what if my cooch falls out?”

I raised my eyebrow, “Has your cooch recently ‘fallen out’?”

She shrugged and grinned, “Well, I don’t want anyone seeing my panties.”

She ran back around her friend’s hand-me-down sedan, clip-clopping on heels, and I watched her shimmy into her spanks as her friends urged her to hurry. They turned to wave and barely refrained from spinning out their tires as they left for the festivities.

II.

This goes to prove that girls these days no longer wear slips; they wear spanks, spandex shorts that are barely there, and typically do duty under cheer uniforms or work as running shorts. The girls as a generation do not understand the concept of foundation garments, nor come to think about it, have I actually given my daughters any such lessons.

“Don’t any of your friends own a slip?” I asked about it, and they shrugged. And when in JC Penny’s (the bastion of proper clothing) the slips are relegated to a single display, back by the high-waisted panties that people get caught dead wearing. When I waved in their general

direction, my girls turned away. The propriety handed down from my mother was no longer relevant.

While shopping with my oldest daughter, I found my mother's slip, not her slip, but the exact copy, 40 years later in a vintage shop. The slip was on a hanger and priced as a dress to be worn a la Courtney Love. It needed only some heavy Doc Martin boots to balance its ephemeral existence and some brazenness to make it into an ensemble. There was many a Sunday morning that my mother stood by the ironing board in that slip, finishing a collar, crisping a pleat, her dress still on the hanger because it was easier to be half-dressed than to clean up spit-up off of her Sunday best.

Regardless of the style icons who have come and gone wearing inner-wear as outer-wear, we still perpetuate the idea of policing each other's clothing. I wish that I could lay this at the feet of the patriarchy, pointing to a disgruntled white man the same age as my father who doesn't understand the difference between a flip flop and a thong. But the reality of the situation is that somewhere between burning bras of the 1960's we have followed looser and looser parameters on what's correct to wear, but we as women continue to judge others and regulate such. I have to stop and ask myself about what I have been perpetuating. Has "dress coding" any of the girls changed their behaviors or has it merely changed how they saw themselves, their message to the world?

The department stores used to call such places the foundations department, but those days are long gone. We no longer have to have a solid foundation on which to balance and display clothing that has been constructed, made of angles and planes. Now darts are rarely required. Now we live in a perpetuation of slouch. Knits slink and slide over bodies, bras are designed to disappear under the sheerness of a tee. Shouldn't the idea of women controlling other's bodies go

the same way, the way of the girdle and the pantyhose? Maybe, as I have seen in my life, it is generational, mothers protecting daughters by trying to cover parts because God knows we are in control of so little else. We have defined decency as somehow corralling unruly breasts and making sure that no one understands that there is a space between one's legs. But we wear pants. I am still befuddled by this concept and tried to clarify it with my mother.

“So why do we wear slips?”

Mom sighed; she is a very good sigh-er, “So that people can't see through your skirt. You've seen someone who has been backlit. You can see her legs right through the material.”

“But we wear pants.”

My mom looked at me.

I tried with a different intonation, maybe the words weren't enough to point to the irony.

“But we wear panttttttssssss.” I crisped the consonants so that the emphasis landed with a hiss. “Don't people see that we have legs when we wear pants? Isn't it evident?” Maybe some more explanation will bring us to the same place.

She laughed at me and walked to the next plant in her garden, pulling weeds as we talked, pointing out a couple new cultivars that she is trying in the bed of her Virgin Mary garden, a fertility symbol made Christian. Mary has been co-opted from pagan belief and has been reduced to a connection to gods rather than a god herself. The statue winks at me. Her gentle smile and downward gaze indicates that my mother and I will not see eye to eye on this one, Mom will continue to wear slips and hose and be a proper lady as I tromp through the world wearing nylon sandals with casual skirts.

I refrain from mentioning my recent scholastic discovery, Mary as vagina: Mary as source. I don't think that “Vagina Garden” has quite the same ring to it. I mentioned to Mom

once that a study linked the brain scans of a nun's ecstasy in prayer to that of another woman in orgasm. It wasn't a long convo, just long enough for her to look shocked. I would like to remember that she scolded me and used my middle name, but I can't be for sure. It made me understand that I was curious about faith and belief, and there was no room for that curiosity with her; faith was faith. To link faith to sex, well, that was pretty damned close to blasphemy. I just thought that it was nice that even if you were married to Jesus, you might still get off.

III.

So then as a mother and a teacher and a woman, what am I left with at the end of this contemplation? Will I continue to dress code my students in "inappropriate" clothing? Are we really just the sum total of the clothes we wear? A child tested this contemplation two weeks ago, walking into class with a chest that announced "Nude Girls" in six-inch neon letters on a black tee. I didn't see the shirt for at least 20 minutes, and the rest of the class kept laughing behind their hands and generally acting like teens. When I finally followed the eyes of her classmate, I wondered how I missed the message "please notice me" for so long. I gently and quietly sent her down to the office as fast as her little legs could carry her. Just like Tanner, she needed some attention, and our principal does a good job of giving caring attention to kids who need it. I couldn't snuggle her and teach the lesson that was on the board for that day. Later that same day, I caught another student spelling "cunt" across my classroom with American Sign Language. While I admired her second language skills, I still called her out. I would do the same if someone spelled "dick." She was chagrined and exasperated that I could translate her code. But she was grinning. There is something liberating and fun about cussing and almost getting away with it. It is even better when the teacher winks at you.

Instead of reading shirts and judging bodies, I think that I will look more deeply into the larger social decisions that I see my students making. Is the shirt ever really about wieners or nude girls? Is the tank top or pushup bra ever really about boobs? Nope. Applying the foundation garments of the 50's and 60's won't work either. We are past the point of pretending that women don't have bodies, or that they are only shaped by and for men. I will continue to wear my cardigans and sensible shoes and insist that my students learn other ways to communicate their needs.

Circles

My brothers and dad filled the truck going to the dump with old papers and magazines, chairs past repair, empty egg cartons, and margarine containers that had been stacked neatly with their lids. Grandma Helen had passed, and it fell to us to portion out those parts of her life that were assignable. But there was so much saved in a small house. Our grandparents had survived the Great Depression, they were savers of the best and worst kind. Our grandfather never bought a car with a loan; it simply wasn't logical to get a loan for a tool that was depreciating as you were paying it off. My grandmother patched jeans. She was a seamstress. She would not be one of those people who used an iron-on patch or allow the frayed edges of a patch to show. She simply did seams on the inside of the jeans, the legs getting skinnier and skinnier with every patch. I know that Grandpa was picky about his sock seam, fidgeting with his socks to get them just right in his lace-up Red Wing boots, I can't imagine his irritation with seams on top of his thighs and under his knees.

Our grandparents' house was a second home for us, they lived across Cedar Creek, our land butted together. We were linked by the phone and by rides in the back of pickups, but if you were willing to walk a couple miles and brave the ford, you could probably make it to the farm in less than an hour. You would arrive with muddy feet but be rewarded with blonde brownies or could climb up the counter to the lazy susan and get some marshmallows and prunes. To this day I don't know why we were so excited to get prunes for a snack.

My mother and I were tasked with doing the women's work of cleaning out the farmhouse. We were washing dishes in the kitchen; gravel dust covered the boxes of china that had been transferred across the creek from my grandmother's house. These dishes were

generations old. I carefully handed my mom stacks of beautiful china that had rarely seen the light of day outside of the china cabinet from my grandparent's back room. Some dishes I knew, a berry bowl, the fish plate, an ornate shaving mug, others were carnival glass that glinted palely but hinted at little purpose other than reflecting colored light and possibly holding candy. The bright pink roses were my Great-Grandma Stella's, the shaving cup was for someone named John W., but then there was a new pattern that didn't match the rest.

There were four place settings, just salad plates and dinner dishes, no fancy berry bowls. Instead of the riotous roses of Stella's collection, this pattern was cool and crisp, pale purple and blue and cream, stylized thistles that mathematically split the plate that was rimmed with silver.

"Whose are these?" I asked.

Grandpa Jim had gone through the cabinet with us before, why else would I know that there is a plate specifically for a fish? Why hadn't he said something about this set? I had never seen this small collection in my years of poking through cabinets and closets.

Mom looked up from the hot water and scrunched her nose a little.

"Oh, those were Helen's." She shrugged and went back to the calm of the water. I was confused. Why would my grandmother have china? She always pooh-poohed the idea. No one should sign up for china anymore. A nice stoneware should suffice. I knew her Franciscan pottery. Every meal was served on it, the white swirls elegant yet practical. I picked a Mikasa stoneware myself well aware that my mother's china had never been touched by us hooligans and based upon what I had seen of our own progeny, we never would be able to use.

Teaching experts tell us not to face off with a kid, to stand shoulder to shoulder with a difficult kid in the hallway. Allow the kid to feel talked with rather than at. So I have to wonder

if the kitchen counter felt like a place of equals to my mom (a veteran teacher) or at least a place of truth and safety, a place of her power where she wouldn't have to meet my eyes.

“Have you ever imagined what it would be like to be Hellen Cubit's daughter-in-law?” she asked it quietly, almost introspectively, the water whispering under her hands as she wiped dust and grime from the elegant and controlled design.

I was gob smacked. As a young mom, I really didn't have time to think about anything other than potty training and Disney channel, and if I really was going to allow my daughters to own a Barbie. The implications of such a question hit me with a visceral punch.

My grandmother was a force of nature, and she was everything that my mom was not. Helen was outspoken and righteous. She was a switchboard operator and went to college in the '40s when most women were still silent partners in inequitable marriages. She played a part in the farm, driving trucks or tractors every once in a while, but mainly tracking all of the bills, the weather, the journal, the number of bales that were rolled up on Darwin's place this year, the head of cattle that we had on the bottoms. She was a member of the AAUW, was part of the Presbyterian Women, sewed many of her own clothes, and was president of the Republican Women of Anderson County. She and Grandpa Jim were Anderson County Fair marshals, a nod to her 4-H leadership, a nod to his 20 years in the legislature.

My mother is quiet and fun, a kindergarten teacher who laughs so hard sometimes that she wheezes with tears rolling down her face. My sister and I are proud of the fact that we have the same skill set of wheezing. She is devoutly Catholic to my grandmother's Protestant background, non-confrontational, and a homebody. She refuses to learn how to drive a stick, staying off the tractors, out of the fields except to bring dinner. They both are sopranos in their church choirs, my mother's voice is rich and beautiful, my Grandma's was shrill.

