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Unlearning and Transforming Educational Harm Through Zine Making

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Abstract

Conceived of and written in the aftermath of the passage of Texas' SB 17, a law banning DEI initiatives in public institutions of higher education, this article offers a pedagogy of zine making as one potential avenue for self-exploration, expression, and empowerment for students in an increasingly polarized and politicized educational context. Drawing from the work of feminist and anti-colonial theorists, as well as our own personal journeys within and outside of the academy, we discuss the transformative potential of creative work in educational spaces and imagine an approach to pedagogy that disrupts traditional academic norms and hierarchies in favor of empathy and solidarity. Focusing on zine making as an artistic medium and form of knowledge production due to its counterhegemonic history and attention to accessibility in regard to creation and distribution, we hope to encourage readers to explore zine making as a means of fostering critical thinking, self-reflection, and communication skills both in and beyond the classroom.

The Spring 2022 semester started like any other. Classes resumed after a winter break and professors were assigned graduate students to help with large courses. We came to know each other in this context, as a professor and instructional assistant for an undergraduate class, Latinos in the U.S., taught in one of the largest public universities in Texas. Under the façade of business as usual in Texas higher education there was great uncertainty. Students and professors were still trying to navigate the realities of post-pandemic teaching and learning and the Texas legislature prepared for its 88th legislative session where Governor Abbott promised to "root out 'woke agendas'" (Svitek, 2023). As we navigated these uncertainties and tried to address students' needs, we found solidarity in our deeply shared frustrations with the ways in which the institution worked against us and our students. We found connection in trying to navigate the injustices our students experienced daily, and we began to realize that, as instructional assistant and professor, we were disrupting the ways in which students are dehumanized by our academic institutions as we unlearned our roles and prescribed relationship.

In this article we offer a critique of conventional modes of knowledge production in higher education as we imagine a more expansive anti-colonial pedagogy through zine making. We rely on continuous reflection and ongoing dialogue about our experiences to explore moments of disruption in our relationship in the context of legislative attacks against Critical Race Theory (CRT)/Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) and LGBTQ+ students. Through an exploration of feminist and womanist theory and discussion of zine-making, we focus on how our teaching and

our participation in efforts to push back against these attacks became opportunities for resisting and unlearning epistemic violence.

The Anti-Woke Context

A campaign, which Micah Pollock and John Rogers (2022) call the "conflict campaign," against anti-racist and social justice teaching is being waged in K-16 classrooms. As of June, 2024, 85 anti-DEI bills in 28 states were introduced and 14 became law within a year (Chronicle Staff, 2024). Generally, the bills prohibit university DEI offices, mandatory DEI training, and diversity statements and identity-based preferences for hiring and admissions. They follow significant gains resulting from college student and university faculty demands for representation made in part as a consequence of the consciousness raising from the 2020 U.S. and global uprisings following the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police.

Texas was among the first states to approve an anti-DEI law, SB 17 in 2023, after it approved SB 3 in 2022, a law that censors classroom instruction and school conversations about race, gender and systemic oppression. Texas SB 17 expands these limitations to higher education by prohibiting: DEI offices and programming, hiring, assigning an employee or contracting a third party to perform duties of a DEI office, mandatory DEI trainings programs or activities, requiring or soliciting DEI statements, and giving preference on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity or national origin to employment applicants, employees, or participants. In addition to SB 17, the Texas legislature also signed into law SB 18, which weakens the protections of tenure by providing ultimate authority to grant or revoke tenure to those without disciplinary expertise. During the 2023–2024 academic year in Texas, universities had to figure out how to interpret SB 17 and SB 18 to meet the state of Texas deadlines for compliance.

To comply with SB 17 our university was the first one in the state to announce its closing of the campus Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) office during the summer of 2023. In May, 2024 the Texas Subcommittee for Higher Education led by the author of SB 17, Senator Creighton, convened a special hearing, to assess Texas universities' compliance with the new law. Despite the fact that the hearing was scheduled while some universities held their commencement exercises and others faced increasing militarization and surveillance resulting from demonstrations demanding that universities divest from Israel, 200 people submitted written or in-person testimony, with all except one outlining the devastating impacts of SB 17 (personal, email to author, May 15, 2024).

When we met, SB 17 and SB 18 were introduced to the Texas legislature. Like other Texas campuses, most students, faculty, and staff were largely unaware of the bills, while others naively assumed that they would never become law. We began discussing the bills because we knew their approval would impact us personally and professionally and because the class we were teaching fit the curriculum targeted by the bill. Students in our class also started asking questions as they followed the headlines about SB 17 in the news. There was a chilling effect on campus that continues to this day, driven in part by the university's minimal communication about plans for compliance with the bills.

Our discussions about the bills, what would happen to our class, and how our professional and personal futures would be affected, led to conversations about broader impacts, particularly about

our previous and present experiences with systemic forms of violence in the academy. These conversations often started as ways to share information, in the absence of any, and to discuss multiple strategies about how to cope and navigate challenges. Through them, we learned about our lives inside and outside the university and filled our identities as professor and graduate student with humanity. Although Mariela's identity as a professor is always accompanied with the description of being a Latina 1.5 generation immigrant anthropologist, in academic spaces she only shares the lived detailed realities of that experience with a few trusted colleagues and students. Meanwhile, AJ tries to be outspoken about their experiences and difficulties navigating life as a white, queer, trans, neurodivergent, mentally ill graduate student trying to cope with histories of abuse and family violence—things many in the academy are, unfortunately, quick to dismiss as irrelevant. Together, we hope to create opportunities for reconciliation and healing within educational settings through holistic approaches to pedagogy that recognize not only the complexity but the importance of students' lived experiences.

Figuring out ways to teach and cope while navigating the attacks, uncertainty, and fear created by SB 17 opened up opportunities to disrupt the expectations we each held of our roles in the university. We challenged who has knowledge and power in our classroom and in academic spaces, related to each other as people, and practiced solidarity. We watched the hearings and legislative debates about SB 17, sometimes late into the night, and heard our own state representatives say racist, sexist, and homophobic things to justify their attacks against DEI. We found comfort, camaraderie, and solidarity by talking about what we heard, sometimes sharing information, research, and scholarly ideas to counter our legislators' arguments, and provided mutual reassurance against their hate speech. One example of these disruptions is AJ registering Mariela to vote in her very first election. Sharing with AJ the very personal and traumatic stories of over 40 years of struggles with U.S immigration nurtured connection and trust allowing Mariela to cede the power to AJ to symbolically culminate her process of regaining U.S. citizenship. The nuances, mutual connections, and solidarity we shared in our roles as advocates for ourselves, each other, and others, were in part inspired by this story and led to their expression in the zine we will be discussing here.

Unlearning

These moments of collaboration, conversation, and disruption offered a meaningful and enlightening experience for each of us; it was through this work together that we began to recognize more clearly both the harm done to us in educational spaces and the harm we had unwittingly been reproducing in our own instructional practice. These realizations inspired us to continue, with more awareness and more intention, the lifelong process of decolonizing consciousness, which Laura E. Pérez (2019) describes as unlearning, challenging, and healing from the inflexible, "other-centered," binary modes of thinking that so often characterize Euro-American epistemologies, as well as reestablishing trust in our intuition and creative impulses (p. 206). An important part of this ongoing work, for both of us, has been recognizing the ways in which systems of education, especially in the United States, are explicitly designed to uphold the status quo, largely through the enforcement of "traditional" Euro-American academic norms that perpetuate epistemic and ontological violence against those who do not fit the prescribed mold of "Scholar."

