The Healing Power of Zines for Trauma Survivors:

Zines as Practiced Alternative Art Therapy

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Zines are a form of a do-it-yourself publication. These publications are typically handmade using elements found in most households. Zines can contain written or typed words and passages, drawings of minimal or professional style, pictures from magazines with commentary on them, stickers, or collages; they are often made using a cut and paste method. Zines are generally smaller in nature, a piece of 8.5 inches by 11 inches or 2 inches by 3 inches, stapled together, photocopied, and are typically in black and white.

Zines are part of various subcultures where they create communities for people to talk about issues and topics that are important to them. Zines create a space for people to share their experiences which in turn allows others to learn from these experiences. According to Kristen Schilt in her article, “‘I’ll Resist with Every Inch and Every Breath’: Girls and Zine Making as a Form of Resistance,” adolescents, particularly girls, tend to have lower self-esteem, eating disorders, depression, and are often seen as having fewer intellectual abilities in science and math fields compared to boys (76). As many scholars of American culture have noted, girls utilize zines during adolescence to create spaces for themselves to discuss issues such as sexual assault and rape, feminism, periods, relationships, and sexuality (74). Zines came out of the Riot Grrrl movement in the early 1990s and were a form of empowerment for girls and women. Schilt argues that the consumerist culture of mainstream society tells girls that they can feel empowered by purchasing items, need to choose a specific product over another, and sells the message that they can grow into strong women who can handle working, a home life, and maintain an ideal image of femininity if they purchase certain products that are marketed to them (72). Zines offer a counter-discourse to these sorts of consumerist cultures, and instead prompt girls to be empowered by what they do, not what they purchase. Zines present counter-spaces that allow girls to talk about the heterosexual hegemonic patriarchy they are growing up in without ridicule.
from mainstream society. *Jigsaw*, a zine handed out at Bikini Kill concerts in 1991 and edited by Tobi Vail, a band member of Bikini Kill, used the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle “to describe the confusion of girls who were trying to see where they fit into a male-dominated world” (Schilt, "A Little Too Ironic" 7). Women wanted to explore with each other to find ways to describe how they felt, and zines created that space.

I have been interested in zines theoretically as well as practically for a long time. I began reading zines six years ago and began studying and writing about zines a year ago with the goal of contributing to the scholarship about them. The first step that led me to creating my own zines as well as to theorizing on them was when I created my own collaborative zines on trauma and self-care, which was very liberating for me.

*Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care* and *What!? What Even is Self-Care?* are two zines I created for the Interrogating Self-Care: Bodies, Personhood, and Movement in Tumultuous Times Conference that took place in the Spring of 2019 at MIT and was sponsored by the Consortium for Gender, Culture, Women’s, and Sexuality Studies. The process of creating pieces to be included in the zines was thought-provoking, healing, difficult to process, and difficult to share all wrapped up together. *Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care* was the more difficult zine for me to process in terms of what I was sharing. This zine is an anthology to which I contributed three personal pieces, five pieces were contributed by others, and I created the list of grounding exercises and resources. The three pieces I contributed to *Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care* are: “Train Encounters,” “Running Thoughts,” and “You Are Not Alone.”

“You Are Not Alone” (Burns, *Survivors* 12-13) was a difficult piece for me to write. I finally put down in words what had happened to me; I had only briefly shared these things with my therapist. This piece brings up shame, guilt, and blame around emotional and sexual abuse,
the lack of control I had over my body, support from friends that what happened to me was not okay, and describes how I learned to take care of myself again. These are all common themes in trauma survivors’ stories and the healing processes they go through. Writing this piece was cathartic and freeing; I finally felt less shameful and stopped blaming myself as much about what happened. While this piece was cathartic and freeing for me it does not mean that my journey to healing is over—healing is not linear. The phrase “healing is not linear” is common in trauma survivor spaces; it means that there are many steps in healing from trauma and that you may need to repeat steps more than once and out of order. There are days when the trauma comes rearing its ugly head and I have to start my healing over, but time has made it easier.

Another piece I contributed, “Running Thoughts,” (Burns, Survivors 5) is a collage piece. Creating this collage made it easier for me to process my feelings about the abuse I suffered. This piece encapsulates the feelings I had about my trauma and my healing process. It evokes the dark thoughts that come up when dealing with trauma and trying to come to terms with it. Trauma never goes away; it only fades into the background. In this piece, I juxtaposed the way society views trauma versus the trauma survivor’s experience. “Running Thoughts” tries to reconcile the fact that trauma will never go away and that healing is not linear with the fact that society wants you to not talk about it and forget it ever happened to you. As you begin to heal from your trauma you can start to process the emotions that come with trauma and understand why you are having them. This piece allowed me to grapple with my emotions around my trauma and the messages I had internalized from society. As zine expert and critic Alison Piepmeier states, “from our experience, this labor can be cathartic as well as inspiring. In a culture that celebrates ease and immediacy, zine makers are choosing to take part in a process that is deliberately messy, inefficient, and labor-intensive—they are choosing to take part in an
art process (Piepmeier 230). Here Piepmeier is discussing the physical act of making zines but her conclusions also apply to the mental exertion that is part of zine creation. The pieces I created were likewise “messy, inefficient, and labor-intensive,” both physically and mentally, and they were also a site of care and pleasure.

The second zine, *What!? What Even is Self-Care?*, looks at self-care as a general practice. This zine is an anthology in which I contributed one personal piece and seven pieces were contributed by others. The piece I contributed is titled “Treat Yourself” (Burns, *What!?* 4-5) and seeks to explore the way that society depicts self-care versus what self-care actually looks like. It gives an intimate look into one’s experiences that cannot necessarily be conveyed in writing.

