

the

Past

is a

HOUSE



next

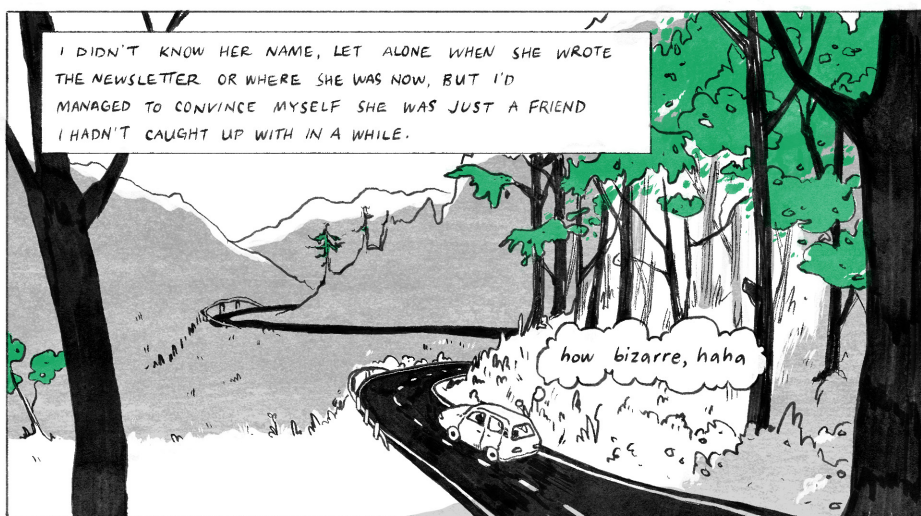
door



# I. MISREMEMBRANCE

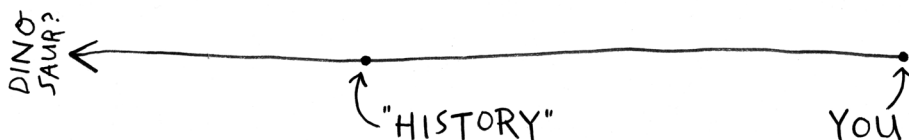


WITH A START, I REALIZED THE FRIEND I WAS REMEMBERING WAS THE ANONYMOUS AUTHOR OF A ZINE I'D READ THE WEEK BEFORE.

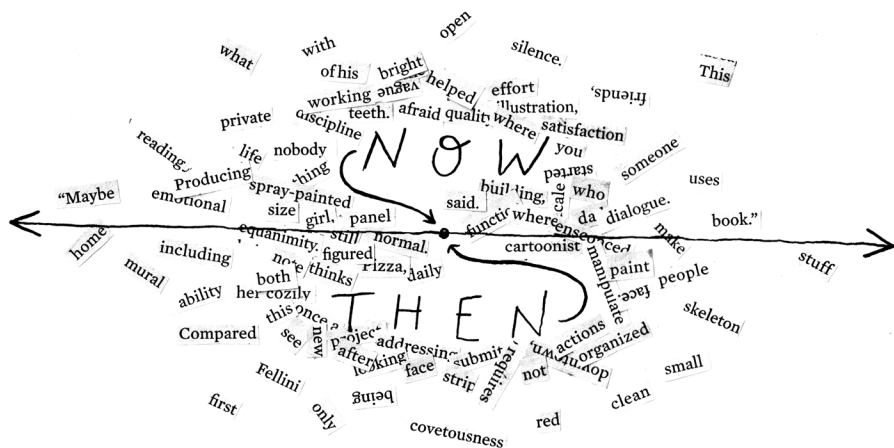


## II. MOUTH TO MOUTH

When we imagine history, we envision it as a distinct schism between 'then' and 'now.'



Yet, there is something about the zine (and especially the perzine) as a medium that collapses this separation.



Both visually and in their contents, modern and vintage zines alike often read anachronistically, and a tendency towards anonymity and undated issues further scramble any attempts at forming easy timelines. As an effect of this chronological blurring, perzines reinforce the kind of 'communal memory' which the marginalized groups who most utilize the genre are apt to experience.