The archetype of the Scholar is shaped by discourses—like those surrounding "excellence" and "rigor," which are often touted as core values of educational institutions—that create and reinforce

hierarchical structures and attempt to define who is and is not "fit" to succeed in these settings (Bejarano & Soderling, 2021). Such discourses are often rooted in Eurocentric, racist, classist, and ableist definitions of "excellence" positioning marginalized groups as subjects rather than producers of knowledge and demanding assimilation in exchange for entry into academic spaces (Bejarano & Soderling, 2021; Lee, 2017; Lorde, 1984; Morrison, 2019). Many scholars throughout the years have written about the emotional and, at times, even physical pain that results from this type of forced assimilation. In one poignant example, feminist writer and educator bell hooks (1994) recounts her experience with such attempts at silencing, where students of color were "made to feel that [they] were there not to learn but to prove that [they] were the equals of whites" (p. 5). This competition to conform to dominant culture deprived, and continues to deprive, students from marginalized backgrounds of a meaningful, empowering educational experience; instead of learning to write, speak, and theorize from their own social locations, they were, and in many regards still are, expected to filter their lives, experiences, and knowledges through hegemonic social and philosophical lenses.

This push to conform to dominant culture is especially common, in all levels of education, when it comes to expectations regarding language, writing, and knowledge production. Knowledge is meant to be produced and shared through "scholarly" writing—a medium characterized by the use of "proper" English, a strict linear narrative style, complex sentence structure, and, often, dense, jargonistic, hard-to-access vocabulary (Ahmed, 2000; Anzaldúa, [1990] 2009; Flores & Rosa, 2015; hooks, 1994; Ngũgĩ, 1986). For many people who have experienced marginalization, conforming to these standards of "proper" writing—which are, intentionally or unintentionally, rooted in racist, classist, ableist norms—involves suppressing their authentic voices in favor of learning to speak the language of the oppressor (Anzaldúa, [1990] 2009; Lorde, 1984; Ngũgĩ, 1986; Pérez, 2019). In this way, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) notes, establishing control over systems of education is one of the most powerful tools of colonialism and imperialism because it alienates youth from and breeds contempt for their languages, cultures, communities, and selves (pp. 28–29). This systematic silencing and deprivation of voice is a tactic of disempowerment and control that is commonly used, even today, within all levels of education to uphold existing power structures.

Women of color feminist writers have long highlighted the importance of voice as a site for resistance, urging us to consider who speaks and writes, who listens, and why—as well as who does not speak or write, why, and how we might begin creating space for those who have traditionally been excluded from discourse (Ahmed, 2000; hooks, 1994). Philosopher and writer Gloria E. Anzaldúa ([1990] 2009) explores these questions in her discussions of silence, of adopting the language of dominant culture, and of learning to speak authentically and against the grain; she describes the disempowerment, the feelings of despair and disembodiment, that result from being denied access to one's authentic voice, as well as the power and possibility that come from opening the proverbial floodgates. As our discussions about SB 17 continued and our concerns regarding legislative attempts to exert control over educational spaces across the country increased, we began sharing examples of our own experiences being silenced by and assimilated into hegemonic culture through systems of education. Mariela talked about the physical and emotional pain of learning English as a second language and losing the ability to speak the language of her discipline in her mother tongue. AJ, in turn, expressed their mounting frustration with academic ableism and writing conventions that leave little room for the inner workings of their neurodivergent brain. Through these conversations, we developed a sense of solidarity and began to wonder what might be done to mitigate these harms for current and future students.

Becky Thompson (2017) offers an in-depth reflection on the epistemic and ontological violence brought on by pedagogies rooted in and reinforcing hegemonic cultural norms. She describes the painful "splits" she experienced as a graduate student—moments of disembodiment that left her feeling like she had ransomed off parts of her body in exchange for a chance at success in the world of academia (Thompson, 2017). Tyrone Simpson (quoted in Thompson, 2017) expresses a similar sentiment, describing the PhD as "verification that you have been willing to be out of your body for an extended period of time" (p. 64). These experiences of emotional and spiritual dismemberment are not an exception, but rather the rule in a system of education predicated on the supposed separation of mind from body from spirit that characterizes post-Enlightenment Euro-American thought and culture (hooks, 1994; Pérez, 2019). We have, many times, shared with each other our own experiences of pain and frustration, particularly in the context of the hypocritical stances of our shared discipline, anthropology; for a field predicated on understanding and valuing diverse ways of knowing and being, we continue to be disappointed by the unwillingness to acknowledge the downsides of traditional (Western) academic norms that we have encountered.

Various scholars and practitioners throughout the years have suggested that it is possible to learn to cope with and begin healing from the epistemic and ontological violence wrought by the neocolonial, neoliberal academy by working to mend the splits between mind, body, and spirit (Anzaldúa, ([1990] 2009); hooks, 1994; Pérez, 2019; Thompson, 2017). For example, Thompson (2017) recounts the difference she observed in her students and their writing once she began encouraging what she calls "embodied writing" (p. 37), writing that makes room for emotion, personal narrative, and experimentation with form and nonlinear structure; as students came to find and strengthen their own voices and writing styles, problems with grammar and organization began to disappear. She proposes this sort of embodied writing as a potential avenue toward the healing of the painful "splits" she had experienced as a student. This raises the question: what might happen, what might change, if we allow students to begin producing and sharing knowledge through other embodied, creative mediums?

Enter Zine Making

Philosopher and activist Grace Lee Boggs notes that young people are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the state of education in our country, "crying out for another kind of education that gives them opportunities to exercise their creative energies because it values them as whole human beings" (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012, p. 12), rather than one that treats them like products moving through a factory, future cogs in the capitalist machine. Boggs highlights not only the importance of developing new cultural images with the potential to help us shift our collective mindset from one dominated by capitalist, colonial/imperial, neoliberal values toward one rooted in practices of solidarity, compassion, and transformation, but also the role art and artists might play in bringing about this shift (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012). As Gloria E. Anzaldúa ([1990] 2009; [2002] 2009) and Laura E. Pérez (2019) discuss, imagination, creativity, and more "artistic" mediums allow people to express ideas and experiences that cannot adequately be put into words—especially words that are recognized/recognizable by institutions of education as theory or scholarship. In this way, creative work may lay the foundation for both individual and collective healing and transformation by offering space for people to begin bridging the gap between mind,

body, and spirit and to consider counterhegemonic narratives and imagine new possibilities (Pérez, 2019; Ponce de León, 2021).

We chosen to explore zine making as pedagogy because zines are a form of creative expression that have a political, counterhegemonic history and require far less training and fewer resources than other artistic mediums (Duncombe, 2017). Zines initially emerged as part of a radical subculture committed to challenging dominant norms through the repurposing of common items and cultural symbols from hegemonic artifacts into means of questioning one's social, political, and/or economic circumstances (Duncombe, 2017; Hebdige, 1979). The creation and distribution of zines provided an opportunity for people feeling alienated from dominant culture to develop networks through which alternative discursive and critical spaces emerged (Duncombe, 2017; Hebdige, 1979); these critiques are expressed, as Dick Hebdige (1979) argues, through the transformation of cultural symbols and their meanings in a way that goes against "nature" and interrupts the process of "normalization" (p. 18). These transformations are significant in that they disrupt the mechanisms by which hegemonic aesthetic practices and ideologies replicate themselves, shaping our perception of the world so thoroughly that it can be difficult to conceive of another way of being (Hebdige, 1979; Ponce de León, 2021). Zines, as creative practice, offer an avenue for transformative self-exploration and expression by fostering, at least within their pages, the kinds of alternative realities their creators wish to embody (Duncombe, 2017).