Figure No. 1, “Treat Yourself,” Page 4-5 from *What!? What Even is Self-Care?*

Figure No. 1 illustrates the collage work used to create the piece. The use of collaging allowed me to convey multiple ideas, some of which are contradictory, in one picture, which would
otherwise have been difficult to do in words. The contradictory ideas being conveyed are important to note because they depict how I think about self-care based on what I’ve learned society wants me to think about self-care and what I actually know about self-care, these are often butting heads, what society tells people about something is often false and revolves around capitalism. What I’ve learned about a subject is well-researched and does not revolve around capitalism.

Presenting, and creating, both of these zines at/for the Interrogating Self-Care Conference was a therapeutic experience for me. These experiences led me to consider trauma as a topic for my thesis and by way of that led me to the questions I hope to answer in this paper. The largest question being: are zines a type of alternative art therapy?

Based on personal experience, I have come to believe that zines are generative and community building forms of therapy that can be utilized in more spaces to employ healing and self-care. Zines should be considered for use in art therapy. Debby Florence is a licensed social worker who uses zines, as well as other art forms, in her therapy practice. Florence’s work with individuals not only involves therapy but also uses creativity. In addition, she helps patients use resources in their own community in order to navigate problems or issues. Florence states on her counseling website,

[zines] have existed for decades, and they have a history of being political, subversive, fun, artful, and most of all: raw. The Trauma Castle zine, below, is a perfect example of why I am including zine making as a part of the services I offer. Consider the subject matter, which shows how an individual struggles with systems, relationships, and personal healing. Zines offer a chance to be creative and honest in a way that doesn’t exist in any other medium. And, people use them for community organizing. For
example, this zine could be used to help raise awareness about problems with the mental health system.

Florence, one of the few who believes and uses zines in their therapy practice, understands the power that zines have. Zines allow for lesser known lived experiences to be shared with others that may not be covered by the media or in scholarly works. Zines allow for one to express themselves and share their story in a format that is best for them. This activity grants zine authors the power to decide what and how they share information. This alternative to talk therapy is made up of components that art therapy already uses such as collage, creative writing, and painting or drawing which is why zines are a form of art therapy, even if not typically considered to be so within the field.

My thesis will illustrate that zines do not have to be formally recognized within the field of art therapy and trauma therapy but should be discussed more in alternative spaces as a way to process and heal from trauma, especially if one does not have access to mental health services. While there is scant literature on zines as a form of art therapy, here I will draw parallels to existing art therapy and trauma therapy practices that are used in zine making to conclude that zines can be a useful practice in helping survivors to heal from trauma.

**Trauma, Art Therapy, and Healing**

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “a traumatic event is a shocking, scary, or dangerous experience that can affect someone emotionally and physically. Experiences like natural disasters (such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods), acts of violence (such as assault, abuse, terrorist attacks, and mass shootings), as well as car crashes and other accidents can all be traumatic.” A form of trauma therapy is trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT). TF-CBT “focuses on the relationship among thoughts, feelings, and behaviors;
targets current problems and symptoms; and focuses on changing patterns of behaviors, thoughts and feelings that lead to difficulties in functioning” (American Psychological Association). TF-CBT can help develop coping strategies for when a survivor is triggered. TF-CBT can also help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression in those who have experienced trauma (Rivas-Hermina and Solano 1). TF-CBT is a way for a survivor to process their trauma in a safe place. The survivor can expect to learn how to deal with their trauma, to learn that it was not their fault, how to identify their emotions and how to manage them, how to cope with reminders of their trauma, how to identify negative thoughts that can cause depression and anxiety, and how to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. TF-CBT is a safe place for the survivor and provides a supportive community and environment (Rivas-Hermina and Solano 2).

Trauma therapy in combination with trauma-informed care can greatly impact the healing of the survivor. Trauma-informed care takes into account the past traumas people have suffered and integrates this approach into all fields of medical care. For a system to be trauma-informed it must follow four approaches: realization, recognition, response, and resistance to re-traumatization. Realization is the understanding of the widespread impact that trauma has and the various paths of recovery available for the individual. The system must recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in their clients. The system responds by integrating all knowledge about trauma into their policies, procedures, and practices. Lastly the system actively seeks to resist re-traumatization (SAMHSA). There are six principles of trauma-informed care: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues (SAMHSA). All of these come up in zines.

According to the American Art Therapy Association,
art therapists work with people who are challenged with medical and mental health problems, as well as individuals seeking emotional, creative, and spiritual growth. Through integrative methods, art therapy engages the mind, body, and spirit in ways that are distinct from verbal articulation alone. Kinesthetic, sensory, perceptual, and symbolic opportunities invite alternative modes of receptive and expressive communication, which can circumvent the limitations of language. Visual and symbolic expression gives voice to experience, and empowers individual, communal, and societal transformation.

(American Art Therapy Association)

In other words, art therapy is a therapeutic activity that seeks to help individuals process emotions and experiences that they cannot put into words. Art therapy uses multiple senses to give rise to alternative ways of expressing oneself. Art therapy integrates the right and left sides of the brain together to process one’s trauma. “Malchiodi (2003) explained that creative arts therapies tap into several senses simultaneously, helping to connect with parts of self not readily available in traditional talk therapy, such as inner feelings and unconscious thoughts. She further posited that the use of creative arts helps the client reconnect implicit (sensory) and explicit (declarative) memories of trauma, as these therapies provide a less threatening way for clients to tell their stories” (qtd in Perryman et al. 83). The right hemisphere of the brain processes negative emotions and stores them in implicit memory while the left hemisphere stores the words needed to tell that story. Since trauma is a negative experience it will be stored in the right hemisphere until it is reconsolidated and will lack cohesion or coherence until then (Perryman et al. 84). The use of art allows one to access those memories that are stored in the right brain and process them in a less threatening or scary way. After those memories have been accessed that
person can then use their left side of the brain to put words to those memories and reconsolidate their memories.