I handed her another dish, this one with Stella's roses. She washed and stacked it as well.

"I wonder why I never saw those dishes," I avoided the conversation. I don't know how to deal with the grief of losing my grandmother. I don't know how to talk about how alienating it must have been to share a daughter with someone so different from oneself. I don't know how to fit in the awkward space between two women that I love.

So today I hang my grandmother's plate on my wall. The silver still glints in the sun, the pattern still mathematically precise. The thistles still poke forward and fan out, beautiful but pointed under the smooth glaze. I have been thinking a lot about that relationship of women, the way in which china is given at weddings. No man gives china. It is a woman's gift to another woman, an acknowledgment of formality and beauty, a symbol of our greatest job, feeding others.

Both women in my life have been great cooks, they share degrees in Home Economics from K-State, a way to formalize and make the art of homemaking into a science, something that can be studied and improved upon. They both have been fair food judges, picking at muffins and yeast breads while young kids squirm on folding chairs waiting for a pronouncement and a ribbon. They shared recipes; my grandmother's cookies never as good as my mom's; my mother avoided frying chicken because my dad claimed that it was never quite right. It was in this mix that I learned to feed others. I have recipes in the box that are in both women's handwriting. My grandmother's blonde brownie recipe is written in my mother's perfect Palmer school teacher's script. I want to be able to understand this complexity, the interweaving of two such different women who helped me learn to feed my family, and who helped me be both a leader and a homebody.

That circle of feeding also led me to be connected to the dirt. As a child, I resisted the job of the garden. Pressed to pull weeds between the green bean rows, I would slowly back away as my mom had her head down, concentrating. I squirreled off, only to be found later under a tree with a book. I gathered buckets of tomatoes, picking off the green-horned cutter caterpillars so that my brothers could squish them under their boots. I trudged into Grandma's hot, steaming kitchen, dumping the bucket into the clean water of the white sink, red bobbers glistening in the water, seals popping in the background. Jars and rings bubbled in a pan next to the big black canner that shivered with heat on top of the stove. We canned what we grew, we ate what we canned. We sweated together in a tiny kitchen until I escaped again from the work of feeding others.

Today I chose to pull weeds and can tomatoes. I understand why I was allowed to get out of work: the calm of a kid-free garden or hot kitchen is a blessed experience. My mom and grandmother did their duty by insisting that I had learned a job and then they relished the quiet when I stopped whining and complaining and just disappeared to my own devices. They allowed me to learn the basics, confident that feeding others would be a calling that I would respond to when it was time. They were confident that they were handing off the china to the next generation.

Grandma Helen's plate is on my wall with other pieces. Circles seem to be a theme there. They appear as the plates that range the dining room wall, they swirl in the design of antique frames, they wink in and out of the quilting that dominates the quilt on the couch, they appear in my own art, acrylic paintings and prints. I like circles and curves and swooshes because they are easy, they are fluid and flowing, they roll off the pen or needle or brush. The circles help my art

exist in its link to others, to togetherness, to the sweeping connection of woman to woman, one generation to the next.

A friend told me that our children are not of us, but that they move through us. Maybe that's why my circles are never singular. I may exist as a circle myself, but I exist in a cacophony of circles: the surface of the water during a rain. My circles bump and plod along, not always gorgeous or fluid, not without interference, but always expanding outward, always connecting and feeding the impetus of the next one, and the next.

So, the plate is just another circle, another connection that flows outward encompassing more and more in its swath as it mingles with others. In that conversation with my mom, I froze because I thought that I had to pick a circle. I froze because I was scared that my grandmother's circle might be overpowering. I felt like I had betrayed Mom and the importance of our bond. It is a conversation that still needs to happen. But I am not of my mother, my daughters are not of me, we exist singly in this space, moving through yet connecting when we bump up against each other, welcoming and honoring each other's circles, telling each other's stories, feeding each other's soul.

No-Fail Pie Crust

This comes from the Better Homes and Garden recipe binder, you know, the one that is clad in gingham? Anyway, this is the only pie crust I use even though I do own a food processor and could cut ice-cold butter into flour. Too much work! Look, you are already going to get credit for knowing how to make a pie, why overwork yourself? That being said, never use canned apple pie filling. I simply won't be able to respect you as a person. It's just cutting up some apples for God's sake, it's not rocket surgery.

Yeah, I know that's a mixed metaphor. Thanks for noticing; my students never do. They just sit there thinking that I'm an idiot. I wait for a beat and there we are, just two generations stuck in a stupidity standoff.

You're just going to buy a frozen pie, aren't you? Fine. When you decide to step up, the recipe will still be here.

2 cups flour

½ teaspoon salt

½ cup vegetable oil

3-5 T of cold water

Mix the flour, salt, and oil with a fork until the mixture is crumbly then work in water until it becomes a ball. Let it rest for a couple of minutes before rolling out half of the ball between two pieces of waxed paper. You can bake this blind (that means empty) for a cream pie, or add fruit filling and then top and crimp. Always add 2-3 T of butter right under the crust and throw aluminum foil over the whole thing while it is baking.

I shared a recipe with a friend once and she was flummoxed.

“This is just the ingredients!”

“Annnnnnd?”

“Well, what am I supposed to do with them?”

It honestly never occurred to me that someone might not know the steps to throw together a batter or a dough. Why wouldn't they have the steps of every type baked good memorized? I realize now that this is a skill given to very few. I can't play the piano by ear. I can't dance, but, “Hey, do you want some muffins?”

Just a Man and a Buffalo

“Mrs. Slabaugh, you know how you said we shouldn’t write about anything that can get us or someone else in trouble, right?”

I approached the “Table of Yahoos.” It is a folding table with unmatched chairs wedged into a corner of my classroom. The table allows my student count to go from 25 up to 30 (because good writing is always produced in classes with that many teens). The big boys like to sit there; it keeps them from shoving their long limbs under desks made for their junior-high size. Jim was a quiet kid, who, though he took up a lot of space with his man-body and boat-like boots, was rarely on my radar in class. Even his red hair seemed to fade into obscurity because of his quiet personality.

“Well, Jim, I’m pretty sure that I said that you can write about whatever you wanted to, but you also have to understand that I am a state mandated reporter. If you tell me something, like oh...that you are addicted to heroin, or that your grandmother beats you with a 2x4, then, yeah, I have to turn it over to someone who can help.”

Jim thought about it for a little while.

“I have this good story about the time that we chased buffalo, but I don’t want to get Grandpa in trouble.”

“Ok, where was the buffalo? Were you at a state park?” I was starting to look forward to Jim’s paper; there was a hint of novelty here. To be honest, I had already judged this book by its cover and was expecting his paper to be another, “We had a beer and then we rolled my brother’s pickup/four-wheeler/motorcycle” narratives. The students write these confessionals and then

burn rubber in the parking lot to disprove the lessons they have wisely and laboriously put to paper.

“Well, they’re our buffalo.” He blinked at me as if this answered the entire question.

“Jim, why would you think you would get in trouble for writing about rounding up your own buffalo?” I was starting to look around the room to see if any students were off task, numbing their brains with their phones.

“Wellll...”

Please God, make this faster.

“Well, Grandpa said that the buffalo were out and we had to get ahead of them.”

“Un-huh?” I nodded encouragement.

“So, he made my brother and my cousins and me load up in the car to go round them up.”

“Yes?” So far so good. I nodded. I have had way too many times in my own life that I have faced down an angry cow at a tender age, typically only armed with a stick and a fear of getting yelled at. A buffalo, though? That would be scary. I still wasn’t convinced that this constituted child abuse, and I some more peeps to check on.

“Well, I had a broken arm.”

“Wait, you broke your arm while rounding up the buffalo?” Maybe I would be filling out a form after all.

“No.” Blink. Blink. Blink.

Sigh.

“Jim, I need you to tell me why you are worried that I will turn in your grandfather.”

“Well, see, it’s like this. There were a lot of cousins, and you know, we had to be safe, so they buckled up.”

“Ummm hmmm”

“And there weren’t enough seatbelts.”

“Yeah.”

“So, my grandpa made me and my brother ride in the trunk of the car.” Jim looked down and tensed for my verdict.

The guys at the ‘Table de la Yahoos’ smirked. One of his compatriots even giggled. Apparently, they had heard this story plenty of times. Hell, a couple of them could even be the cousins who got to ride up front in relative safety before facing some runaway beasts.

“Yeah? Well, I wouldn’t recommend it, but it looks like you came back in one piece.”

Jim’s head came up, but he wasn’t sure he could trust me, “So Grandpa isn’t in trouble?”

“Jim, has your grandpa put you in a trunk ever again?”

“No.”

“Are you afraid of Grandpa?”

“No.”

“Were there any long-term effects of riding in the trunk?”

“Well, it was bumpy.”

I sighed my long sigh, my “this job is ridiculous” sigh.

“No, Jim, I won’t call Social Services, but I do think that this sounds like a really exciting narrative. What if you did this fancy thing called ‘in media res’ which basically means that you start in the middle of the story and then you can flashback to how it all started? Let’s start with setting the scene. Write down all the things that you can remember about being in that trunk. How did you feel? What could you see and hear? Could you smell anything?” I scribbled questions on his notebook where he had started some notes.

Jim paused. "I couldn't see anything. It was dark"

The whole table laughed together, and Jim joined in on the joke he just told about himself.

"I'm sure it was, Jim, I'm sure it was. Why don't you start with that?"

Welcome to the Jungle

Shhhh....To see an outstanding teacher, one must first stalk one in its natural habitat: the classroom. Note the anchor charts, markers and craft supplies, stacks of journals for student writing, and ready availability of technology. Note, too, the faces of her students. They will be attentive because this teacher accepts nothing less. Turn your eyes to the teacher. She may be quietly facilitating groups who are working independently; she wanders and listens as she checks on each one. Or she may be wildly gesticulating (because of course, she is acting out a part of Odysseus's journey home to Ithaca). Watch as she checks comprehension and then continues to demonstrate the correct Cornell note-taking strategies. Observe, too, how the students respond. They feel safe and secure amid this jungle of education because they know that they are valued and respected regardless of the grade that they have earned or the detention that they must serve. Ah, a young cub tests the authority of the outstanding teacher, and he is gently reminded that he is not allowed across the firm but invisible boundaries that they agreed upon at the beginning of the year. The bell rings and the students are dismissed as the outstanding teacher goes to the hallway to supervise the young as they roam. Our preliminary conclusions after this observation are that this outstanding teacher respects her students, sets boundaries, and provides a rigorous curriculum.