While not all zines are explicitly political or intended to be educational, the discontent they express and the worlds they imagine are often rooted in sociopolitical, cultural, or economic commentary. In fact, zine making as a medium is based on an amateur (from the Latin "amator," meaning "lover"), do-it-yourself (DIY) culture that inherently rejects dominant aesthetics and capitalist ideals of mass production and consumption (Duncombe, 2017; Hebdige, 1979). Zines require both fewer physical resources and less technical skill than many other artistic styles—and, unlike more traditional approaches to art or scholarly writing, zines are more about the content and message than the form (Duncombe, 2017)—making them an ideal option for classroom spaces, particularly in contexts where authentic forms of self-expression are repressed. Additionally, the movement of zines challenges traditional structures of knowledge production and distribution; zines are often made in or for community and are meant to be spread freely, creating a way of sharing information that is, in many ways, both more dialogic and more accessible than institutionalized modes of communication. While zines may not have as wide an audience as modes of mass communication, we argue that their creative, more personal nature makes them easier to connect to and more moving for the people they do reach—perhaps this is part of why zines seem to have reemerged as a popular informal educational tool in recent years.

It is, of course, important to consider the ways in which zine making can be and has already been appropriated into dominant cultural institutions (as is the case when, for a brief time, zines were considered "trendy), but we prefer to think of zine making as a way to provide students with the tools to produce and share knowledge in a way that feels more personal, relevant, and accessible, even if the production and dissemination of this knowledge takes place largely outside of the classroom. We believe zines, as a pedagogical practice, can offer space for students marginalized within systems of education—and feeling the effects of the epistemic and ontological violence brought on by norms surrounding learning and knowledge production—to express themselves more freely and authentically. In fact, the co-creative processes of knowledge and meaning making that often go into zines may help students foster a sense of empathy and solidarity that can work

to counter the alienation, individualism, and competition that characterize so many contemporary educational institutions; such a pedagogy feels especially needed in a time when education at all levels is subject to political attempts at censorship and erasure of students' historical and cultural realities. In the following paragraphs, we will provide an example of our vision of zine making as pedagogy.

Our Zine

Originally conceived of in response to Clelia Rodríguez and Josephine Gabi's (2023) question, "who are you without colonialism?[29]", our zine combines personal narratives of learning and unlearning with sociopolitical commentary on the mechanisms and effects of colonialism and imperialism. The zine was made using issues of National Geographic magazine from dates significant to each of our personal narratives; this method was chosen as a way to transform a publication with a long history of colonial practice and a close tie to the discipline of anthropology into a medium for questioning coloniality and imagining a different way of living. Each page in the zine was created from a single National Geographic volume corresponding with central moments in our respective life journeys. The pages—which were designed to represent some of the major relevant themes from those periods in our lives—were then organized in a nonlinear fashion, illustrating the story of Mariela's decades-long journey back to U.S. citizenship and AJ's reflections on the ways they have begun to unlearn, cope with, and heal from the forms of colonial domination and oppression that have shaped their life both in their favor and to their detriment. Our two narratives cross over in April 2023, a time when both of us achieved personally significant victories in pushing back against laws that erased our personhood and became active in efforts to support diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. We chose to organize the zine in this way to highlight the moment when our journeys intertwined and to emphasize that healing and growth often involve both looking back and moving forward.

We began with Mariela's written narrative, "I am not Anyone's Citizen," in which she details four pivotal years in her immigration journey; included along with these accounts are images of personal moments, redacted documents, a letter from an immigration attorney, and forms from the U.S. Departments of State and Justice. From this narrative, we drew themes related to the violence of colonialism and imperialism, loss, resistance, resilience, and hope, which we attempted to incorporate into the zine pages. AJ's story was not quite as straightforward—they realized fairly quickly which moments from their life they wanted to highlight but it took them much longer to figure out what exactly they wanted to convey. Ultimately, their story ended up being more introspective, reflecting on the messy process of untangling and unlearning the hegemonic cultural, social, and political narratives they had grown up with; their pages represent major shifts in their life's trajectory and explore more (inter)personal themes such as abuse, trauma, and mental health. To us, this project as a whole represents an act of solidarity, offering an example of people with vastly different lived experiences and at different places in their own journeys learning from and working to support each other. That said, while these are the ideas that resonated with us as we were working on this project, they are far from the only interpretations—we believe the meaning

[29] We submitted an essay to the call for papers for this volume; in response, the editors pushed us to center and imagine our experiences outside of colonial frameworks. Although our essay was not included in the published book, it was their suggestion that led us to continue reflecting deeply and, ultimately, inspired the zine we discuss in this article. We are grateful to Clelia Rodríguez and Josephine Gabi for pushing us to delve deep and outside of colonial boundaries.

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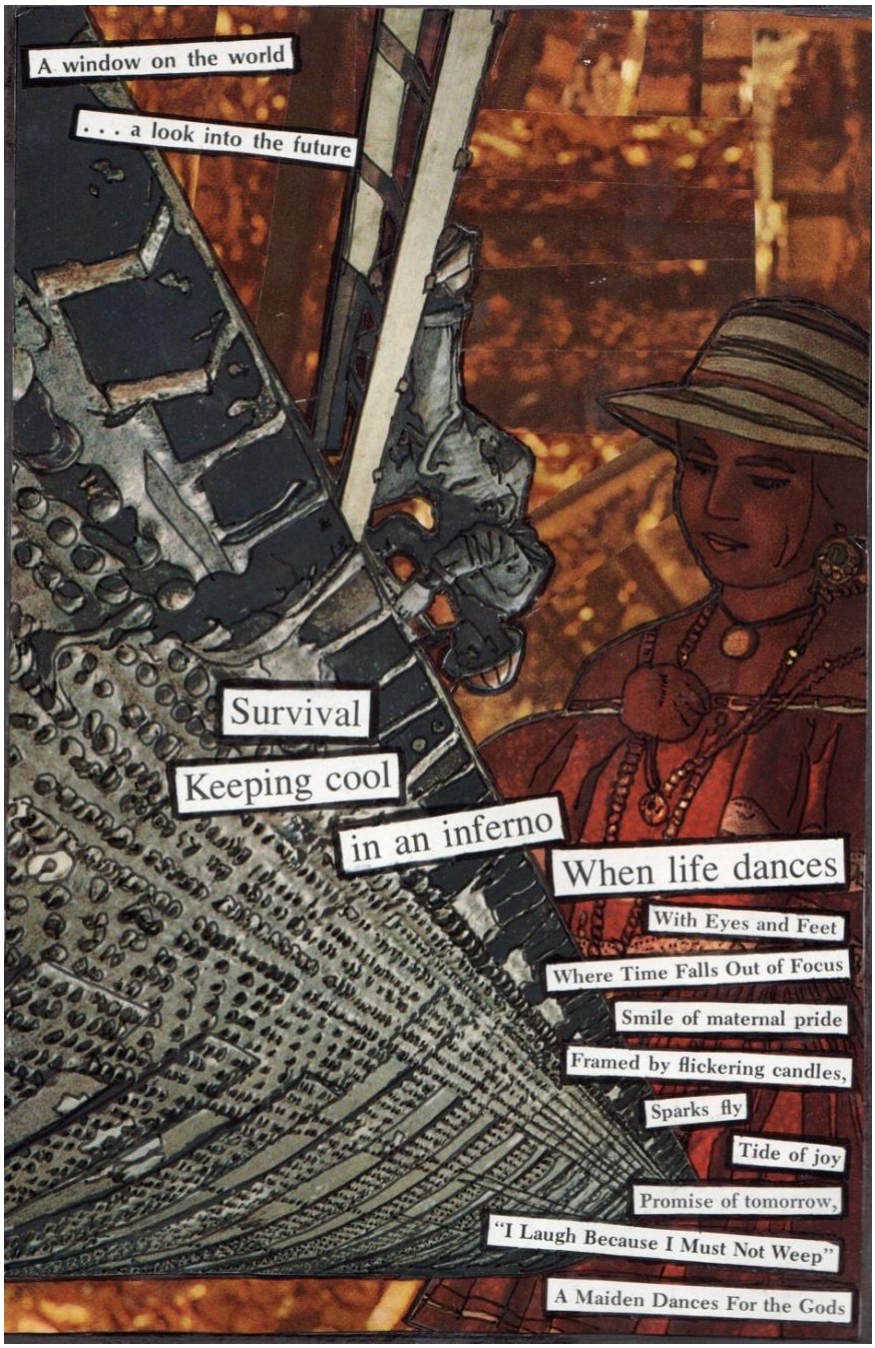
of art is as much in the interpretation as in the making and we value this co-creative element of artistic mediums. For this reason, we encourage our readers to approach this zine with an open mind, considering the themes discussed above but still allowing yourselves the space to develop your own interpretations and make your own meanings.