Using art therapy gives the survivor a sense of empowerment over “or an opportunity to change the client’s narrative prior to reconsolidation [and] provide a sense of regained control over the event” (Perryman et al. 86). The use of the left brain is common for processing the therapy or art therapy session. Writing, including poetry or storytelling, offer an opportunity to the survivor to integrate what they process in their therapy session after reconsolidation, aiding them in their healing (Perryman et al. 86-87).

Karin Alice Schouten et al.’s systematic literature reviews found that after doing art therapy “patients reported treatment satisfaction and perceived improvements, such as decreased stress, more relaxation, less worrying, fewer intrusive thoughts, and increased ability to look more confidently toward the future” (“Trauma-Focused Art Therapy” 121). Relatedly, patients mentioned that they were “able to express their emotions and memories in art making and to share memories and emotions that they had never shared before” (“Trauma-Focused Art Therapy” 122). These self-reports show that in practice these treatments make the daily lives of patients easier.

Zines do exactly the same as art therapy, as stated above, but without the facilitation of an art therapist. Zine creators use art materials and the creative process to discuss important topics to the authors or share personal stories, which in turn can help explore the authors’ emotions, foster self-awareness, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem, just as art therapy and trauma therapy do. Art therapy provides gradual access to memories, emotions, a sense of control, a sense of autonomy, as well as strengthening self-esteem (Schouten et al., “Trauma-Focused Art Therapy” 115, 116, 125). I believe that zines can provide the same benefits as art therapy does to
someone who does not have access to mental health care and/or trauma-informed care specialists. Zines, although not an official form of trauma-informed care, often bring together a community of individuals who have gone through similar traumas and written on the topic. Individuals can read those experiences and come to learn that what they experienced is in fact trauma and start to work toward healing.

Methodology

In this thesis I will be analyzing zines, including my own, to suggest that zines are a form of art therapy, as well as trauma therapy. Analyzing my zines along with others provides a bridge to the community of zine makers and proves that other creators have found zines to be fruitful for healing and dealing with their own trauma and more broadly their mental health. I was able to interview two zine makers, Pleasure Pie and Karina Hagelin of Femme Filth Press, and will use these interviews alongside the zines to inform my research. I will use this data to prove that creating zines should be considered an alternative form of art therapy.

The first part of this project was to collect zines to analyze. The zines I collected shared a number of commonalities. Zines were included if they discussed any of the following themes: shame, guilt, blame and healing; shared personal stories; recognized disassociation; emphasized coping, advocacy, non-linear healing, self-care, and grounding; and finally provided resources for healing. The zines come from various geographical areas as well as various physical locations and the internet.¹ I searched through 60 zines on Etsy, a store full in San Francisco at Silver Sprocket, around 50 zines at Bluestockings, a store in New York City, and 16 from

¹ Zines were found in person in San Francisco, California; New York, NY; and Boston, Massachusetts. The zines from San Francisco come from an independent press store, Silver Sprocket. The zines from New York come from an independent feminist bookstore and activist space, Bluestockings. The zines from Boston come from a local sex-positive zine maker and a college campus, Simmons University. Other zines were found on Etsy and come from various geographic locations (Montreal, Canada; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Ithaca, New York; Dana Point, California; Eugene, Oregon).
Simmons University and various personal collections in Boston. After consideration of the zine’s locations, themes, depth of theme and personal story, I chose 18 zines to use for analysis out of the 176 that were considered for analysis.

My decision to include a zine in my analysis was based on a few aspects: location, themes, depth of theme, and personal story. Since the personal story is important to survivors and their healing it was pertinent to me to make sure that zines included not only personal stories but also offered some indication of what it meant to share those stories. Many survivors state the importance of sharing their story with others and how it aids their healing process; sharing your story and hearing other’s stories reminds you that you are not alone in this, creating a validating experience for all those involved.

The zines were separated into three categories: trauma, mental health, and self-care. I created these three categories to describe the content that appears in each zine. The trauma category includes zines that share a personal story of their trauma, experiences of the aftermath of trauma, emotions experienced during and after the trauma, healing narratives, and healing tips. Mental health zines are educational zines. They include information on how to help survivors in their healing process, they provide definitions for symptoms, and provide resources for survivors to find the help they need. The self-care category includes tips for healing, sharing stories that have helped that individual heal, affirmations for survivors, and toolkits for survivors.

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2 I estimate that I went through at least 50 while at the store in San Francisco. Numbers from the store are estimates. I did not count how many I went through at the time. My personal collection from Simmons is around 35, 16 of which fit the criteria for inclusion.

3 Not all of the 18 zines will be discussed in this paper. I wanted to include the full list that I culled so that people could find them for themselves.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trauma Zines</th>
<th>Mental Health Zines</th>
<th>Self-Care Zines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care</em></td>
<td><em>Accessing Mental Healthcare: A Brief and Incomplete Guide for Those in Need</em></td>
<td><em>What!? What Even is Self-Care?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Femme Filth 4: The Healing Issue</em></td>
<td><em>Trauma Rama #1</em></td>
<td><em>70 Acts of Self-Care</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Ebb Tide</em></td>
<td><em>Trigger Warnings</em></td>
<td><em>Pocket Skills</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ouch: Reflections on Bad Sex, Rape, &amp; Shame</em></td>
<td><em>DIY Mental Health Trauma Zine - How to Feel Safe In The World</em></td>
<td><em>Cosmic Ghost Princess #2</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Supporting a Survivor of Sexual Assault</em></td>
<td><em>Cosmic Ghost Princess #3</em></td>
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<td><em>The Little Book of Affirmations for Survivors</em></td>
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<td><em>Surviving to Thriving: A Trauma Survival Toolkit</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>The Littlest Witch’s Trauma First Aid Kit: For Rituals and Resilience</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure No. 2 Table displaying zines based on category type
Collaging/Drawing/Life Writing