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" provides a compelling framework to understand what distinguishes the (per)zine from other narrative genres, specifically through its explanation of what does and does not make a story.<sup>1</sup> Most succinctly, he frames storytelling as "the ability to exchange experiences," and further claims that the core desire to share experiences is being lost. At the time of his writing, he felt that WWI and surrounding events had so shaken the moral and experiential foundations of the world around him that experience itself was losing certainty, losing value. The traditional 'mouth to mouth' communication of experience was being superseded by new communications which could stomach the torrent of modern change.<sup>2</sup>

The most profound change in communication which Benjamin felt was endangering the storyteller was what he termed information. His 'information' was brief, modern, and desperate to justify itself. he felt information was communication which demands that its content sound plausible and be fully explained. The story, on the other hand, feels no pressure to explain itself; "it is left up to the reader to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks."<sup>3</sup>

What I find most astonishing in his explanation of information is his insistence that 'information' is only valuable in the exact moment in which it is provided. The story, in contrast -- "It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time."<sup>4</sup>

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy Hale (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 362.
2. Benjamin, 362.
3. Benjamin, 366.
4. Benjamin, 366.
5. *The Stars and Stripes*. (Paris County, France), Jun. 13 1919, <https://www.loc.gov/item/20001931/1919-06-13/ed-1/>

Suit cases are much more distangay than

In short, Benjamin's definition of the story, as this exchange of experiences untied from time, is simultaneously a useful definition of the perzine. His essay describes that slippery tendency of the perzine which makes it feel at once a product of the present and the past -- the perzine is a story, a kind of inheritor of oral history, and thus remains resonant over time. Whereas information is a product of a single moment, and so reinforces the distance between 'then' and 'now,' a story is a kind of communal recordkeeping which is not tied to a specific moment but instead coaxes historical ~~experience~~ experience back into the present.



Many modern narrative accounts -- the op-ed, the blog post, even the memoir -- might more align with information than with story.

But a perzine follows in the footsteps of Benjamin's storyteller.

### III. \* \* \* \* \*

Walter Benjamin's storytelling explains why the content of perzines eases the distance between then and now, but it's the formal visual characteristics of zines which prime a reader to expect -- and accept -- this chronological indistinction. Zines stylistically embrace visual appropriation from a wide variety of sources, often vintage, all of which play with a reader's expectations of when a zine might actually be from.

By and large, the majority of the visual quirks which we now associate with zines come from two things -- typewriters and photocopiers. The thrifty economic production of earlier zines heavily influences even current styles, though evolving technology makes some of these early constraints less pressing.



Something i find personally charming is that many zines' authors still choose to cross words out and rewrite them when misspelled, a treatment of mistakes reflecting older typewriter zines. Not only does this follow in the style of past authors with no 'backspace' button, it's also a deeply anachronistic and even countercultural decision at a time when autocorrect and glossily overedited photos are accepted unquestioningly.

DEAR PRETTY LADY,  
SUBJECT:-APPLICATION FOR FRIENDSHIP/  
RELATIONSHIP.  
FOOD FOUND YOU HERE ON OKC, SAW YOUR  
PICTURES AND READ YOUR PROFILE. I WANT  
TO TELL YOU THAT YOU LOOK LIKE A

Erin Martinez, *Things Dudes Say to me Online*, (2015), 3-4.

in a similar vein, i've noticed "\*\*\*\*\*" used to delineate different sections in a wide variety of zines. This comes from typewriter formatting, but is repeated even in handwritten zines.

creams ar  
gends tr  
ver hex  
DERING  
or keepl  
to take  
ve were  
d give  
pt but  
r the st  
sweets  
ecream  
i need  
garettes  
n for w  
asitic  
...i g  
uly is  
e almost  
cream -

my lap & rubbed her back "ehhh darling i love you so, so much everythings gonna be ok, alright?"

debbie is paul&pam/s dog. she/s a little shitsu-poodle mix. she always needs to be walked but i never wanted to cuz she/s really slow & tempermental & alwxx walking her alwayxxxx felt like pulling teeth toxxxx me. ada loves debbie. we/d walk her together& look at trees: "this is a walnut tree. see how the leaves are feathery & they have a spicy scent?" she repeated "this is a walnut tree! this is fun violet i like you showing me how to identify trees!" "this is a honey locust, it makes big pods that taste like sweet carob. some honey locusts have gigantic scary thorns!"