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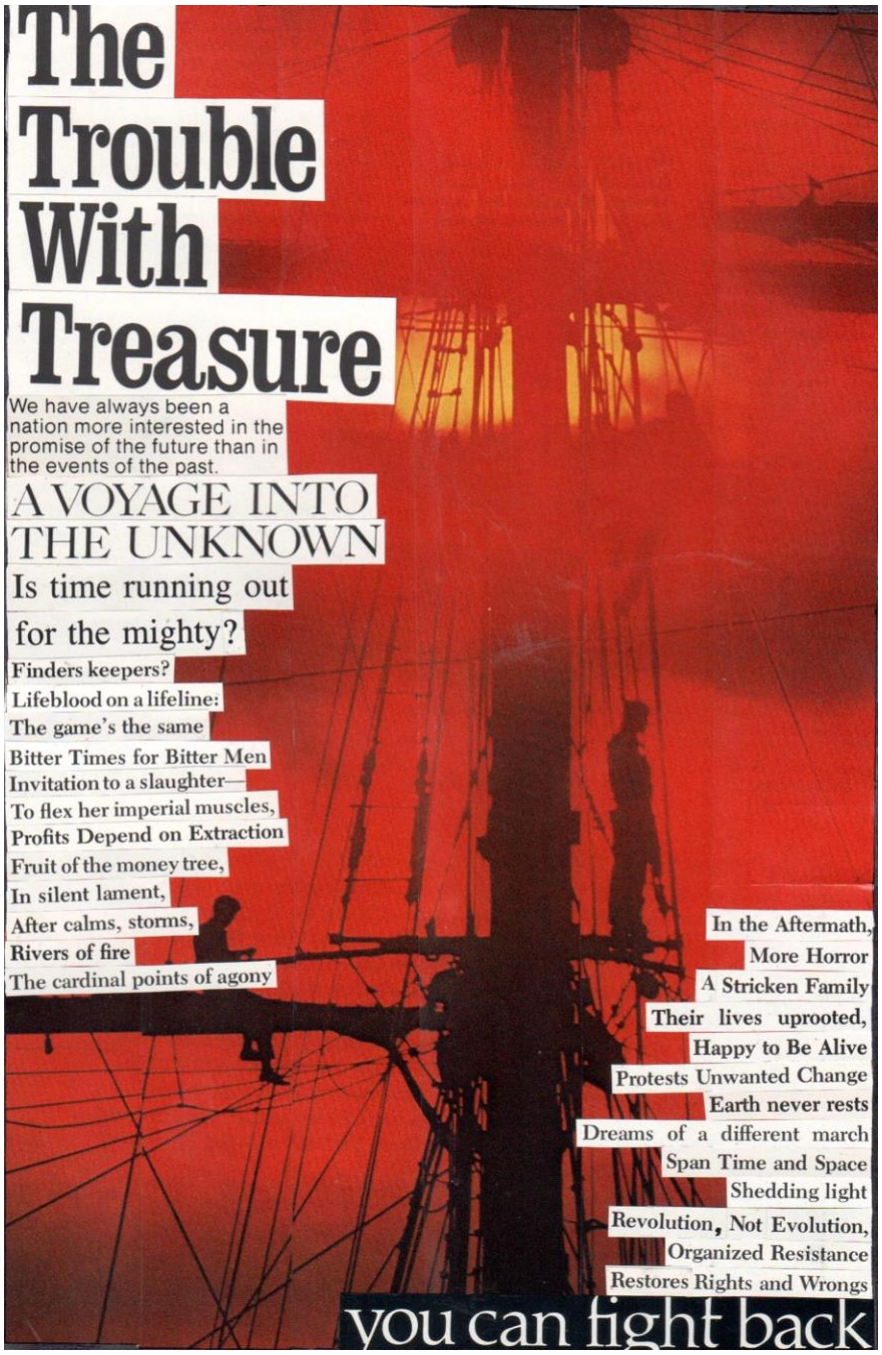