This section will include pieces from zines that largely use collaging and drawing to process, discuss, and share one’s trauma. I am including a few examples of life writing, a technique used in trauma therapy, in this section as well because they are powerful examples of the healing properties of zines. Collaging allows the creator to bring life to those emotions that are difficult to put into words. The creative process can help contain the inner chaos of the traumatic memory and give it a form to live in. “Working with visual imagery and emergent metaphors can help clients tell their stories removed from the actual events and literal details thereby ensuring safety and evoking imagination” (Tripp et al. 513). Collaging has three possible effects on people: negation, tolerating, and integrating. If the artist is negating then this is indicative of the fight response associated with traumatic events. The artist might cut up an image into small pieces or color over it. The is indicative of the fight response because the body perceives it as threatening and is trying to protect itself. If the artist is tolerating, then this is indicative of the flight response and the artist will keep the image visible but may alter or modify it to change its meaning. This is common in a flight response because survivors are avoiding interacting with the trauma they experienced. The last effect is integrating which does not elicit the fight or flight response in the survivor. Artists who are able to integrate their artwork can find a sense of safety and could use their artwork as a resource, artists are able to have a negotiated response in the face of trauma. There is also a possibility that the artist feels a sense of accomplishment and pride with the art piece that was created and therefore might be more elaborate or colorful art pieces (Tripp et al. 521).

Figure no. 3, titled, “Running Thoughts” (Burns, Survivors 5), and figure no. 4, the cover of Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care (Burns and MacIsaac), both employ the use of collaging
and drawing to describe emotions that are difficult to express in words. “Running Thoughts” is a collage piece that encapsulates the feelings one has about their trauma and healing process. It evokes the dark thoughts that come up when dealing with trauma and trying to come to terms with it. Trauma never goes away; it only fades into the background. As seen in figure no. 3 there is a juxtaposition of the way society views trauma versus the trauma survivor’s view of trauma. It is trying to reconcile the fact that trauma will never go away and that healing is not linear with the fact that society wants you to not talk about it and forget it ever happened to you. “Running Thoughts” is an integrated piece of artwork. Because parts of my trauma have been processed this makes “Running Thoughts” an integrative piece. According to Tripp et al. artists who were able to integrate their artwork can find a sense of safety and could use their artwork as a resource and artists can feel a sense of pride and accomplishment with what they created (521). When I completed “Running Thoughts” I was happy with the resulting collage. I felt that it conveyed what I wanted it to and was excited to share it with others. The image conveyed contradicting thoughts I had about my trauma and gave space to hold both of these thoughts without putting judgement on them. The collage allowed me to express thoughts that were in my subconscious that I had not let myself process yet. Creating this piece allowed me to tap into some emotions that I had not yet processed about my trauma. I blamed myself a lot for my trauma but creating this piece helped me realize some of the internalized thoughts I had around sexual assault.

While the artwork on the cover of Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care is not a collage piece but it is indicative of similar strategies in collaging in response to and processing of one’s trauma. The artwork on the cover is a black and white drawing of a female presenting person who is hunched over with their arms holding their chest and their head bent slightly down with their hair falling down beside them. Ripping out of the back of the female presenting figure is a
skeleton (Burns and MacIsaac). The artwork on the cover is explicit in the emotion and experience it is conveying—dissociation. Dissociation is a difficult experience to convey to another person in words but this art piece does just that. The artist, Ashleigh MacIsaac, was able to convey this particular response to trauma in a clear and concise way just like in “Running Thoughts” and can be seen as an integrative art piece.²

Collaging can be restorative in the sense that it provides the survivor with feelings of being in control. Using structured art techniques, like collage, can help the survivor retell their story and by doing so can gain control over the event in which they felt helpless (Naff 84). Along with retelling their story, the use of self-care and grounding techniques help the survivor gain

² I am not the artist who did the cover piece for Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care. The artist is Ashleigh MacIsaac, ajemtattoo on instagram, facebook, tiktok, and other platforms. I formatted the picture to fit onto the cover and designed the front and background of the font.
control over their emotional and physical reactions, helping to establish the sense of control the survivor has over their life (Naff 84). In a personal interview with zine creator, Karina Hagelin of *Femme Filth Press*, they stated “but like [zines, at least,] I can control ... [which] is like such a, is such a relief to just have something that I can control, something that is in my power.” This statement resonates with trauma and art therapy research that discusses the need for survivors to regain control in their own lives.

Pleasure Pie’s zine *Ouch: Reflections on Bad Sex, Rape, & Shame* is full of honest stories about their experiences of rape, sex, and the shame surrounding those. Pleasure Pie’s body of work focuses on sex-positivity, body-positivity, and positivity about other good things (Pleasure Pie, “About”). Pleasure Pie’s zines employ honesty without skirting around the truth. Sharing one’s truth is an important aspect of trauma healing. Being able to open up and share your story makes you vulnerable. Pleasure Pie’s zines use this vulnerability to open up conversations around trauma. Being honest as a zine maker is important when doing collaborative work. *Ouch* is not only a personal zine for Pleasure Pie; it is a collaborative one as well. Pleasure Pie is asking other people to be vulnerable and share their stories, but this is easier when the creators themselves are doing that.

Pleasure Pie not only employs art therapy combined with trauma therapy in the creation of her zine but also within the pieces contributed as well. In figure no. 5, the author references using art therapy to create this piece in the zine (Pleasure Pie, *Ouch*, 25). Figure no. 5 is a green robot on a blue background with an orange speech bubble that states, “You can say no for ANY reason. I will respect it. You don’t have to explain why.” At the bottom of the page is a white box with texts that reads “I drew this robot late at night as art therapy. This robot would never pressure anyone into sex that they didn’t want to have. That is basic robot decency” (Pleasure
Pie, *Ouch*, 25). “The creative process itself is inherently powerful, and, in this sense, art is therapy (Edwards, 2004)” (qtd in Green 15). The act of drawing itself, regardless of what is drawn, is therapeutic for the survivor. By stating that she used this piece as art therapy late at night she is conveying that the use of art has helped her process feelings at a time when it was difficult to do so, such as late at night. The author uses art to process some of their emotions, putting into art with the use of words what consent should be and how consent should be a basic decency that all humans have for one another.