and then ada/d point at a tree sometimes "do you know what type of tree that is? i t exclaim like a little kid & m voluptuous & maternal "what t ...i forget...not i know! xx i "good job ada - i/m proud trees" "yeah your teaching

after 2 months it began to ge in the house. ada cleaned up it to be my bedroom. i-made i presented to paul; 1/d do

ie got  
in and  
com  
me  
tell me  
planned.  
the  
free in  
was  
stand-  
ng work  
ause  
thoug  
inside  
an that  
d make  
id and

our clothes, and stood there kissing instead of going downstairs and it was so good. i realized he was the first person i had truly found home in, had written it on his walls, kept all his little trinkets and letters in my pockets. i had held him honestly. \*\*\*\*\*  
i stayed at the collective for a few months, short of a year after that. Moved into my own room, wrote sappy poems, got drunk, began to learn about growing food. There weren't too many women around, and when Kim came to visit for a month, i learned so much from her

Muggwort, *You and Everyone You Know is Damaged in Innumerable Secret Ways (and Most of the Time it Doesn't Really Matter)*, (Portland, OR), 9-10.

Alanna, *Ammunition*, Issue 2, (New Haven, CT, 1998), 14-15.



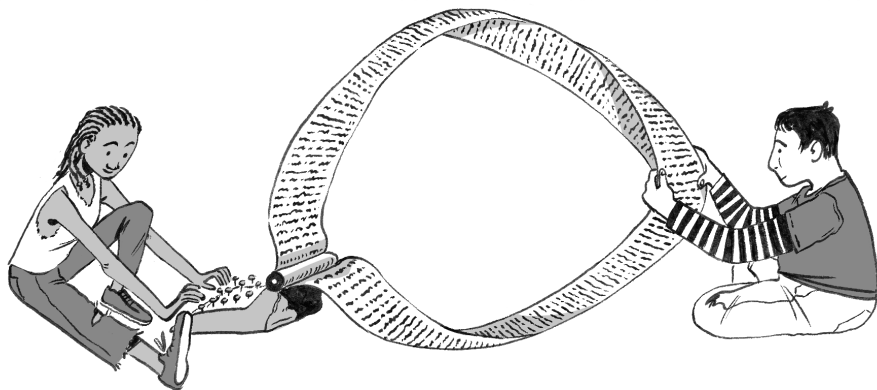
Even the typewriter font itself is appropriated by computer-formatted zines to indicate the visual lineage to which they belong; at first read, a zine may appear to be typewritten only for a closer look to reveal the use of ITC American Typewriter or another monospaced ~~xxxxx~~ digital font. Part of what's notable about historical imitations in modern zines is that they put a kind of veil over a reader's eyes; even when one might have the skills to tell a font is a modern facsimile of an older technology, one's own preconceived notion that the writing must be of a different era can cloud judgement of the piece's actual appearance.



never had running water, but it was pretty "normally". This is important to me because it always seems that to live off the grid or in a manner that still allows us to have things like our stereos and punk cd's and records and a stove, cost a lot of money. If you have ever thought of living off solar power, it's expensive. I'm not paying for mine at the moment, because I got lucky to meet a great guy that lets me use his. A small

Digitally-set type AND an email as contact information, much to my surprise. I made the assumption this zine is much older than it is on a first read. J. Trashville, *The Ghetto Garden*, 2nd ed. (Boone, NC), 5.

Even as the constraints of technology and economics have changed, many zine authors have chosen to keep using certain 'dated' stylistic hallmarks of zines. Again, this embrace of a visual heritage further confuses a reader's expectation of time period, at once suggesting the author is temporally farther away, yet bringing the past closer.



## IV. ANARCHO "ARCHIVE MATERIAL" YAWN.

Certain groups living on social or political margins have disproportionately embraced the zine format.<sup>7</sup> For these groups in particular, the zine serves to collapse past and present, bringing history into their lived everyday consumption. I think this is no mistake; for a marginalized group, a strong grasp of collective history is useful for both social cohesion and community safety. The tricky relationship zines hold with exact time is a reflection of how collective memories are ever-present in the psyche of the groups that make and read them.