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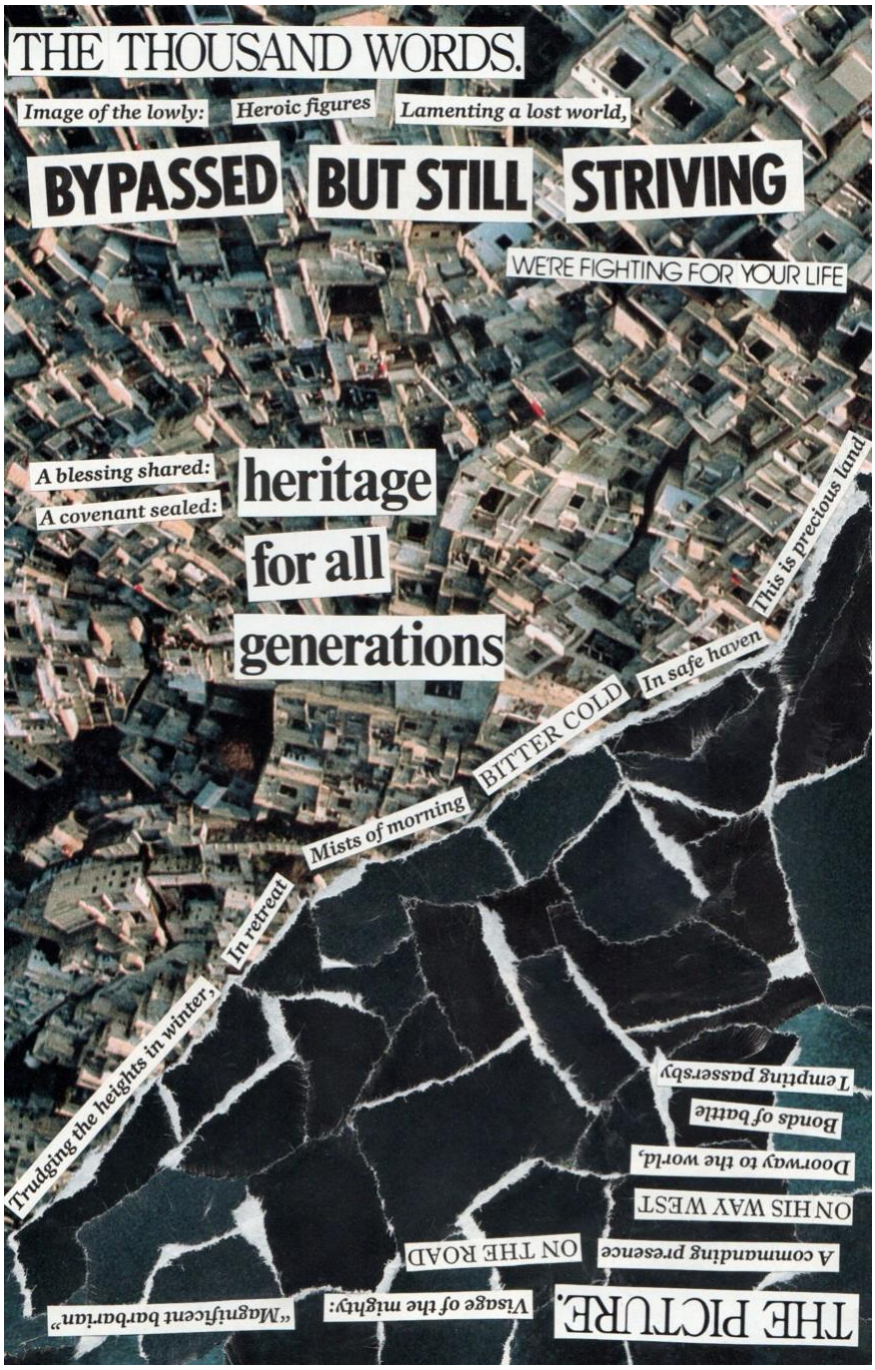

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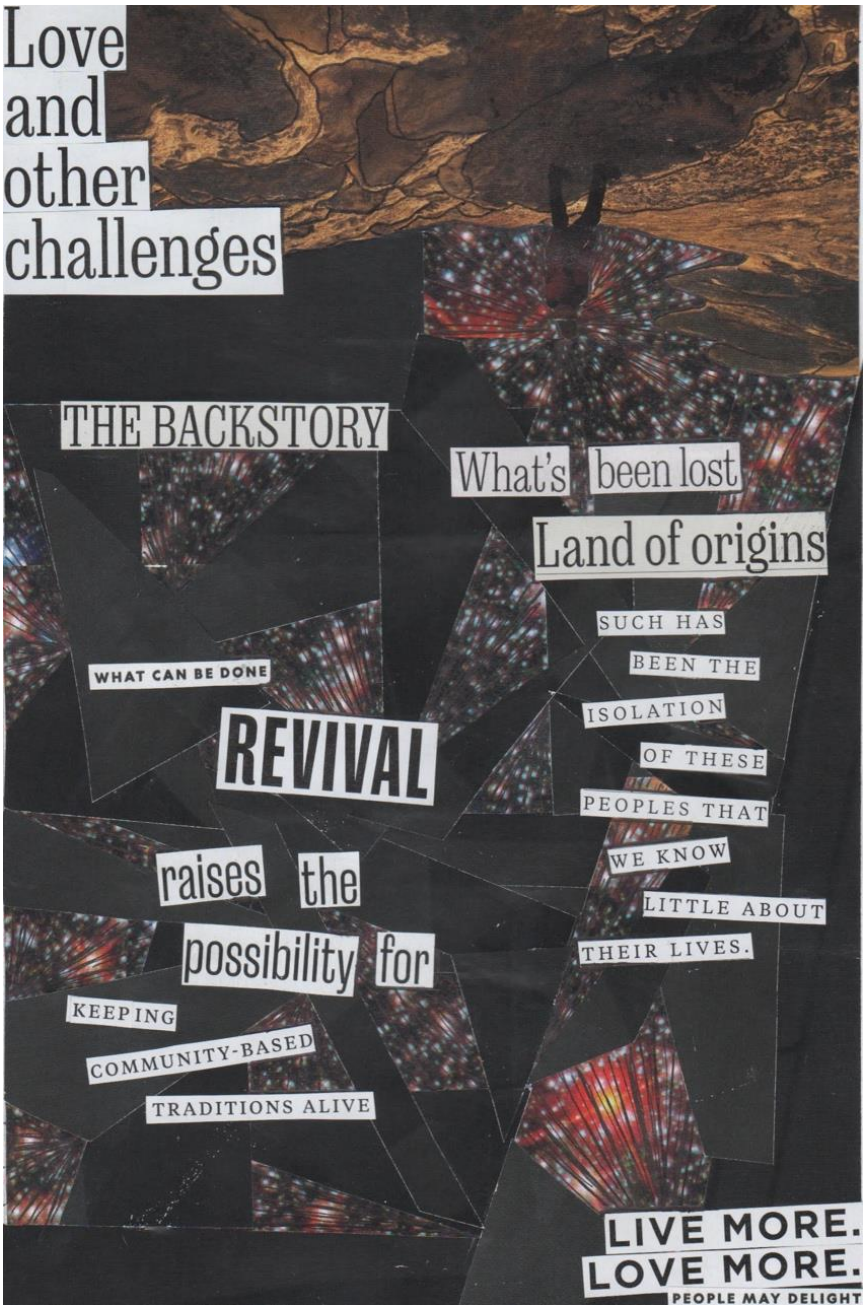