This image and the accompanying text also reference the guilt many people feel when saying no while in the middle of having sex without explaining themselves. Women are brought up in a dichotomy where they should be both a virgin and be happy to have sex at the same time. When they say no during sex they feel they must explain themselves and have a reason to stop and feel a sense of guilt from this. This guilt is commonly found in trauma victims; they feel it was their fault that the abuse happened (DeCou et al. 135).

In a personal interview with Pleasure Pie she stated, “I definitely think [zines can] be therapeutic … I feel like all kinds of art can be therapeutic both for the person [making] it and for the viewer … I feel like for me personally, a lot of my zine-making has come from a place of like, feeling like I needed [it] … like I am making things that I would have benefitted from if they had existed when I was younger.” Pleasure Pie finds creating her zines to be therapeutic, including the art that she makes for the zines. In figure no. 6 (Pleasure Pie, *Ouch*, 2), Pleasure Pie references the types of emotions survivors feel after an assault. Figure no. 6, is a blue background with a pink ghost outlined in blue with a green speech bubble with white text that states, “It’s ok to feel sad, angry, disgusted, afraid, anxious, numb, confused, annoyed, tired, horny, or a whole bunch of other feelings after a sexual assault” (Pleasure Pie, *Ouch*, 2). These
emotions are also tied to stigma these survivors face when dealing with the aftermath of their assault. By using art to help depict those emotions the survivor can better process them.

![Figure No. 5 Page 25 from Ouch: Reflections on Bad Sex, Rape, & Shame](image1)

![Figure No. 6 Page 2 in Ouch: Reflections on Bad Sex, Rape, & Shame](image2)

The next story, titled, “Body map of non-consensual touches,” from *Ouch: Reflections on Bad Sex, Rape, & Shame* (Pleasure Pie, *Ouch*, 7-8) is one in which the author shared all the places they had been touched non-consensually over a nine year period and can be seen in figure no. 7. She conveyed this information with a brief description of why she was sharing the information followed by an image of a cis female body with different parts of it colored differently with a key corresponding the colors to a non-consensual touch. This piece is honest in its descriptions of how she has been touched and why she wishes to share this information with
people. The author is making use of art therapy and trauma therapy in their healing process. On page 7, seen in figure no. 7, she states why she wants to share this drawing of non-consensual touch with the world,

1. To say, ‘Hey! This is what sexual assault looks like (or can look like). Recognize it! Acknowledge it!’
2. To share what has happened to me as a part of my own healing process.
3. To bring attention to the complex, confusing, and deeply internalized ways that non-consensual touching can affect a person.

I am trying to reclaim my body as my own - to unlearn all of the experiences that have taught me that my body exists for other people’s whims, and to proclaim that I am the ruler of my body - the only person who gets to decide what I do with it. I have bodily autonomy and I will not give it up! (Pleasure Pie, *Ouch*, 7)

Pleasure Pie’s words along with the drawing of the non-consensual touch is a powerful way to represent sexual assault, especially when it happens to many people that may not recognize it as such. The various non-consensual touches, the varying degrees of intensity of each touch, are represented by a different color, showing just how different sexual assault can look to people.
Using colorful art that you did not create and interspersing that art with text is a form of collaging and art making. Karina Hagelin’s, *Femme Filth 4: The Healing Issue*, seen in figure no. 8, is the fourth zine in a collection of zines that focus on trauma, radical vulnerability, healing as resistance, and queer femme joy (Hagelin “About”). Hagelin employs radical vulnerability in their zines not only as a way to heal but to combat the stigma around trauma and survivors. The zine combines colorful patterned backgrounds, handwritten quotes, typed out passages that have been cut out and pasted, and one photograph of a tarot spread.

The zine is extremely colorful and filled with cute images such as rainbows, diamonds, mermaids, crystals, unicorns, and stars. Hagelin’s zine not only discusses radical vulnerability but uses it in their visuals as well. Hagelin’s use of radical vulnerability, both in text and visuals, is important when discussing trauma. Often survivors are told they have to fit into a specific mold of how a survivor should be—strong, tell their story, forgive their perpetrator—and these are not the only way to be a survivor. Hagelin employs radical vulnerability in their work, showing survivors that being vulnerable is an option for them too.
Often, vulnerability is associated with weakness and needing protection. The concept of radical vulnerability is a popular point of conversation in survivor communities. Radical vulnerability is the “idea that being vulnerable is a revolutionary act in a world that tells us we must be strong” (Moreno par. 1). In other words, being weak and needing protection and asking for those things is a radical act. Hagelin, in a personal interview, states, “Just that … when I first started, like I said, it was, for me, it was a way of dealing with what happened, and coping, and I have really … benefited from art and therapy already so … zines were kind of a way of … engaging in my creative side, which was really good and a healthy coping mechanism that I desperately needed, … compared to the other ones I had … at the time”. Hagelin’s use of art in the form of making zines helped them heal from their trauma in a way that was not only healthy but also therapeutic for them.

The use of comic book style art to share a story in zine format is very effective at communicating difficult feelings and experiences. The use of art in *Ebb Tide* provides a backdrop for the words that are being said in clear cut ways. The art gives a clearer picture to what the author is feeling and experiencing during their assault and the aftermath. Figure no. 9
depicts the author being trapped by the perpetrator in their home and not being able to escape through the forest near their home. The use of the forest as jail bars in the artwork adds to the feeling of being imprisoned in your own home by the perpetrator.