Apparition

I saw a ghost once. Or a spirit. Maybe the Virgin Mary. Maybe my sister, maybe my daughters. I still don't know, but it was my miracle, a happening, a truth.

There is no other good way to say this. It doesn't come up in conversation very often, and it's not a story that I trot out at parties because it is amusing or amazing. I have lost three pregnancies in my lifetime, three children. I'm not here to argue semantics or politics or women's rights. You have the right to do as you wish with your body, as do I with mine, and I will fight to make sure that that remains true, regardless of my mother's beliefs or that of the church that I no longer attend. But the beings who came and went without partaking of this world are still my children, in whatever form that they might be now. No, not angels. Angels are different beings. Jesus! Did you even take a religion class? Do you even know how to feel vague guilt for your existence?

We lost the first babe when I was 23, in my first year of teaching. It seemed like a good idea to have a kid. We had checked off the boxes. Young love? Check. Marriage in a big church with a big party (it was a hog roast at the Knights Hall, don't get too excited)? Check. A dog that hated me and loved my husband? Check. A little house with a big yard for the aforementioned dog? Check. We had finished our degrees and I had a professional job. Double check.

When I lost the babe at 12 weeks, I was devastated. How does God make up a plan like this? The stats were horrible, and I felt cheated by what I didn't know. I don't bet on things. I don't gamble with important decisions. I don't cede control lightly, and research indicated a 25% failure rate for early pregnancies. I wouldn't have made that bet or walked into that situation

gambling on a life. But who knows the numbers if they haven't experienced them for themselves? I had no idea and was gob smacked that such a thing happened regularly. With distance and age, I am less reactive to that statistic, but I also know that my daughters will probably share my stats and I will have to apologize to them for whatever genetic deficiencies I have passed on. A 50% success rate is nothing more than an invitation to pain.

The three girls came along without much trouble. And I was careful, so careful. Iced Tea? No thank you! Caffeine isn't good for the baby. I bet people wanted to strangle my careful, controlled, terrified little self. Gwen went to the NICU for a while for jaundice, but they all made it through with the usual shots, rashes, teeth, naps (THANK YOU, SWEET JESUS, FOR NAPS) and I was home to enjoy it all. Scott and I made the decision early that I would stay home with the kids. I really do appreciate that he made it seem like he would stay home, but when he asked, "do you think a car seat will fit in a golf cart?" He was giving me the excuse I needed to prove that he couldn't possibly stay home with her.

I quit my job and the Home Ec teacher who taught next to me berated me when I announced my resignation. She was furious. "THIS IS WHAT WE FOUGHT FOR!" But dammit, how to explain? How could I say it aloud? I went from being my college feminist self to a mom, a weepy, leaky mom. When I picked up my baby from the sitter's, she didn't smell like me. It was that essential. It was that primal, and I was loath to admit it. My reasoning that I spouted to others was logical and was based on my own upbringing. My mom stayed home. My mom nursed. My mom used cloth diapers. So would I.

Then followed many years of misery until I found running, therapy, and antidepressants, but not in that order.

I shouldn't be so flippant. We did a lot of things, but my brain needs a project, a stone to grind itself against, a knot to unravel, so in the midst of staying home with the girls and learning and playing, I planned. I planned Sunday school; I planned home renovation projects; I planned huge gardens; I planned playdates. For the most part, I found ways to be happy, and I was busy.

I took a job when Grace was five and Gage had just turned three. Now they are all intelligent and determined young women, but there are girls who were raised by sitters and daycare centers who are very much the same. I don't feel like I gave them much, but I got to know my daughters deeply, and I know it is because we were snuggled like bugs in a rug. I am thankful for that deep knowing.

A couple of years after I was back to teaching, I went to participate in the blood drive hosted by the KAYS. The nurse asked all of the usual questions and then raised an eyebrow at me.

“You think you could be pregnant?”

I laughed, “Of course not. No. We don't have a big enough house for four kids.”

“Ummmmmmmmhmm. You just talk to my twins about that. I didn' have enough room for them either, but they didn't get no memo.” She winked, and grinned, and sent me away in a daze.

I struggled with that pregnancy. It was a reset of expectations, and we have already established that I don't do well with ceding control. I had done my time on the recliner, rocking and nursing. We didn't have a big enough house; I didn't want the mess of moving. And yet, my bestie was carrying her first babe, a month behind. And she had fought so hard through her own losses and loved so much that I couldn't be the asshole who complained because a baby wasn't convenient. I changed my tune and told Scott that we had better find a bigger place, and for

God's sake if we are going to have four teenagers in one house, there better be a second bathroom.

I ran into another pregnant gal in front of the True Value. I had been buying plants, again, for the house that we were soon to move out of. She was the wife of one of my husband's co-workers, so I knew of her and therefore decided to be nice and stop to chat when she stopped in front of me, no matter how much I just wanted to get home and put both kids and flowers in their respective beds.

Taylor was excited and pregnant with her first. I was begrudgingly becoming happy with my fourth; we were the yin and yang of pregnancy, a maiden and a crone, the uninitiated and the expert. I thought to myself, this child knows nothing of stitches, or sore nipples, or lack of sleep. But Taylor couldn't read my thoughts or my body language and continued with her chatter.

"I felt the baby move today when I was getting down from the tractor. I wasn't sure, but then I was, you know?" She blathered on, "Are you going to find out the gender? Scott sure needs another man in the house."

"Yeah, sure." Agree. Agree. Agree. My feminist self couldn't even work up the outrage at the illogical position in which a woman was degrading the idea of birthing a female child. Seriously, what is that all about? Just agree. Do anything to get out of this conversation. Anything to stop the chitter chat. I hadn't felt the babe move yet. The calendars suggested that it was about that time, and I was trying to pretend that I wasn't nervous.

I lost the babe at 4 months, about a week after this inane (but normal) conversation. There was a tense trip to a hospital 30 miles away that had a sonogram tech. Techs aren't allowed to diagnose. But they know; they know. I could see the answer on the young man's face. Some of my students have gone on from my classroom to become sonogram technicians, and when they

tell me of this decision, it is with excitement. It's a great job! It is in demand! It pays well! They don't know the truth behind it. You get to see dead babies! You get to see malignant tumors! You get to see failing hearts! I don't tell them. Who would believe a sarcastic and bitter woman?

Glenna was delivered at the hospital. She was tiny, but my baby. Lacey came to sit with me. She has a talent for being still and sitting in pain with acceptance. My talent is to escape, escape, escape. If I could move, read, think, keep my brain moving fast enough, keep my brain busy enough, then maybe this couldn't really be a reality. But there weren't too many places to go in a small-town hospital. And how many visitors should one expect at such a time? Does Emily Post have a chapter over this? What should one do when there is a dead baby? Card? Flowers? A kick to the teeth? They all felt about the same.

Mom and Dad didn't come up; there probably was a good reason if not just their own trauma over their own losses. I probably told them to stay home. I just wanted to be with Scott; we had a lot of shock and grief to work through. And I'll be damned if I know where my kids went. No, seriously, as I sit here typing, I don't even fucking remember if my kids were well taken care of. They probably went to the neighbors? I don't even know who fed them Hamburger Helper and corn or spaghetti with shaky parmesan cheese.

There is no place to escape to in a hospital room, so when I say that I saw a ghost or an apparition, it probably just means that I lost my mind, had a nice little psychotic break to take the edge off. There were some pain meds, now that I think about it. Annnnywho, I saw a girl holding a babe. The girl had braids, long dark blonde hair. And the baby was bald as a cue ball, and about six months old, able to sit up from her perch and look around at the world. They both had blue eyes. The babe was on her left hip as she was standing there casually slinging the kid against her. My focus on this goes in and out. Sometimes the face of the young woman is almost

recognizable, like someone who looks like they might be related to me, I just haven't met them yet. It might have been the sister I've never met. It might have been my oldest, my child who didn't make it all the way here. Other times in my memory the face changes and it is Scott's mom, Bev, with her soft brown hair in curls around her face. Regardless of the changeable identity, my baby and her companion were both laughing: happy baby laughing, belly laugh laughing, joyously laughing.

It is one of my only significant brushes up against the divine. I guess that there are other moments in my life that echo the same feeling, but they seem much more distant. Listening to a heron's wings as it lifts off from a still bank is close. The quiet of a butterfly landing on a plant, the leaf bending with the insect's negligible weight is another. My girls laughing in the backseat of a vehicle, all snuggled together like when they were young is just about the best, and just about as rare. Like I said, my experience isn't a discussion piece. It isn't something tradable, a tit for tat anecdote offered to get to know someone better. But it was real, and it is mine.

Some jackass who does math is going to notice that I said I had a 50% birthrate and I have only talked about five pregnancies. I lost another babe about a year later. It was another blow to the solar plexus, but it let us know that we were done. Done. It allowed us to see the precious girls who were right in front of us, the souls that had decided to stay here for a while. If you study catholic iconography, you might quietly mention that this scene that I've described sounds a lot like the Virgin Mary and the Christ child, a statue on the left side of every Catholic church in existence. You believe what you want. I was the one who saw it; I was the one who heard them laugh.

Mothering: It's a Verb. Do It.

When I was first married, I was surrounded by onlookers who couldn't wait for a baby. I was the darling of the family, the youngest of the grandies, and a young adult deeply involved with our small rural community. Everyone loved me, and everyone was in my business. Old ladies who ran the food stand for the fair would nudge my Gram as she carried in a tray of pies. With a wink they would suggest to her that I was surely pregnant by now. Take for example my happy glow and my poochie stomach. Gram would dismiss them with a shrug. How was she supposed to know what newlyweds got up to these days?

"Silly old women!" Back in her kitchen, she discussed their conversations as she rolled out another crust, her head and back bent over the counter, her hair as white as theirs.

I disappointed them all for years. To be really honest, I was scared. If I forgot to feed my dog, Bella would forgive me with reproachful brown eyes and a lick of my hand. Babies cry. They are kind of ridiculous and scary. I mean, what happens if I break it, or if I just wasn't good at mothering? Is there a receipt? I wasn't going to risk ruining a child just to meet some archaic pattern of reproduction.