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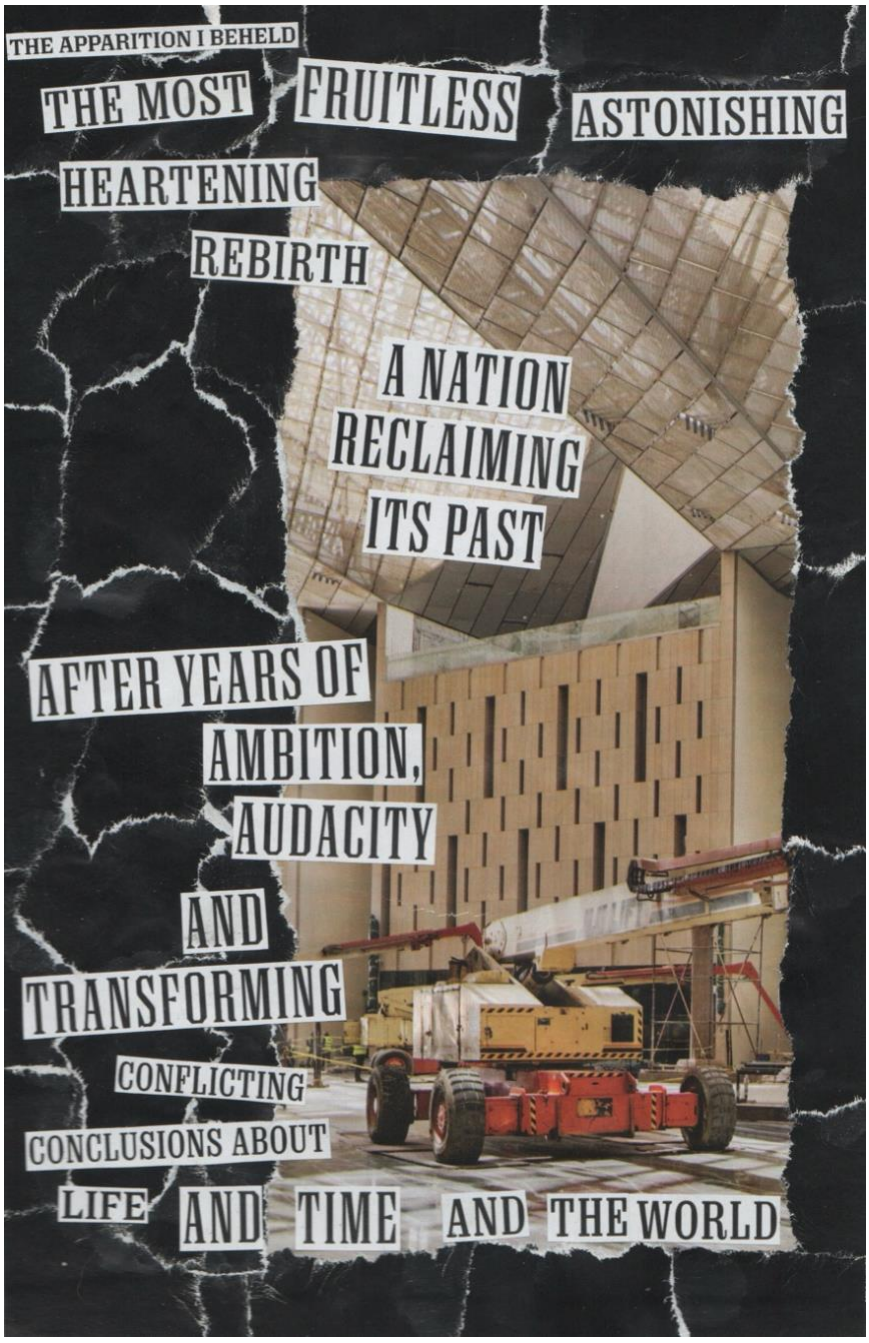

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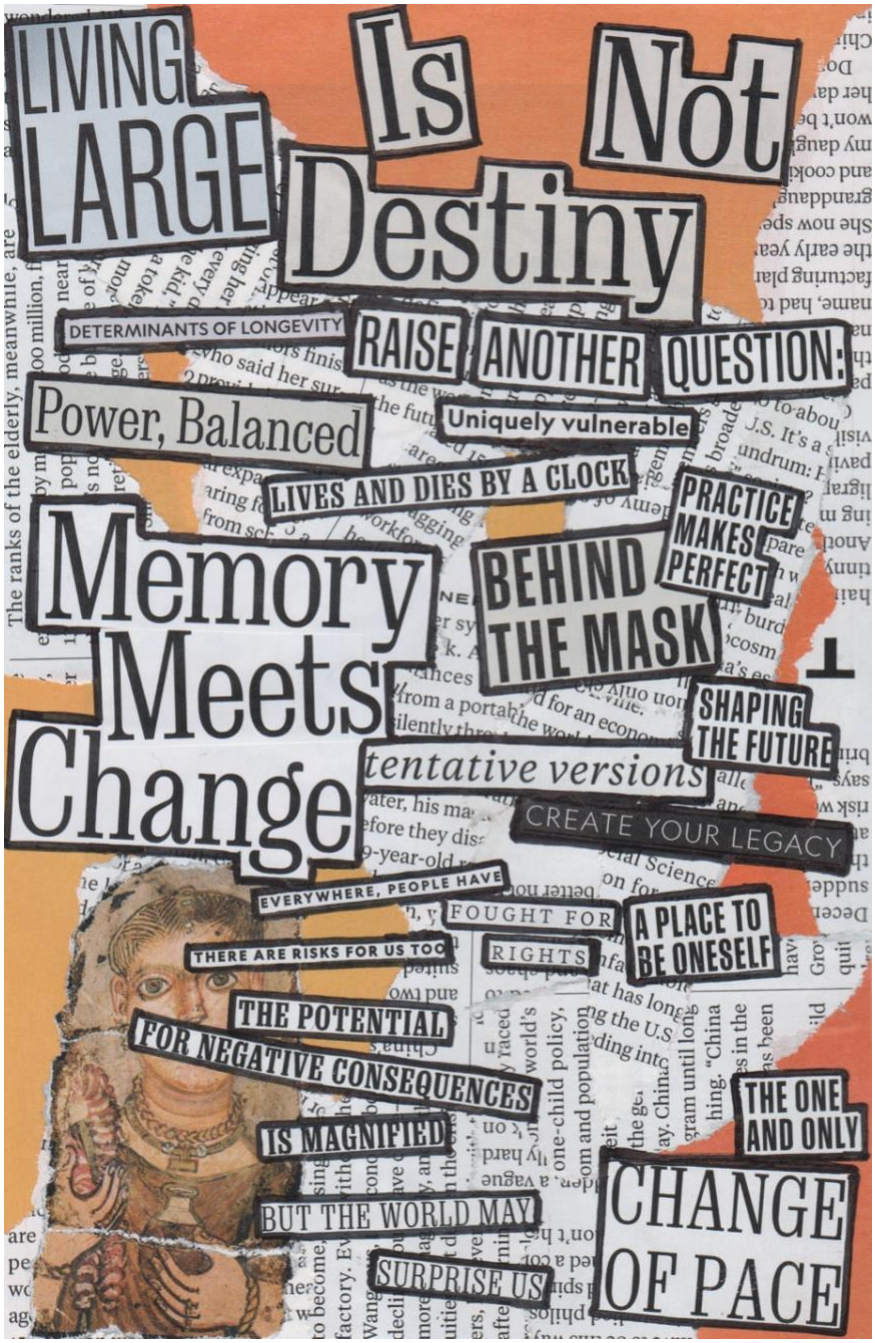