![Figure No. 9 Page 7 from Ebb Tide](image)

As the story progresses the author struggles with the emotions one succumbs to after a traumatic experience; feelings of worthlessness, not knowing who you are anymore, and dissociation. The author uses images of barren beachfronts and flourishing flowers to juxtapose the words they are using to describe how they are feeling. The author writes, “Does your rapist feel worthless? You wonder why you do” (G. 9). The pleasant images of flowers and serene beaches contrasts the worthlessness the author is describing in their words. The author also references healing on this page when they write, “You are free now but you don’t know what that means. You are you now but you don’t know who that person is. You are drowning again when the coast is clear” (G. 9). Healing is non-linear and trauma changes who you are as a person. As you heal you have to figure out who you are again and that is a difficult journey to navigate. On page 10, as seen in figure no. 10, they are referencing the feeling of dissociation by
drawing a person that is partially see-through, like a ghost. They write, “There is something sluggish moving unaware through the basalt of your heart” (G. 10). When one is dissociative one may not feel like themselves, may not feel their emotions, and is sometimes described as like a ghost outside one’s own body. Both of these illustrations aid the words they are using to convey the emotions they have.

![Figure No. 10 Pages 9-10 from *Ebb Tide*](image)

Figure no. 11 depicts a turning point in their narrative. They write, “You are so small yet so valuable. Losing you would be like losing the entire ocean” (G. 13). They realize that they are worthy of love and life and that they will be sorely missed if they were to take their own life. On the second page of this two-page spread they write, “You are loved as is right now. You carry brightness” (G. 14). They realize that their life is worthwhile and that they are loved and are worthy of being loved. It does not matter that the person changed because of the trauma they experienced because people love them for who they are. The picture compliments the words of this two-page spread; the picture is an aerial view of a beach. The waves are rolling onto the beach and there are a bunch of people on surfboards in a circle floating on the ocean surrounding
one person. The person in the middle is the trauma survivor being reminded that they are worthy of love and are loved for who they are and are surrounded by those that love them as they are.

Figures no. 12 speaks to the emotions the author is feeling on their road to recovery. They have started to become a person again, finding joy in life while at the same time not feeling guilty about the negative emotions they have for their rapist (i.e. wanting their helicopter to crash into the sea), and finally being able to go home. This picture is the opposite of the forest scene presented earlier in *Ebb Tide*. In this picture the tree roots are white, not black, resembling lightness and the feeling of being trapped by the roots is no longer visible. The words compliment the picture stating, “You imagine your rapist crashing his helicopter into the sea. You are not a bad person. You feel victorious. You go home” (G. 19). Wanting negative outcomes for your rapist is reasonable and valid.

Like collaging and drawing, life writing is an important technique in trauma therapy to help a survivor process parts or their narrative. Many zine makers, such as Carrie Colpitts who wrote an article for Broken Pencil Distro, use zines to share their particular stories and be
affirmed in that they are not alone in this world. Colpitts states, “making a zine is a kind of therapy for me. I think about what I’m going to write for a long time and then it spills out” (Colpitts).

The first piece I want to discuss is my personal life writing piece from *Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care*, titled “you are not alone” (Burns, “Survivors” 12-13). This piece, seen in figure no 13, is in the genre of life-writing. This piece is personal and shares the story of the authors, my own, sexual assault. I am including my own life writing piece in my analysis because it speaks to one form of art and trauma therapy that survivors can access. Sitting down to write this piece was incredibly difficult and my experiences were hard to put into writing. I was able to put this into writing after having processed my trauma both in therapy and other art forms prior to writing this. Once I started writing the words just flowed from me and since I contributed
this piece anonymously to the zine I felt like I had control over how I could share my story. I was not ready for the world to know it was my story but I was ready to share it with other survivors and find a community of support and love. Writing this also allowed me to process some parts of my trauma that I had not yet shared with anyone, including my own therapist. Writing can be easier than expressing what happened to you in verbal words.

The next piece in Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care is in the genre of life writing. Figure no. 14, titled “Tempered Glass” (Collins 4), is exploring how to heal from trauma and the options that self-care has provided. Collins states, “I’ve tried yoga, exercise, water, essential oils, religion, and spirituality; these were but tape to take pressure off my shattering pane. I’ve tried substances, self-harm, promiscuity, and rampant spending to find these could only paint over the ever-growing fractures … You can’t fix trauma by applying a bandaid. The glass must be remade within fires of love and self-respect” (Collins 4). She speaks about self-care, the way that society at large understands self-care to be, as coping mechanisms and not really an aid in her healing and that her true healing began when she found love in her life and started to respect herself.

Figure No. 14 Page 4 from Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care
Collins’s piece speaks to the need to share trauma survivors’ stories. Her story is not unique but might feel so in a society that tells survivors there is one particular narrative that they can embody. Sharing her story gives her control over her narrative as well as empowers other survivors by showing them they are not alone.

The next piece being discussed is from *Ouch: Reflections on Bad Sex, Rape, & Shame* and titled, “A Letter to My Rapist” (Pleasure Pie, *Ouch*, 26), seen in figure no. 15. Just like other pieces in this zine it employs both art therapy and trauma therapy. The use of writing a letter to the abuser is common in trauma therapy (Wright and Thiara 12). Combining this with the use of art therapy is beneficial. One reason a survivor may turn to life writing as a way to cope and heal from their trauma is because it may be too uncomfortable for the survivor to discuss their trauma out loud (Morrow et al. 7).