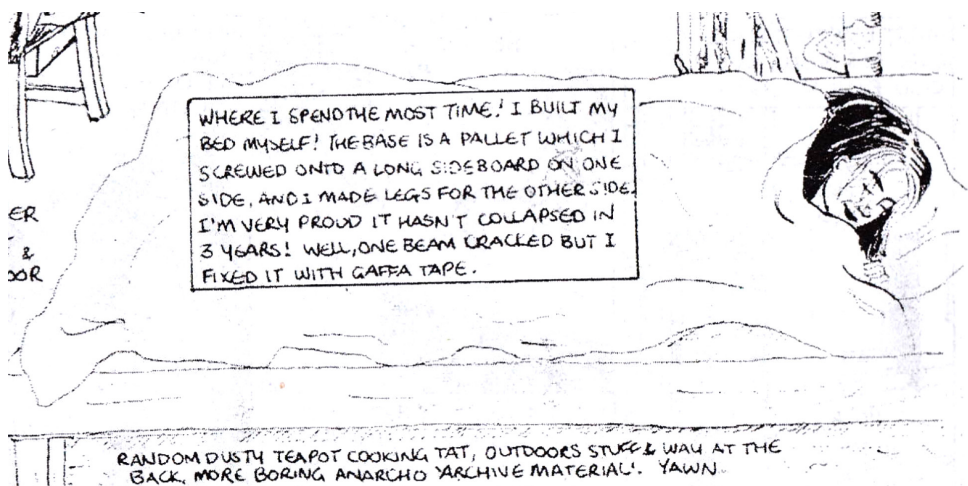
It's useful for a ruling class to suggest a community or struggle is ahistorical, while it's legitimizing to acknowledge that a group has a long legacy. The clearest American example of this right now might be transgender people -- it's common, and false, to hear that transgender and gender nonconforming people are a recent phenomenon, when there are long legacies of trans people in a broad range of societies.<sup>8</sup> Thus, communal memory is also particularly important to an outsider group when there is no guarantee that their histories will be taught otherwise. It might make sense, then, that zines are the territory of groups with an incentive to self-archive; personal and political zines are saved and archived in non-traditional spaces (and increasingly in traditional libraries and universities) in order to facilitate remembrance -- to canonize non-dominant histories.

---

7. C. Brandon Ogbunu, "Social Media Replaced Zines. Now Zines are Taking the Power Back," *Wired*, Jun. 16 2025, <https://www.wired.com/story/zines-social-media-power/>

8. kiwi. "'Looking at' Transvestites: Marjorie Garber's Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York: Routledge, 1992)," in *Gendertrash from Hell*, ed. Mirha-Soleil Ross and Xanthe-Phillippa MacKay, Issue 2 Volume 1, (Toronto, genderpress, 1993) <https://digitalexhibitions.archives.ca/items/show/767>, 37. "Lookin' at Transvestites" is a scathing critique of Garber's *Cross Dressing and Cultural Identity*, which kiwi writes has a strong bias against the transgender people Garber claims to be studying. The review finishes with a recommended reading list of fairer sociological and anthropological studies about gender variance around the world (on the page cited here). However, the zine *Gendertrash* is in and of itself a wonderful testament to transgender people's long-standing communities. The full run of the zine presents the scope of the kind of boisterous, academic, funny, tragic, clashing, and changing views that go along with being a vibrant and living community.

This remembrance is demonstrably intentional. Author Isy Morgenmuffel makes a nod to her own archive in morgenmuffel: a collection from issues 2-10, when she notes the pile of "more boring anarcho 'archive material.' yawn." under her bed.<sup>9</sup> The author had previously expressed her suspicion of traditional academic structures<sup>10</sup> and puts quotes around the term archive, suggesting her own ironic acknowledgement of the complicated hierarchy of archives, but she still makes the choice to point out that 'she is saving zines and pamphlets in a personal historical archive.



Isy Morgenmuffel, *morgenmuffel: a collection from issues 2-10*, 2nd ed, (London: Active Distribution: 2008), 54.

## V. THANKS FOR GIVING A SHIT—

While remembrance is political, it's also social.

Even with the internet's promises of connection, zines are still a real-method of introduction to faraway real-life community. In the hottest part of last summer, I found myself weeping in front of a table at my local zine festival.

9. Isy Morgenmuffel, *morgenmuffel: a collection from issues 2-10*, 2nd ed, (London: Active Distribution: 2008), 54.

10. Morgenmuffel, 33.

The author in front of me had written a zine about managing disability during seasonal heat.