Along the way, a friend suggested that I join her on a bike ride, and it didn't kill me. I kept going on longer rides and I even bought a better bike. I enjoyed the air, the crunch of gravel under the tires, the freedom of being alone with my thoughts. I watched the golden grasses stretch away from me as the bowl of the Kansas sky made me feel infinitely small and intimately cupped in the center of all that is holy. The same friend asked me to enter a bike race, and suddenly and surprisingly I was signed up to race a hundred miles across the Flint Hills. I'm still not sure how it happened, or why. It just seemed like the next right step.

I remember regretting my decision as I carried my bike through mud that was too deep to ride through. Everything was wet; everything was gritty; the mud was the consistency of peanut butter; I was crying. There was a line of water running down my back from my braid that mixed with the mud that had splashed up from my tires. There was not a part of me that was not exhausted. I was at mile sixty-seven and I was considering quitting and calling my mom.

Seriously, that woman would elbow the other competitors out of the way, pack up my bike into the back of her ancient minivan, drive me home, start a hot bath for me and have cookies warm from the oven by the time I was pruney. Out of the mud, I made it another ten miles just thinking about the cookies alone. Four miles later I biked past the entrance to my grandfather's pasture, land that holds the divet of a dugout where my great-great-grandmother raised kids, chickens, and enough crops to feed all of them. It was then that I realized that I was going to finish. The idea had been nebulous from the start. I knew that the finish existed, but I didn't know how or why I was going to bike that far. I finished that bike ride, not because I was an athlete or a competitor, but because it was a task that was important to prove to myself.

I learned a lot from that ride. If I could ride 100 miles through rain and mud, if my ancestors could raise seven kids in a hole in the side of a hill, surely I could keep one child alive while making the choice to mother, in the fullest sense of that verb. Two years after the race, my blue-eyed daughter was born, and now I am on a different road, a wilder ride, but I have the stamina and a G and a Gram to look up to.

Catch and Release

We dropped our kiddo off at college today. I cried...a little. There is always loss mixed in with the new, and this is something new for her father and I even though we have been practicing giving away more and more responsibility, practicing more and more with letting her go.

Ways that we have let our girl go:

Walking, bike riding, jumping into the pool, walking to the park, hiking at the river, riding her bike to the pool, 4-H Camp, driving to school, sleepovers, first bank account, the senior party.

I still remember sinking into a dramatic puddle on the floor of the kitchen, cool against the gritty linoleum. I called Scott crying, "What if they don't need me anymore?"

What had my children done to melt their mother? I can still see them, the dog on the leash skittering with excitement. The girls, gathered around the butcher block, watching the shining coins pour out of the recycled pickle jar. They gathered an exorbitant amount, stacking quarters until they had about ten dollars, a treasure that was then poured into the cloth purse that came with a doll set. They set off to walk to the coffee shop, also a purveyor of smoothies, little trailing after big, Buttons, yipping, pulling on the lead. Gwen, her chin resolute, slightly lifted.

This is how I know that she will do something. There is a set to her jaw that tells me when she has decided. And really, what battles have we had? What rebellion has she foisted on the family? There have been several iterations of hair color, wild enough to make a small Kansas town frown, but mild enough that when we were in other places, it went without comment, she was merely a teen.

There was a wedding that we were to attend, and I mentioned buying a dress. Her chin lifted, and I cut out and sewed a set of khaki skorts, pants in disguise. The owl hat also comes to

mind, a ski hat with the dangly ties that fall by each ear. Her aunt Jana had bought it: Jana, the best shopper ever. The hat was brown with a sewn-on beak and buttons for eyes. Gwen would shove the hat over slightly damp hair in the morning and trudge to 5th and 6th grade. I'm sure it smelled, so it got thrown into the wash occasionally. The hat was worn on summer trips with shorts. I worried about heat stroke, thought about mentioning the hat and then looked at her chin. The hat would stay on through family Christmases and other not so formal occasions. I won the battle when it was really important. Church and school didn't see the dratted bird.

After it was lost on a trip to Nebraska, we bought a new one, tried to recreate the magic, but it was never the same. She has branched out to ridiculous socks and emo rebellion, her grandfather's army shirt from Vietnam over the concert tees of musicians she hadn't seen in concert. When we moved to a larger town, a larger school, the tee shirts became less dark, her hair was colored less, but the socks remained as crazy as ever.

I am partially to blame for the clothing. I let my kids thrift shop with me, looking through the past treasures, often trying to costume student actors, sometimes to clothe student performers who didn't own something that made the cut for forensics competitions. We bought a collection of ties once. The girls came to find me at the clothes racks with 70's ties, 3'½ inches wide, the most polyester of polyester, and the best part yet? They were clips-ons. Their tee shirts pulled down at the neck: their faces lit up with smiles. She was raised in this way, around crazy fashion, thrift shop hilariously paired with tie-dye clothing produced at a party of drunken moms.

I want to take credit for the line of her chin, her quiet determination. But it is her father's chin, his quiet willfulness. I am more likely to lose my temper, to yell and throw shit; they are more likely to retreat, their eyes askance at such overt displays of ridiculousness.

The house doesn't feel empty yet, I hear people speak of the quiet house, and I wonder what else they have in their lives, how close they are to the kids that they raised. I don't know yet. There are still plenty of raging teen hormones and dirty socks in my living room. Someone is probably spilling something on the couch right now or tucking a cheese stick wrapper between the cushions for me to find later. I will get to pack up two more kids to college or maybe a tech school. And I will be honored to get to let them go. What else is my job besides raising kids to be competent and adults?

I wonder too about others who have caught and released, this motherhood dance that seems unbearable except with the shoulders of good friends. What about Gram and the daughters that she has lost? Children who have lived and raised children of their own, lived big complex lives filled with big and small problems? Are our souls here on a catch and release system too? I don't know if this is how god feels as he observes us, I don't know that I believe in such a being. But I can imagine a benevolent soul biding her/his time, shaking her head at our juvenile antics, scared that she hasn't done enough (and has she? Has she? Look at how we are acting) and wondering if it is time to intervene.

“Ahhh, But Does It ‘Spark Joy’?”

I am in my room. Well, when one is married, I don't know if that can really be the case, In my room that I share with my lovely husband. Things invade our space, kids, mostly, but also other less important things. There is a bookcase, mainly because our living room is too small to have a library space, but don't worry, the builders planned for a TV. I shouldn't be flippant, we do have the noise box on quite a bit, a noisy background for our daily activities.

I am caught in this balance right now between things and stuff and the urge for room and breathing and thoughtfulness. Marie Kondo has suggested a purge the likes of which I don't know that my family will survive. I get the point, bring all of your stuff into one place so that one can feel the presence of their thing-ness. What would happen in our case is that we would gather everything together and then, when my living room or kitchen table was overrun with belts and shoes and scarves, I would cry, overwhelmed by the process of trying to get out from under everything, and then I would just stuff the collection back into the closet and go on with my life after cursing the petite wonder who has changed other families supposedly for the better.

In attempting to clean my closet, I am always met by memories, not only of events but by the person I was as I wore those clothes. I know that I am supposed to look for change in myself, but as a wienie of a person, I feel like I am always nostalgic for the person that I was, rather than the perennially troubled person that I am now or the future self who might not be competent enough to deal with life.

A colleague and I joke about our future and past selves. On a Friday when we are just surviving the week, we look at each other and laugh, Monday Angie is going to be really pissed when she sees the way that Friday Angie has left the desk. We laugh at ourselves because we know that it is true. Maybe it is because we are hoping that Friday Angie and Lexi will pick up

that pace or be less exhausted, but it is in a frame of acceptance and forgiveness. We can predict that tinge of annoyance and shake of the head. Our past selves are always forgiven, our present selves are the ones that are beating ourselves up.

How to Plan a Gallery Wall, or Checklist to be a Middle-Class Woman

One of the talents that a woman must have is the ability to artistically put things on walls in order to prove one's belonging to a social group. For a long time during the '90s, there was an actual company that made money off of women making money off of women by selling pre-selected, pre-arranged art. They were color-coordinated with candle holders and artificial flower swags. Even better, they were sold at a "party" where friends could impel one into an expensive purchase. I want to hoot and holler at this concept. How could women have been so daft? Why did they buy this crap? How could they consider it art? How many prints of Monet's *Waterlilies* does the world need? Or how about the fat angels lined up, resting their cherubic faces on plump forearms? But then, I need to step back. My girls will have the same damned question, "Why did Mom put so much shit on the walls?" and I won't have much to defend myself other than to say to my children, "Well, everyone else was doing it" and "It looked cute on Instagram."

I, however, pride myself on the fact that, damnit, if I'm going to fall for a decorating ploy, I will at least do so cheaply until the next scam comes along. And if I buy ART, you know, stuff that artists make? Then I'm going to actually love it and then buy it from the artist so that they can pay a smidgen of a bill or maybe go out for a nice sandwich (ok, so I buy prints...but, I buy prints FROM THE ARTIST). And then I add in bits and pieces from the general flotsam that populates my house: 4-H photo contest pictures, my kid's art, and thrift shop pickings all are moved across what are now known as collage walls or gallery walls. Woe to the woman who has chosen not to include the family initial, a wooden arrow, or a list of family "rules" that are both witty yet share how really connected she is to her fam. Bonus points if you add a cross or have a line of scripture in a flowing font. Bonus-bonus points if you have a sign that says something about the beach or tacos or how much you love your dog.

Decorating is just another way for us to signal to our peers. “Yes, I’m worthy! Include me, I understand and will abide by the rules. I spent money to belong. I bought shit so that you will like me.” Don’t get me wrong, I agonized over where to hang an oversized clock on my feature wall. I followed the rules and taped painter’s tape down, just to try it out. And then, because I really needed some connection, I sent phone pics to my friends so that they could know the depths of my need for approval. Did I really have any growth after junior high school? It is questionable.

I am probably being too hard on myself. People have formed groups for time immortal and having a gallery wall just shortens the interview time and really acts like a woman’s friend resume. Does this woman value family? Check! Does this woman spend money? Check! Does the woman have taste? Ummmm, it seems questionable. . . Does this woman dust? Fuck no! The interview closes and depending on the interviewer and her toleration of kitsch and dust, the relationship can grow or wither. I feel sorry for those people who have ignored these rules and just put things on the wall that they like, or that maybe reminds them of something deeper, or perhaps is actually art.