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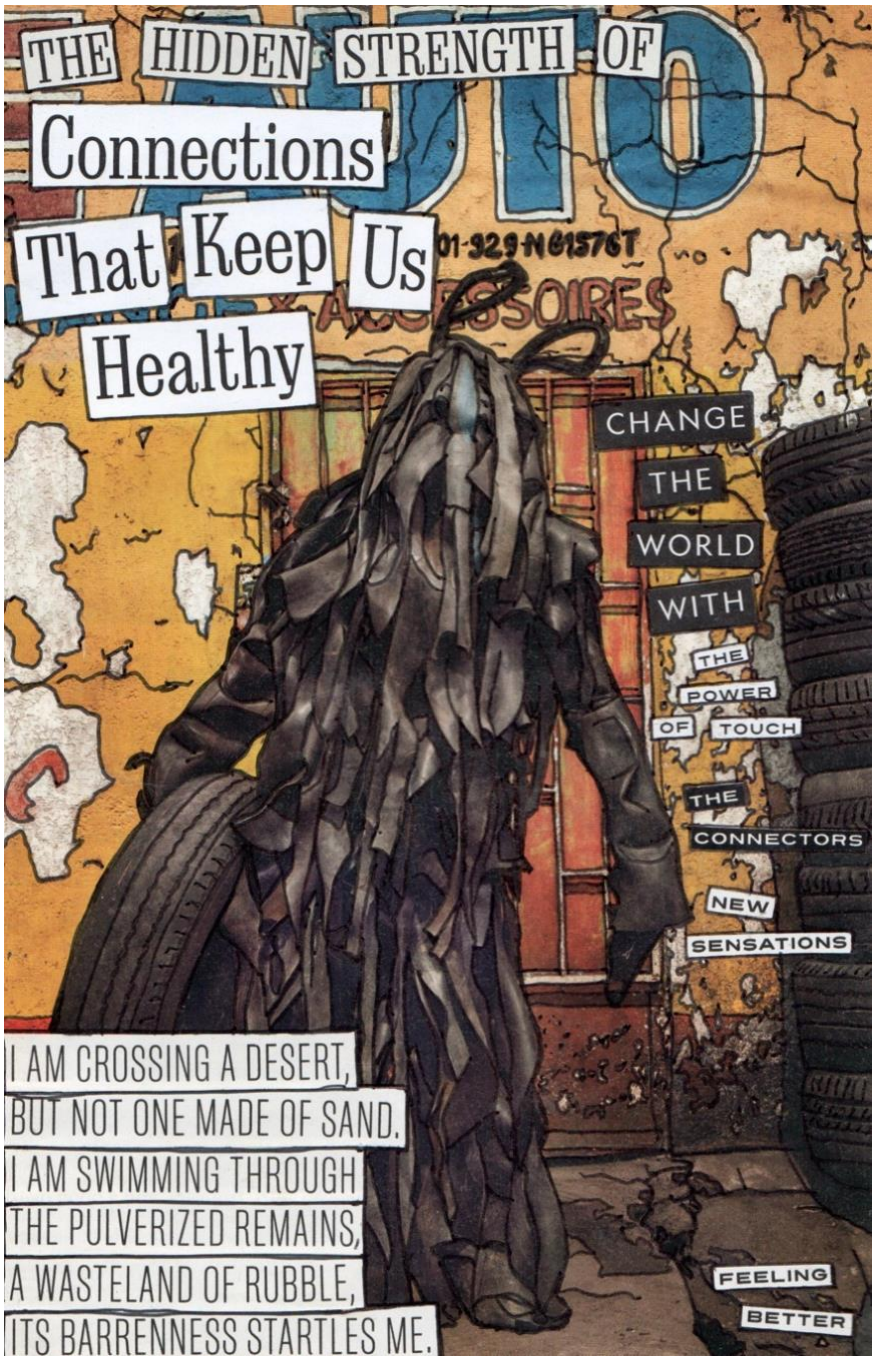

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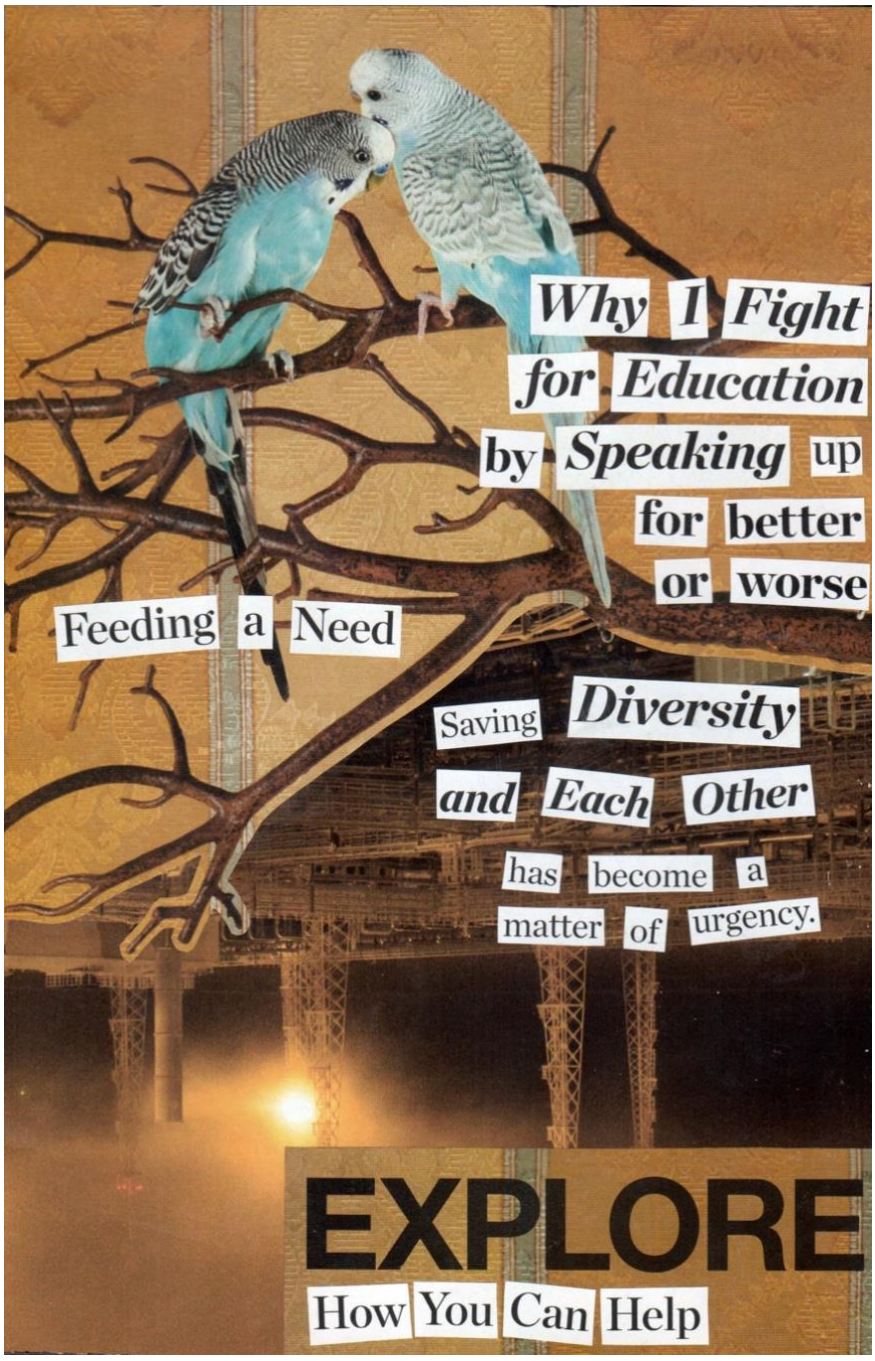