![A LETTER TO MY RAPIST](image)

The letter states, “I am only writing you to ask you to think about the way that you treated me, and whether or not that is how you want to treat women in the future” (Pleasure Pie, *Ouch*, 28).
She wants her perpetrator to understand that what he did was not okay. On the last page of the letter there is a section from the author discussing what she hoped to get out of writing and delivering this letter to her rapist. She writes, “I think I would feel better about the whole thing if I knew that he cared that he had mistreated me. But I honestly don’t know if he does … I like to think that maybe he would have felt bad and apologized if he wasn’t worried about me calling the police. It disturbs me to think that a person might lack empathy” (Pleasure Pie, *Ouch*, 28). She hoped that this letter would clarify to her rapist what her experience was and to get some closure on what happened to her. Letter writing in particular can be beneficial for closure, even if the letter is never sent to the perpetrator. Pleasure Pie states, “I think that, that being like there's a lot of just my personal processing … written into that zine, and like trying to make sense of … what do these experiences mean for me … and like how do I make sense of them and stuff like that … and I think doing that in writing was a helpful way to do that and also having … the ability to share it with the world … for me that was really a nice way of getting it off my chest” (personal interview). Writing down what happened to her was healing as well as sharing her story. Writing helps her process her trauma in a way that works for her and after she can share that story with others through her zines. Sharing it with others in the zine community is an affirming practice. You are surrounded by like-minded people, some of whom have gone through similar things, and understand what you are going through. Having people who empathize with you is an important component of healing.

**Community Finding**

Stephen Duncombe, Alison Piepmeier, and Kristen Schilt, zine experts, all state that zines are community producing artifacts (*Notes from the Underground*, *Girl Zines*, “I’ll Resist”). Along with these academics, many zine makers themselves have stated that making and sharing
zines are part of the ways they find community and that this community has helped them heal.

Hagelin states,

once I started making zines and getting feedback from other survivors … it made me feel so much less alone. Like even just putting my story out there made me feel less alone, but once I started receiving … letters and feedback from other people who've been through similar things, especially in the queer community where a lot of people act like … queer people can't be perpetrators or trans people can't be perpetrators of sexual violence … it was really affirming to create zines and then hear from other people and trade zines with people and just … build my own little community. (personal interview)

Hagelin uses zines to employ healing in their own life and to help others in their own journey of healing. They find the zine community very accepting and affirming of their story. Not only did Hagelin state this in my interview with them but it can be seen in their zines as well. Hagelin states in their zine, as seen in figure no. 16, “i am sharing my radical vulnerability, my experiences, to open up difficult conversations around r*pe culture, trauma, & mental health; to share solidarity with other survivors who are angry & bitter; to try & crush the stigmas attached to all of these things so that we exist more holistically & allow ourselves to begin healing” (Hagelin, Femme Filth, 11). Sharing their experiences opens a community up, allowing others to see their vulnerability and know that they are not alone and in turn open up about their own trauma. Talking about trauma, in its whole truth, breaks the stigma and myths surrounding trauma. “When trauma survivors share their stories with another person, they may feel supported rather than isolated, which in turn initiates the process of reuniting with the rest of the world” (Naff 85). Hagelin uses their own voice to do this and in turn is breaking the cycle of trauma. If people around survivors are telling them how to be a survivor and that their way of being does
not fit into that model then this traumatizes the individual further, instilling in them that what they are doing is wrong and shameful.

When many people practice radical vulnerability it empowers others.

When we do this, we create a cycle of empowerment; we empower those around us to be vulnerable. At the same time, we break down stigmas that tell us that we must remain stoic, silent and strong. That visibility is especially important for those of us who are mentally ill, and even more so for those of us who have trauma-induced illnesses such as PTSD, C-PTSD, DID, etc., as well as for those of us who hold myriad intersecting marginalized identities and backgrounds. (Moreno par. 5)

Radical vulnerability is a radical act of love that is practiced by zine makers such as Hagelin. This vulnerability fosters community and sharing one’s story, thus creating a circle of healing and empowerment for survivors.

Many zine makers, such as Carrie Colpitts, affirm the way that zines help makers and readers to create community; she writes, “sharing my stories has helped me be okay with being vulnerable. Sharing my stories has also helped me see that I’m not alone in my weirdness. I get
letters and emails from people who enjoy my zines! It’s flattering, and I do hope to make art that people can relate to, and that helps them feel a little less alone. But honestly, I make zines because they make me feel better” (Colpitts). Colpitts’s statement above speaks to both the community aspect of zine making and the therapeutic aspects of zine making as mentioned previously. Both academics and zine makers value the importance of community making. As the authors of the scholarly article, “Trauma Healing: A Mixed Methods Study of Personal and Community-Based Healing” argue, “these findings also corroborate the importance of community-based prevention and healing … and highlight the value of survivor-informed and survivor-driven healing structures and strategies. As such, given their unique understanding of the terrain of trauma and healing, survivors can unearth healing systems and strategies that they are already using and work to illuminate and perpetuate them” (Todahl et al. 629). Zinesters unearth healing practices that work for them and share them with the community, promoting new and unique healing practices in others. Along this vein, Pleasure Pie explained to me that she received two submissions for a zine that shared very similar stories and both contributors felt like they were alone in what they were doing. She states,

not talking about it kinda perpetuates that like feeling that … you're kinda afraid of not being normal and I got that from so many people [who submitted] … be like look you know there's like, like obviously you're not the only one in this [zine] out of like maybe there's like twenty entries or something like two of the people … do the same thing … so I'm sure a lot of [other] people do that … So it was just this cool experience of like having [it, and] that to me felt like such a like connecting community experience.

(Pleasure Pie, Personal Interview)
Having people submit and share their story in a zine promotes others to do the same, spreading the feeling of togetherness and creating a community of supporting people. Because zines allow for such openness and honesty many have found it easier to share their personal stories. Pleasure Pie finds that being open encourages others to be open with her and in return encourages her to continue to be open and honest. She states,

it just is like such a different experience than exploring all this stuff on my own by myself … it's more like exploring it with everybody who reads it … and it's so many people react to things and tell me what it means to them or like … people tell me about their own experiences with sex education or … just like anything related to sex, gender, body stuff … in a way that like random strangers never have told me all that stuff if I wasn't making these things, … so it's been really amazing just the way it's like I think like me opening up… my own personal experiences and also like just making stuff on topics that matter to me like have, has encouraged people to o-, open up to me in return.