Life on the Farm

I got to drive the D-19 and the D-17 Allis Chalmers, and I worked my way up to the Massey Ferguson. I'm sure that it had a type or a name, but since it was the only non-orange tractor on the place, it didn't get a first name. The Allis Chalmers are sweet little tractors, the orange has been foxed with so many caresses of the sun, the paint has lost its gloss. They look a little like persimmons, their skins dusty and bright, the darker color showing through around the edges.

When you look at a farmer today climbing into a tractor, there are stairs or a ladder involved, a cab with air conditioning and radio, it is a high-tech cockpit. We, instead, had a whole herd of the D series, like a string of pack ponies, cheerful and eager to work. The D14 and D15 were smaller, but the D-17 had a different transmission, it would be easier for me to drive. Climbing on is just a high step up, a foot into a stirrup, not a ladder into technology. There were no cabs when I was doing fieldwork, so I dressed in light layers and put on a DeKalb Seeds trucker hat (unironically) and drove.

There is a quiet meditative feel to driving back and forth over a field in third gear. The tractor rumbles, I looked down past my foot at the front tires to make sure that I had a tire in the groove, and then I got to look around. Raking was the best because drying hay is the smell that we all recognize as home. There were dirt and leaves, and grasshoppers who would spring up to see me, but not the layer of topsoil that I shook from my clothes after disking.

I got a job in town at 16 because Pizza Hut paid in cash and Dad paid in promises. I had about four years of driving until John was tall enough, but he always had a ball in his hand. Aaron was just as tall, and he wanted to farm. He would elbow John out of the way to the tractor, determined. John would shrug and make up another complicated play to run against imaginary

opponents, content to take the wheel when Aaron was tired or had to leave for another chore. In a conversation much later in my life, Aaron told me that I had worked many more acres than they did as teens, they split the burden that I had carried by myself. It was a compliment to me in a family that prizes work and dedication to the land.

Surely there were many times that my life was in danger, I do tend to let my mind take over as while my body is driving, but I am only conscious of one. I turned too sharp while pulling the disk. The tractor and implement made an L on the field, and then a tread of the tire picked up the edge of a disk. As the tire moved forward, the entire implement was lifted from the ground. A look over my right shoulder showed the end of the disk almost level with me. If I hadn't caught it in time, the tire would have continued to lift the disk until it would have fallen on top of me or pulled down the whole she-bang.

As I think about it now, I'm trying to figure out the physics, the logical way to get out of this quandary. Did I stop? Turn left out of the turn? Reverse? What did it sound like when the disk hit dirt? I don't remember the sound of my life being spared.

I have a complicated relationship with the farm. It is almost like a cousin that I haven't seen since childhood, but with whom I spent every waking moment of my early life. I know the fields based not upon land features, but by the last owner, long dead. We camped on Jim Warren's place once and my daughter asked me why Jim let us stay there, did we even know him? Actually, I don't. He died before I was cognizant that adults existed outside of my little sphere. But he owned the land 50 years ago, was the brother to the man in church who gave us gum, and he supposedly buried his cash in coffee cans or had a run-in with the James gang. Whatever the story is, there is treasure somewhere on that land, past the easy access to Cedar

Creek and the walnut trees under which we camp, providing cathedral-like graceful arches and symmetrical leaf patterns, and bumpy ground to sleep on.

I don't remember when I got to start driving tractors. I'm sure I was old enough. We had neighbors that let a son drive at eight or ten and my family scoffed, they would never risk a kid like that. But I remember that I ground feed at a young age, paired with a brother. We would take turns scooping milo into the maw of a grinder that was powered by the power take-off, a source of rotation that ran many implements that we used. We stood on the safety grid of the metal grain truck floor, the slick and slidy burgundy milo under our feet, a fine white powder blowing off of the ground grain escaping from the auger. It would settle like fine snow on our hair and brows. I think now how lucky we were that none of us had allergies, but the truth might be that we were exposed to such dirt and pollen in our early years that we only really had one option, to survive. There was a rhythm to the scoop and fling, a song that swelled faintly under the growl of the tractor and the roar of the grinder, so we couldn't talk. Scoop. Fling. There was no cover on the grinder, it seriously could have eaten one of us and spit us out like the woodchippers of a scary movie. We somehow managed to love each other enough not to be tempted to push.

I. Construction

Blue cotton with white stripes, I still remember the construction. In my mind, I see my grandmother and myself in the backroom. The sea-green typewriter that does the Presbyterian bulletin has been pushed aside and the Singer Featherweight is in its place on a small table. I learned the magic of matching stripes, an almost mathematical practice when laying out pieces of pattern. The pattern was simple, straight pants with an elastic waist and a woven top with a yoke. I know that Mom bought the fabric with me, but I sewed with Grandma.

I modeled this outfit for judges and the public at the 4-H fashion review. The memory is preserved for me in a picture, not in an actual memory of an event. The picture from the fair is eerie, probably from the weight behind it. There is a solitary eight-year-old standing on a plywood plank. High fashion was modeled only half an inch from the cow shit produced from beef shows earlier in the day. My wispy sun-stained hair was in a ponytail and my bangs were misbehaving; now my cowlicks have been tamed a bit, but for the humid fashion show they were in full force. I held a blue ribbon in front of me, elbow bent as the ribbon blows back in the breeze. While I was the center of the shot, the fences and barns behind me stretched across the background and I am almost lost in the soft dark of an approaching summer night.

Grandma hauled me into town to model at the fair that night; my parents were in one of their rough phases. The word “divorce” was bandied about. Tensions were thick at home. My green bedroom opened to the living room and so I was a bystander to the fireworks. I was told more than once to “stop crying and go to sleep.” So for the fair, Grandma Helen was my escort. She probably chatted in the back with Nancy, making excuses for my mom’s absence.

When Grandma Helen died, I wanted to ask for the sewing machine, but I knew that it wasn't my place to do so, and who asks for things after the loss of a person? It seemed unseemly and asinine. But in a conversation much later, my aunt, the only daughter, said that of course, Angie needed the sewing machine.

Helen's design is sinuous, the featherweight is a lady with a nipped waist in an elegant glossy black. The chunky white plastic machines of today have nothing on Helen in design. Gold painting scrolls down the side, but is worn through on the table, a testament to the many miles my grandmother sewed on the machine. It only has two stitches: forward and back. There is an attachment that allows one to do buttonholes, even a fancy keyhole one, but I never learned how to set it up and I am hesitant to do so now in case I will lose all of her in a banging clash of machinery. She is named after my grandmother, obviously, and on the underside of the lifting table, her maiden name is painted in white. There is a measured rhythm to her, a smooth clickety clackety that is the music of my childhood.

I haven't sewn with her in a while. I own a Bernina that was purchased after my husband bought a little fishing boat. If we had enough money to entertain ourselves fishing on a tiny pond, surely, we had money for a "need." Bernie is a solid machine, but she has a humming efficiency about her, she whirrs rather than clacks. And she has a computer display with hundreds of stitches to beautify napkin hems if I so wish, but mostly I just sew forward and back.

"Lift the needle, now lift the foot-feet, nooow you can pull the fabric out." When my kids invaded my sewing room, at first I was constantly coaching over their right shoulders. I was in constant vigilance to prevent a needle through a finger. I don't know what I was more scared of, the injury and pain for one of my daughters or the thought that I would have to see a needle jammed into the flesh of my kid. I'm pretty sure that I would have to be the one to get it out, or at

least accompany the child to the ER while my husband picked himself up from the floor, recovering from his dead faint. After a while, they proved their competence and I backed away so that they could compose in peace.

I did attempt to earn the 4-H Mother badge. It is invisible but very real, my mother shines her badge every day before she goes to school, sure that she taught at least one daughter a skill that no one seems to need anymore.

Gwen is a frustrating child. She is defiant in her quiet retreat from other's expectations. She puts out her chin and waits. We spent an entire summer sewing a single pair of shorts. One. Pair. Of. Shorts. Five seams. Two hems. A day before the fair I was outside my house on the back step. I called my friend, desperate for an adult voice to help my sanity. I had just told Gwen that a seam wasn't straight enough. Her look of exasperation would have been comical to anyone not in the running for a mythological 4-H mother's badge.

As it was, I was furious at a kid who didn't demand perfection in the work that her mother demanded she do. Lacey laughed on the phone as I jerked little pieces of leaves from the geranium next to the stairs and shredded them on my lap. Lacey's mom has earned her badge, and Lacey lived to tell about it.

"It will probably be ok" she reassured me. She constantly says ridiculous shit just to calm me down.

"What if she's not good at this? What am I going to do?" I was whining.

"You let her decide how to represent herself and give her the choice to make it better."

Lacey is basically one of the most unreasonable people I know, right up there with my husband.

I don't remember what ribbon Gwen got on her shorts, and I doubt that she does either. There were probably many other problems with that fair because fair time is always a chaotic mess of parents without enough sleep and kids competing with each other and the family rivalries that exist in any community. But from then on, my kids and I decided that sewing and creativity was not a competitive sport. We backed away from the timetable foisted on us by competition and relaxed into our space.

I bought another sewing machine. There are only so many times I could stand seeing a 10-year-old child abuse the delicate bobbin case of a thousand-dollar machine. She was a pink New Home from the fifties, and SHE HAD CHROME. I know that others might want a pink Cadillac, but I thought that she was beautiful, and she was cheap. I lugged her home, she was ponderously heavy and unwieldy, but did I mention that she was only thirty dollars? I went home and wrestled Bernie away from my kids., swung Pinkie Pie up to her place of honor, and then I walked out of my sewing room. There was no way pre-teens could destroy that hunk of steel.

On a walk with Lacey, our path to the river led back past my house, and Gwen stuck her head out the door to halt our high-paced mom-walk.

"I just broke the needle, but I picked up the pieces and replaced it. We're all good now." She gave me the thumbs up and then disappeared back into the house.

Lacey looked at me in amazement. "You are letting them sew when you aren't home?"

I shrugged. What was the worst that could happen? I had already conjured those images many times before, burns from the iron, needles and fingers, feet stepping on pins. Those fearsome images were nothing compared to the looks that I got from Gwen when I was demanding that she conform to my standards for my pride.

II. De-construction

When I arrived back home around fair time, Jeanette was outside with a brother or two, working a calf in a show halter. As we sweltered in the July Kansas heat in front of a box fan in the window, I asked about her other projects, she is the grandchild of Helen, daughter of Mary, sister to Angie for god's sakes, she couldn't just show a calf. Golden rolls were ready by the counter, a testament to my sister's skill, and my family's sadism that yeast bread should be baked in a house with no air conditioning.