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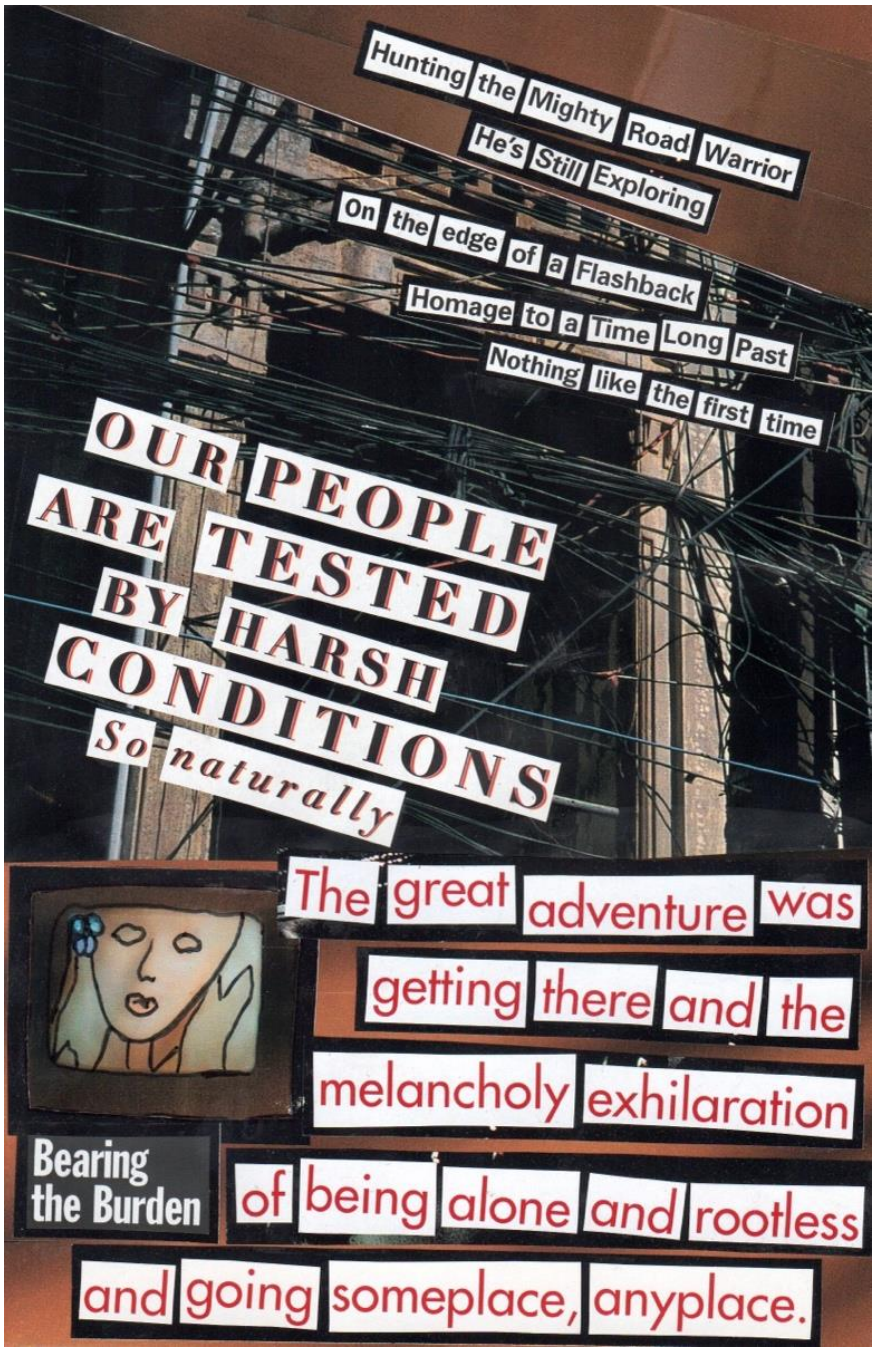

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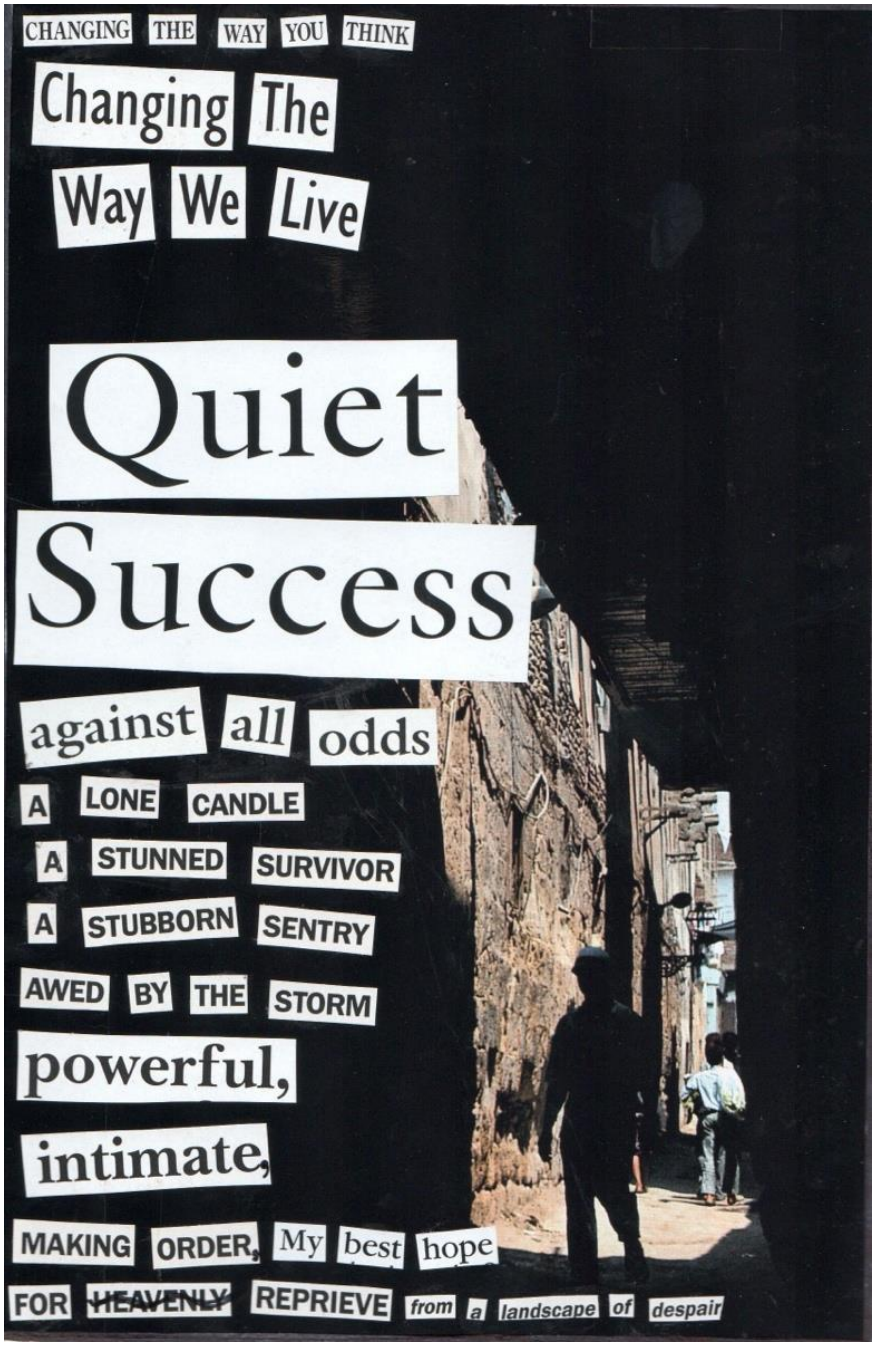

April 1993

Thoughts to End With

There are, of course, still many questions regarding the implementation of a methodology/pedagogy of zine making, but we believe in the potential of this art form to create the space for both inner and social transformation, as discussed in this essay. Ideas do not need to be distributed at large to have an impact and zines, through their focus on self-expression and sociopolitical commentary, as well as their non-institutionalized distribution networks, may represent an avenue to transform traditional educational spaces into sites of liberatory practice (hooks, 1994). Not only do zines have the potential to provide both students and educators a medium through which they can meaningfully engage with topics that are currently being targeted and censored by state legislatures, they also offer an important creative outlet for students to envision their futures with the freedom to imagine their worlds on their own terms.

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