(Pleasure Pie, Personal Interview)

Zines are a site of community in-and-of themselves. To be able to share one’s story and have that returned by those around you is reassuring and therapeutic.

Many zinesters have discussed the therapeutic value of zines for both the maker and the reader. Hagelin started creating their own zines to deal with their trauma. They state, “So I started creating my own zines as a way to cope with what had happened to me and a way to feel less isolated and alone and a way to also eventually build and find community. So I actually started making zines just to like deal with the trauma of what I had underwent … that year” (Hagelin, personal interview). They used the process of creating zines to heal and then found community to aid their healing through sharing their zines. Creating zines and finding a
community is essential for Hagelin in their healing process. Similar to Hagelin, Pleasure Pie finds both creating and reading zines to be therapeutic. In a personal interview with Pleasure Pie she states,

> I feel like both writing and making art can be really therapeutic and like humble ways of processing feelings including like feelings that come out of trauma … And I wasn't thinking about the … therapeutic side of things [when I started making zines]. And then after, like as people were writing letters, so many of them were saying that it was really therapeutic for them to write all that stuff down … And kinda like get it all out. And that was a really nice side effect … of that that I wasn't even thinking about when I came up with the idea. (personal interview)

In her experience as a zine creator both her personal submissions and anonymous submissions to her zines have found the experience to be therapeutic. Both of the quotes from Hagelin and Pleasure Pie speak to the therapeutic side of zines. While Hagelin turned to zines to help them heal, Pleasure Pie found zines therapeutic after having made them for some time. At the end of my interview with Pleasure Pie she stated, “I feel like it's also worth mentioning that like I also read other people's zines and, and sometimes find reading them therapeutic … and I love the ways that like people open up about personal things … in their zines” (personal interview). Both making and reading zines is therapeutic. Reading others stories is an affirming process. It provides you with the knowledge that you are not alone or crazy for feeling the way you do after being traumatized.

> As zine makers evolve their work over time many switch from writing about strictly personal issues to writing about issues that will help other people. In my interviews with Pleasure Pie and Karina Hagelin both stated how their zines have shifted over time. Hagelin states,
I think zines are therapeutic for like everyone, even if you don't necessarily identify as crazy or survivor, like zines, are really grounding and soothing and connect[ive] to create and share with people … But I think especially for survivors and people who are recovering from trauma, zines are just such a source of community, of connection, and... of comfort, … I really believe that, like, the act of making the zine itself is very grounding, the act of sharing your story is really empowering, and doing it on your own terms [through] do-it-yourself media just puts you in the driver's seat … Like, it's totally, you're the one who's 100% in control, and that's especially comforting for survivors and people who are recovering from trauma I think. (personal interview)

They find zines to be therapeutic for everyone in the process. The act of creating zines makes use of hands on work that helps people ground through their sense of touch and sight. Many zines on trauma include resources for grounding exercises, such as Hagelin’s *Surviving to Thriving: A Trauma Survival Toolkit*, which provides resources for trauma survivors, and *the little book of affirmations for survivors*, which provides survivors words of affirmation when they are having a difficult time.
In figure no. 17 Hagelin discusses what grounding is to them. They discuss a few options that others can use for grounding that are helpful to them. The rest of the zine is other grounding tools and healing tools that they use to stay healthy and caring the best for themselves that they possibly can. Gentle reminders such as taking your meds, staying off social media, and seeing your therapist are helpful in the moment when things seem overwhelming. Hagelin’s other zine, the little book of affirmations for survivors, provides gentle reminders that you are loved, you are worthy of love, you are strong, and that having difficult emotions, such as anger or needing to cry, are valid to have. Figure no. 18 is an example of the affirmations that fill the pages of their zine. Survivors are often hard on themselves and feel that they are not healing in the way that they should be.

The zine I created, Survivors on Trauma and Self-Care, has a list of grounding exercises that I learned while in a trauma education group. Grounding exercises can include “progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery exercises, and mindful breathing techniques … Art may amplify any of the above techniques and also may be helpful for emotional regulation” (Naff 84). The combination of grounding exercise along with art making is therapeutic and can help one navigate their difficult emotions.
Grounding exercises help the survivor come back to their feelings. One exercise in particular, called the five senses hand, in which each finger on one hand corresponds to a different sense—touch, smell, sound, taste, and sight. This helps bring survivors into the present moment by having them list off things that are around that correspond to each sense listed above.

CONCLUSION

Zines are a form of alternative art therapy. Zines provide the space and creativity needed to be used as a technique in art therapy. While I hesitate to advocate for zines to become a regular practice in art therapy due to the political aspect that zines embody, they are useful for individuals to use to help process their own trauma. Zines being used formally in art therapy could risk undermining community-building efforts. Alison Piepmeier states that “these narratives emphasize self-revelation and publicize a healing process as both a political and personal act” (157). In future work I would like to build off this idea that Piepmeier calls a...
“pedagogy of process” to examine how trauma zines, specifically, work in the political realm—how these individual zines and zinsters come together to form a community that does political work by sharing their stories.

I am committed to shedding light on the usefulness of the zine format to promote healing and discussion of trauma. I believe that zines offer a deep connection to oneself and others by being able to create work that is personal to you, that you have complete control over, and you get to decide how you communicate that information. Zines are an outlet for emotions and thoughts that cannot be expressed in words; they provide a community around mental health issues and the importance of trauma-informed care. Zines offer an alternative healing practice to those that do not have access to mental health services for a number of reasons. The community that is formed from reading and making zines is essential to the healing of survivors who use zines in this way, it can be similar to group therapy but without the therapist being present. The community provides affirmation, resources for healing, and grounding techniques. All of these options are great if you can get them from a trained therapist but if you cannot get them the zine community is a valid option. Throughout this paper I have shown that collaging, art making including drawing, life writing, and finding community, all tenets of art and trauma therapy, are present in zine making and reading.
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