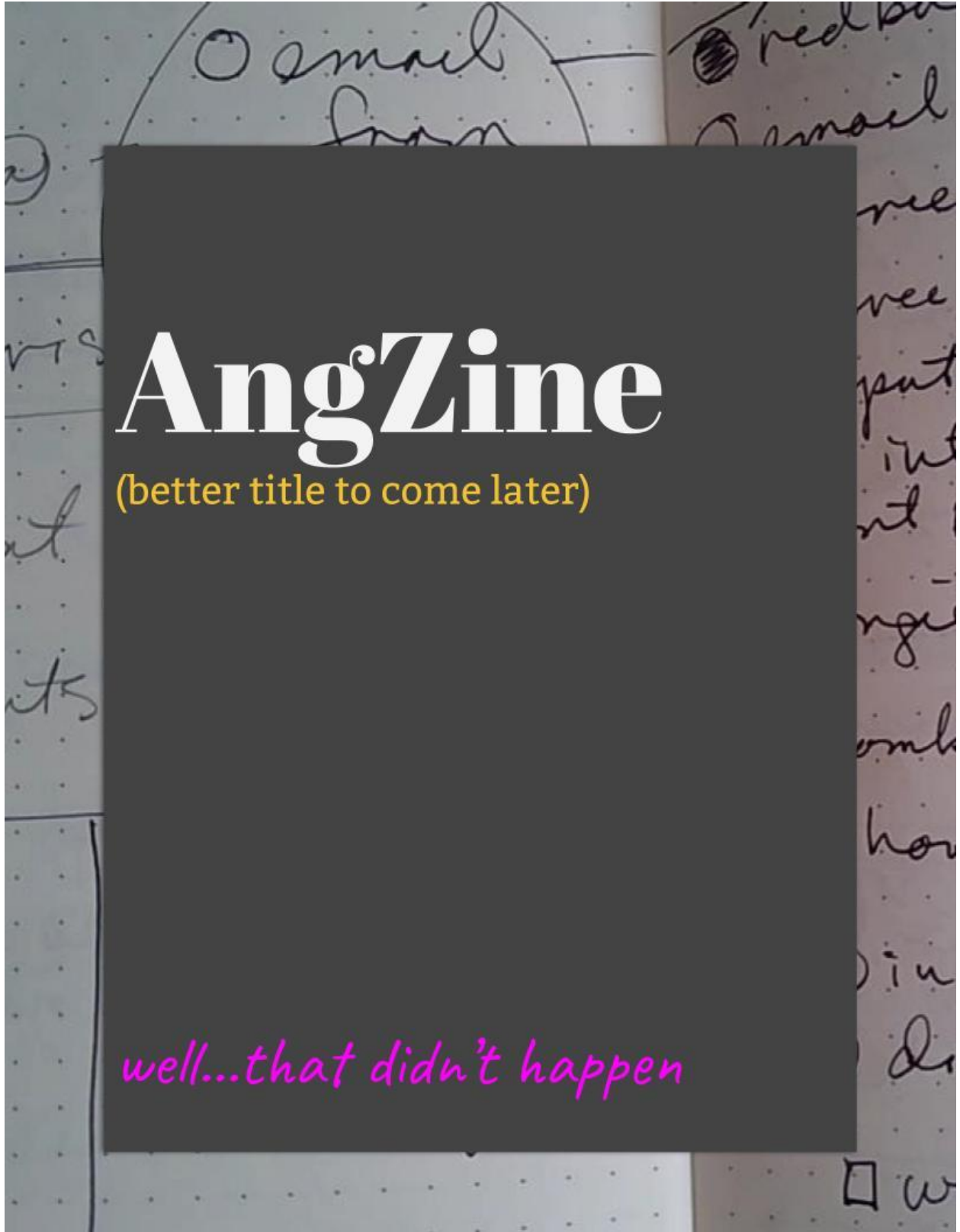
"Did you sew something this year?"

Jeanette laughed and grabbed a roll, one of the imperfect ones that were not competition ready. "No, I don't have to sew anymore."

I squawked my indignation and looked closely at my mom's badge. I noticed a little tarnish there. Jeanette continued through the kitchen, shit-covered boots under tight wranglers topped by an FFA shirt that announced her chapter. She grabbed another roll, and then another.

"What?" she pushed her indignant speech past the roll that she was still chewing. "Aaron sent me in for food"

She stomped out the back door to what she wanted to do, her chin lifted, her eyes forward.



AngZine

(better title to come later)

well...that didn't happen

**zine ZINE ZINE ZINE ZINEZINEZINE ZINE
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 ZINEY-MCZINERTON ZINE ZINE ZINE zine**

So I'm putting together this zine, and what strikes me as I do so is the freedom that I have here. No one (even me for that matter) knows what will go or SHOULD go on the next pages.

Why am I risking a masters thesis on an almost illegitimate genre? Because I want to explore the idea of publication and pedagogy. Because my students deserve to do something fun and that might just get read by someone other than me. Because my stories and my writing are just as important as theirs. Because we all have stories to share.

I am a mother, gardener, wife, teacher, stitcher, dabbler and woman who delights in the ridiculous but who strangely enjoys following the rules...until I don't. I am home STILL this summer, in mourning over a semester lost to the Covid-19 pandemic. I am helping a daughter gather second-hand furniture for her first apartment, waking another daughter to make it to morning XC runs, and cajoling the youngest into doing chores that I'm ignoring. When my husband comes home in the evening, I know he wonders what we have done all day, and sometimes I struggle to point to anything useful, but damn, the roses DO look good. And, while there isn't any dinner ready, we typically do have a steady supply of chocolate chip cookies.

Enjoy (or don't, I can't tell you what to do) these examinations of real (ish) life These are my stories of love, craft, and teaching

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Food and Entertaining

No Fail Pie Crust

This comes from the Better Homes and Garden recipe binder, you know, the one that is clad in gingham? Anyway, this is the only pie crust I use even though I do own a food processor and could cut ice cold butter into flour. Too much work! Look, you are already going to get credit for knowing how to make a pie, why overwork yourself? That being said, never use canned apple pie filling. I simply won't be able to respect you as a person. It's just cutting up some apples for God's sake, it's not rocket surgery.

Yeah, I know that's a mixed metaphor. Thanks for noticing; my students never do. They just sit there thinking that I'm an idiot. I wait a beat and there we are, just two generations stuck in a stupidity standoff.

You're just going to buy a frozen pie, aren't you? Fine. When you decide to step up, the recipe will still be here.

2 cups flour
½ teaspoon salt
½ cup vegetable oil
3-5 T of cold water

Mix the flour, salt and oil with a fork until the mixture is crumbly then work in water until it becomes a ball. Let it rest for a couple minutes before rolling out a half of the ball between two pieces of waxed paper. You can bake this blind (that means empty) for a cream pie, or add fruit filling and then top and crimp. Always add 2-3 T of butter right under the crust and throw aluminum foil over the whole thing while it is baking.

Decorating on a Budget: your first apartment

1. *Go to the thrift store.*
2. *Take your mom.*
3. *Let your mom pay for the weird orange and black lamp and the red spatula after you remind her that you paid \$198 for the chemII text*
4. *Steal things from the house. They don't need nail clippers or tea pots here.*
5. *Spend money on succulents because plants are better than people*



How to Plan a Gallery Wall

One of the talents that a woman must have is the ability to artistically put things on walls in order to prove one's belonging to a social group. For a long time during the '90s, there was an actual company that made money off of women making money off of women by selling pre-selected, pre-arranged art. They were color-coordinated with candle holders and artificial flower swags. Even better, they were sold at a "party" where friends could impel one into an expensive purchase. I want to hoot and holler at this concept. How could women have been so daft? Why did they buy this crap? How could they consider it art? How many prints of Monet's *Waterlilies* does the world need? Or how about the fat angels lined up, resting their cherubic faces on plump forearms? But then, I need to step back. My girls will have the same damned question, "Why did Mom put so much shit on the walls?" and I won't have much to defend myself other than to say to my children, "Well, everyone else was doing it" and "It looked cute on Instagram."

I, however, pride myself on the fact that, dammit, if I'm going to fall for a decorating ploy, I will at least do so cheaply until the next scam comes along. And if I buy ART, you know, stuff that artists make? Then I'm going to actually love it and then buy it from the artist so that they can pay a smidgen of a bill or maybe go out for a nice sandwich (ok, so I buy prints...but, I buy prints FROM THE ARTIST). And then I add in bits and pieces from the general flotsam that populates my house: 4-H photo contest pictures, my kid's art, and thrift shop pickings all are moved across what are now known as collage walls or gallery walls. Woe to the woman who has chosen not to include the family initial, a wooden arrow, or a list of family "rules" that are both witty yet share how really connected she is to her fam. Bonus points if you add a cross or have a line of scripture in a flowing font. Bonus-bonus points if you have a sign that says something about the beach or tacos or how much you love your dog.

Decorating is just another way for us to signal to our peers. “Yes, I’m worthy! Include me, I understand and will abide by the rules. I spent money to belong. I bought shit so that you will like me.” Don’t get me wrong, I agonized over where to hang an oversized clock on my feature wall. I followed the rules and taped painters tape down, just to try it out. And then, because I really needed some connection, I sent phone pics to my friends so that they could know the depths of my need for approval. Did I really have any growth after junior high school? It is questionable.

I am probably being too hard on myself. People have formed groups for time immortal and having a gallery wall just shortens the interview time and really acts like a woman’s friend resume. Does this woman value family? Check! Does this woman spend money? Check! Does the woman have taste? Ummmm, it seems questionable. . . Does this woman dust? Fuck no! The interview closes, and depending on the interviewer and her toleration of kitsch and dust, the relationship can grow or wither. I feel sorry for those people who have ignored these rules and just put things on the wall that they like, or that maybe reminds them of something deeper, or perhaps is actually art.



Cleaning House:

“Ahhh, but does it ‘Spark Joy’?”

I am caught in this balance right now between things and stuff and the urge for room and breathing and thoughtfulness. Marie Kondo has suggested a purge the likes of which I don't know that my family will survive. I get the point, bring all of your stuff into one place so that one can feel the presence of their thing-ness. What would happen in our case is that we would gather everything together and then, when my living room or kitchen table was overrun with belts and shoes and scarves, I would cry, overwhelmed by the process of trying to get out from under everything, and then I would just stuff the collection back into the closet and go on with my life after cursing the petite wonder who has changed other families supposedly for the better.