I have chronic fatigue, and it flares up badly during summer heat waves. This has felt specific and strangely isolating, as has my entire experience with a sudden, invisible disability as a young person, so I found myself deeply moved to discover a clear reflection of my life in front of me. A problem that has been difficult to understand or manage through medicine was instead validated through community resource sharing. That zine might be a product of today in that covid has created an influx of newly disabled people looking for help, but it's fundamentally an exchange of experiences which "... preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time."<sup>11</sup>

In 1936 Walter Benjamin feared the coming end of the storyteller, but I think today we've got no lack of 'stories,' it's just a matter of finding them. What's challenging, instead, is maintaining these stories once they're discovered. The zine is one necessary medium for this, because it cannot be deleted, blackballed, demonetized, or easily censored.

---

11. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy Hale (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 366.

its manufacture and distribution are both in the hands of the storyteller, and its maintenance is in the hands of the listener. As Marc Fischer points out in answer to his question, Why Publish Under Fascism, "Because historians and archivists aren't going to be able to read all the brilliant stuff you only shared on social media platforms that probably won't exist in twenty years or less,"<sup>12</sup> and "Because even the cheapest garbage paper survives a million times better than technology that rapidly becomes outmoded on purpose by tech assholes."<sup>13</sup>

Making, reading, and archiving zines are all acts which serve to bring a tactile 'then' into the now, an act which is political, radical, and necessary as ever. It is a disorientation and a relief to know that thirty years ago or yesterday, a writer with no identification but a hotmail email and a wonky self-portrait had the same political fights you do, the same elations and anxieties. The zine exists as a reminder that the past is not a foreign country, but the house just next door.



12. Marc Fischer, *Why Self-Publish Under Fascism?* (Chicago, IL, 2025), 1.

13. Fischer, 1.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alanna. *Ammunition*. Zine. Issue 2. New Haven, CT: 1998.

Aron. *Art Flux*. Zine. Issue 5. Minneapolis, MN.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000* ed. Dorothy Hale, 361-378. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Fischer, Marc. *Why Self-Publish Under Fascism?* Zine. Chicago, IL: 2025.

G 'zine: the Bay Area Issue. Zine. Issue 1. Chicago, IL: 1993.

kiwi. "'Looking at' Transvestites: Marjorie Garber's Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York: Routledge, 1992)," in *Gendertrash from Hell*, ed. Mirha-Soleil Ross and Xanthra-Phillippa MacKay. 35-37. Zine. Issue 2 Volume 1. Toronto, CA: genderpress, 1993, <https://digitalexhibitions.arkives.ca/items/show/767>

Martinez, Erin. *Things Dudes Say to me Online*. Zine. 2015.

Morgenmuffel, Isy. *morgenmuffel: a collection from issues 2-10*. Zine. 2nd ed. London: Active Distribution: 2008, [https://www.thesparrowsnest.org.uk/collections/public\\_archive/7713.pdf](https://www.thesparrowsnest.org.uk/collections/public_archive/7713.pdf)

Muggwort. *You and Everyone You Know is Damaged in Innumerable Secret Ways (and Most of the Time it Doesn't Really Matter)*. Zine. Portland, OR.

Ogbunu, C. Brandon. "Social Media Replaced Zines. Now Zines are Taking the Power Back," *Wired*, Jun. 16 2025. <https://www.wired.com/story/zines-social-media-power/>

Smith, Esther K. *How to Make Books: Fold, Cut, and Stitch your Way to a One-of-a-Kind Book*. New York: Potter Craft, 2007.

*The Stars and Stripes*. (Paris County, France), Jun. 13 1919. <https://www.loc.gov/item/20001931/1919-06-13/ed-1/>.

Trashville, J. *The Ghetto Garden*. Zine. 2nd ed. Boone, NC.

Nearly all the zines cited here were read in person at Hard Pressed in West Danville, VT, an amazing and very appreciated community resource.

The handwritten letter to the right was found tucked in between a couple of their zines. I wish I knew who Matt or Alejandro were, but the note is such a lovely encapsulation of the ethos behind zine making and sharing I couldn't help but tuck it into here, too <3

Matt, thanks for  
writing again. Here's  
the zine and other fun  
stuff. See the catalog  
for stuff I have. ~~Now~~  
You can write the MA scenes.  
I'll be there soon.

Thanks for giving  
SWT —

Alejandro