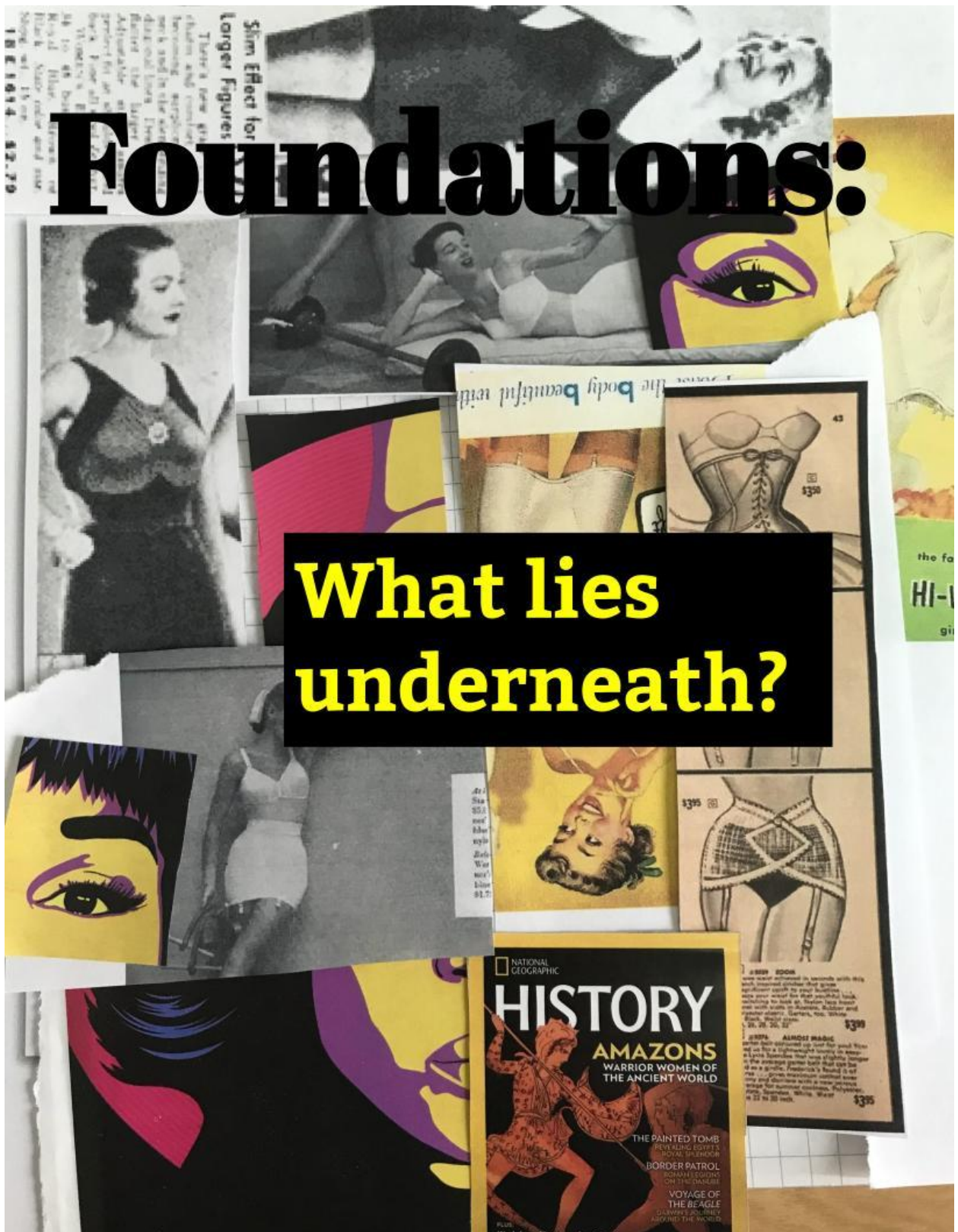
In attempting to clean my closet, I am always met by memories, not only of events, but by the person I was as I wore those clothes. I know that I am supposed to look for change in myself, but as a wienie of a person, I feel like I am always nostalgic for the person that I was, rather than the perennially troubled person that I am now or the future self who might not be competent enough to deal with life.

A colleague and I joke about our future and past selves. On a Friday when we are just surviving the week, we look at each other and laugh, Monday Angie is going to be really pissed when she sees the way that Friday Angie has left the desk. We laugh at ourselves, because we know that it is true. Maybe it is because we are hoping that Friday Angie and Lexi will pick up that pace or be less exhausted, but it is in a frame of acceptance and forgiveness. We can predict that tinge of annoyance and shake of the head. Our past selves are always forgiven, our present selves are the ones that are beating ourselves up.

Slim Effect for Larger Figures
 There's new girls...
 charming and surprising...
 with and in the world...
 delicate lines...
 flatter the larger...
 adjustable...
 perfect fit...
 boys...
 14 to 48 lbs...
 Royal Blue...
 Black...
 1921-1924... 32-79

Foundations:

What lies underneath?





FOUNDATIONS

How are we defined by what we wear? How are we “clothed” or covered? The better question might be, why does anyone care?
I.

As a High School teacher my goal is to be a leader of people who don’t quite know what they are doing yet, but they know deep down that they are destined for greatness, regardless of the fact that they had a Pop Tart for breakfast and have lost a signed permission slip somewhere between their car and my classroom. They are pretty amazing, and I am lucky to be able to share my time with them. When they come into my classroom, I may not be able to solve their problems at home, but I can make them think about their place in this crazy world, and I can give them skills that will allow them to communicate with a larger community than the 27 or so yahoos who inhabit my desks.

Many roles fall to teachers. We communicate with school psychologists, attend IEPs, track and analyse data, flag down the custodian when a latte has been spilled during the Flag Salute, and hold steady when a kid complains that their grade should be changed because they need to play in the big game. In many ways, it has been my job to be the solid place from which to launch. It is my job to stand firm on the school rules, and because I have always been a rule follower (believe me, I will make some up just for fun) I have rarely questioned the handbook and its pronouncements. In a past, more conservative school, it was my job to tell kids, ok mostly girls, that their clothing wasn’t appropriate. My male counterpart couldn’t comfortably “dress code” a girl, even if he had noticed something inappropriate, so it was easier to call me over and point out the offending child with a pointed nod of the head. It followed a predictable pattern of offense, boys wore ridiculous tees, girls showed skin.

One of my favorite malcontents, Tanner, managed to wear a shirt half a day before he arrived to English class, it announced that he liked “Big Racks,” and it had a buck imprinted on it.

“Go home or turn it inside out.” I spoke matter of factly. I wasn’t mad. This wasn’t a battle, but it was a rule. We had known each other for a while, so he knew where the line was drawn.

“Awwwww, man. Slabaugh, no one else cares.” He grinned; he had been waiting all day for someone to notice his clever entendre. He had been waiting all day for someone to notice him. He followed a couple weeks later with an advertisement for an apparent hotdog company: “Tasty Wieners.” Strangely, that one was noticed during his first hour.

II.

Girls these days no longer wear slips; they wear spunks, spandex shorts that are barely there, and typically do duty under cheer uniforms or work as running shorts. The girls as a generation do not understand the concept of foundation garments, nor come to think about it, have I actually given my daughters any such lessons.

“Don’t any of your friends own a slip?” I asked about it, and they shrugged. And when in JC Penny’s (the bastion of proper clothing) the slips are relegated to a single display, back by the high-waisted panties that people get caught dead wearing. When I waved in their general direction, my girls turned away. The propriety handed down from my mother was no longer relevant.

While shopping with my oldest daughter, I found my mother’s slip, Not her slip, but the exact copy, 40 years later in a vintage shop. The slip was on a hanger and priced as a dress to be worn a la Courtney Love. It needed only some heavy Doc Martin boots to balance its ephemeral existence and some brazenness to make it into an ensemble. There was many a Sunday morning that my mother stood by the ironing board in that slip, finishing a collar, crisping a pleat, her dress still on the hanger because it was easier to be half dressed than to clean up spit up off of her Sunday best.

Regardless of the style icons who have come and gone wearing underwear as outerwear, we still perpetuate the idea of policing each other’s clothing. I wish that I could lay this at the feet of the patriarchy, pointing to a disgruntled white man the same age as my father who doesn’t understand the difference between a flip flop and a thong. But the reality of the situation is that somewhere between burning bras of the 1960’s we have followed looser and looser parameters on what’s correct to wear, but we as women continue to judge others and regulate such. I have to stop and ask myself about what I have been perpetuating. Has “dress coding” any of the girls changed their behaviors or has it merely changed how they saw themselves, their message to the world?

The department stores used to call such places the foundations department, but those days are long gone. We no longer have to have a solid foundation on which to balance and display clothing that has been constructed, made of angles and planes. Now darts are rarely required. Now we live in a perpetuation of slouch. Knits slink and slide over bodies, bras are designed to disappear under the sheerness of a tee. Shouldn’t the idea of women controlling other’s bodies go the same way, the way of the girdle and the panty hose? Maybe, as I have seen in my life, it is generational, mothers protecting daughters by trying to cover parts because God knows we are in control of so little else. We have defined decency as somehow coraling unruly breasts and making sure that no one understands that there is a space between one’s legs. But we wear pants. I am still befuddled by this concept and tried to clarify it with my mother.

“So why do we wear slips?”

Mom sighed; she is a very good sigh-er, “So that people can’t see through your skirt. You’ve seen someone who has been backlit. You can see her legs right through the material.”

“

“But we wear panttttttssssss.” I crisped the consonants so that the emphasis landed with a hiss. “Don’t people see that we have legs when we wear pants?” Maybe some more explanation will bring us to the same place.

She laughed at me and walked to the next plant in her garden, pulling random weeds as we talked, pointing out a couple new cultivars that she is trying in the bed of her Virgin Mary garden, a fertility symbol made Christian. Mary has been co-opted from pagan belief and has been reduced to a connection to gods rather than a god herself. The statue winks at me. Her gentle smile and downward gaze indicates that my mother and I will not see eye to eye on this one, Mom will continue to wear slippers and hose and be a proper lady as I tromp through the world wearing nylon sandals with casual skirts.

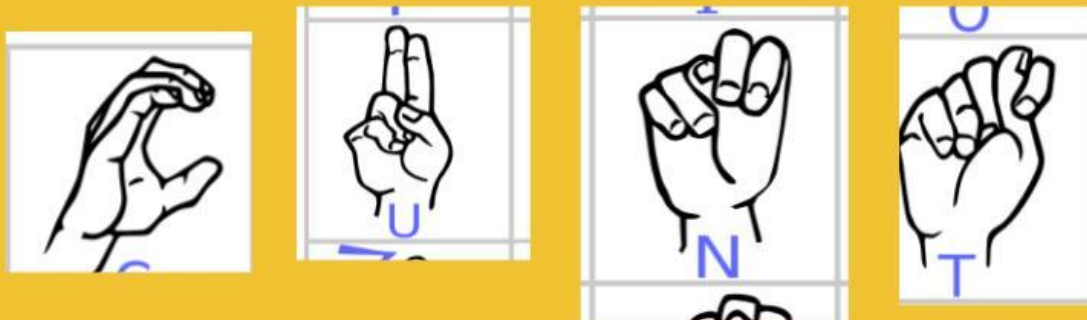
I refrain from mentioning my recent scholastic discovery, Mary as vagina: Mary as source. I don’t think that “Vagina Garden” has quite the same ring to it. I mentioned to Mom once that a study linked the brain scans of a nun’s ecstasy in prayer to that of another woman in orgasm. It wasn’t a long convo, just long enough for her to look shocked. I would like to remember that she scolded me and used my middle name, but I can’t be for sure. It made me understand that I was curious about faith and belief, and there was no room for that curiosity with her; faith was faith. To link faith to sex, well, that was pretty damned close to blasphemy. I just thought that it was nice that even if you were the bride of Jesus, you might still get off.



III.

So then as a mother and a teacher and a woman, what am I left with at the end of this contemplation? Will I continue to dress code my students in “inappropriate” clothing? Are we really just the sum total of the clothes we wear? A child tested this contemplation two weeks ago, walking into class with a chest that announced “Nude Girls” in six inch neon letters on a black tee. I didn’t see the shirt for at least 20 minutes, and the rest of the class kept laughing behind their hands and generally acting like teens. When I finally followed the eyes of her classmate, I wondered how I missed the message “please notice me” for so long. I gently and quietly sent her down to the office as fast as her little legs could carry her. Just like Tanner, she needed some attention, and our principal does a good job of giving caring attention to kids who need it. I couldn’t snuggle her and teach the lesson that was on the board for that day. Later that same day, I caught another student spelling “cunt” across my classroom with American Sign Language. While I admired her second language skills, I still called her out. I would do the same if someone spelled “dick.” She was chagrined and exasperated that I could translate her code. But she was grinning. There is something liberating and fun about cussing and almost getting away with it. It is even better when the teacher winks at you.

Instead of reading shirts and judging bodies, I think that I will look more deeply into the larger social decisions that I see my students making. Is the shirt ever really about wieners or nude girls? Is the tank top or push up bra ever really about boobs? Nope. Applying the foundation garments of the 50’s and 60’s won’t work either. We are past the point of pretending that women don’t have bodies, or that they are only shaped by and for men. I will continue to wear my cardigans and sensible shoes and insist that my students learn other ways to communicate their needs.



I Love my Job. i love my job...i like my job...I Love My Kids

Alternately titled "A Guy and a Buffalo"

"Mrs. Slabaugh, you know how you said we shouldn't write about anything that can get us or someone else in trouble, right?"

I approached the "Table of Yahoos". It is a folding table with unmatched chairs wedged into a corner of my classroom. The table allows my student count to go from 25 up to 30 (because good writing is always produced in classes with that many teens). The big boys like to sit there; it keeps them from shoving their long limbs under desks made for their junior-high size. Jim was a quiet kid, who, though he took up a lot of space with his man-body and boat-like boots, was rarely on my radar in class. Even his red hair seemed to fade into obscurity because of his quiet personality.

"Well, Jim, I'm pretty sure that I said that you can write about whatever you wanted to, but you also have to understand that I am a state mandated reporter. If you tell me something, like oh...that you are addicted to heroin, or that your grandmother beats you with a 2x4, then, yeah, I have to turn it over to someone who can help."

Jim thought about it for a little while.

"I have this good story about the time that we chased buffalo, but I don't want to get Grandpa in trouble."

"Ok, where was the buffalo? Were you at a state park?" I was starting to look forward to Jim's paper; there was a hint of novelty here. To be honest, I had already judged this book by its cover and was expecting his paper to be another, "We had a beer and then we rolled my brother's pickup/four wheeler/motorcycle" narratives. The students write these confessionals and then burn rubber in



the parking lot to disprove the lessons they have wisely and laboriously put to paper.

“Well, they’re our buffalo.” He blinked at me as if this answered the entire question.

“Jim, why do you think you would get in trouble for writing about rounding up your own buffalo?” I was starting to look around the room to see if any students were off task, numbing their brains with their phones.

“Welllll...”

Please, God, make this faster.

“Well Grandpa said that the buffalo were out and we had to get ahead of them.”

“Un huh?”

“So he made my brother and my cousins and me load up in the car to go round them up.”

“Yep.” So far so good. I nodded. I have had way too many times in my own life that I have faced down an angry cow at a tender age, typically only armed with a stick and a fear of getting yelled at. A buffalo, though? That would be scary. I still wasn’t convinced that this constituted child abuse, and I had some more peeps to check on.

“Well, I had a broken arm.”

“Wait, you broke your arm while rounding up the buffalo?”

Maybe I would be filling out a form after all.

“No.” Blink. Blink. Blink. Sigh.

“Jim, I need you to tell me why you are worried that I will turn in your grandfather.”

“Well, see, it’s like this. There were a lot of cousins, and you know, we had to be safe, so they buckled up.”

“Ummm hmmm”

“And there weren’t enough seatbelts.”

“Yeah.”

“So my grandpa let me and my brother ride in the trunk of the car.” Jim looked down and tensed for my verdict. The guys at the ‘Table de la Yahoos’ smirked. One of his compatriots even giggled. Apparently, they had heard this story plenty of times. Hell, a couple of them could even be the cousins who got to ride up front in relative safety before facing some runaway beasts.

“Yeah? I wouldn’t recommend it, but it looks like you came back in one piece.”

Jim’s head came up, but he wasn’t sure he could trust me, “So Grandpa isn’t in trouble?”

“It was dark” for the love of St. Peter!

“Jim, has your grandpa put you in a trunk ever again?”

“No.”

“Are you afraid of Grandpa?”

“No.”

“Were there any long term effects of riding in the trunk?”

“Well, it was bumpy.”

I sighed my long sigh, my “this job is ridiculous” sigh.

“No, Jim, I won’t call Social Services, but I do think that this sounds like a really exciting narrative. What if you did this fancy thing called ‘in media res’ which basically means that you start in the middle of the story and then you can flash back to how it all started? Let’s start with setting the scene. Write down all the things that you can remember about being in that trunk. How did you feel? What could you see and hear? Could you smell anything?” I scribbled questions on his notebook where he had started some notes.

Jim paused. “I couldn’t see anything. It was dark”

The whole table laughed together, and Jim joined in on the joke he just told about himself.

“I’m sure it was, Jim, I’m sure it was. Why don’t you start with that?”

Career Advice: Teach! You will always be busy, but you will never be bored.

Crafts?

IDK, does calling something a craft make it less-than? Is a craft something a woman does, but men have hobbies? Anyway, this is an artsy thing that I do in my spare time...

How to Pull a Print

1. Decide that it is a summer day and that you don't want to do anything that could be considered useful.
2. Spend an inordinate amount of time on Pinterest and pin 20 thousand things.
3. Start a shopping cart on Blicks Art supply.
4. Get a freezer pop.
5. Get 6 freezer pops for your kids and the neighbor kids.
6. Shrug when they ask if they are gluten free.
7. Abandon the \$75 shopping cart. There is no way in hell to explain away \$75 for art supplies.
8. Order a pair of shoes online. Shoes are always worth it.
9. Figure out cost per wear for the shoes over a three year period so that you can casually mention it to your bestie when she raises an eyebrow about your shoe buying propensity.

The Easy Way

Say "Screw it, I'll figure it out" to no-one in particular because the kids are outside with the freezer pops

10. Haul out the craft foam, cheap paint, cardboard, and ink pens.

11. Using the pens, press a pattern or pic into the peachy-feeling foam that has been attached to the cardboard

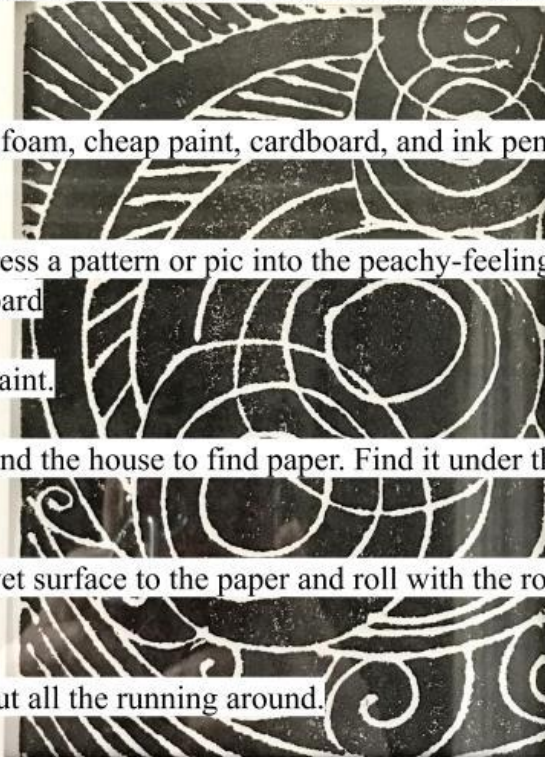
12. Load-er up with paint.

13. Cuss and run around the house to find paper. Find it under the defunct home printer.

14. Press the barely wet surface to the paper and roll with the rolling pin from the kitchen.

15. Repeat, but without all the running around.

16. Sigh when the sticky, sweaty kids ask if they can do it, too. Say, "yes' and mean it.



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Angela M Slabaugh

July 23, 2020

Foundations: A Collection of Creative Nonfiction Essays with a Zine and a Case for Creative Nonfiction and Zines as Secondary Language Arts Pedagogy

