

Relationshipes:

Three Zines and Twenty *Critical Poly
100s* in the Style of Dr. Kim TallBear

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1. Why zines? Well – does it have to be for any other reason than I like them? I like the people who make them and I like the people who read them. I like quirky communities built around shared interests. What are you excited about? Share it with me, please. Teach me something new, draw me outside myself. An object manifested into reality by the sheer force of someone’s enthusiasm transfers that energy into those who hold it. Mainstream publishing houses aren’t actually homes, they won’t welcome you into their space and feed you. Come into my *home*, rest awhile.
2. I like that zines are cheap. I like that I don’t have to worry about accidentally bending the pages. Their imperfections comfort me, make me feel less clownish. The satisfying texture of cardstock. The odd sizes. Every non-standard deviation makes zines far more memorable than textbooks, far more engaging than a journal article. All of these forms have their place, but a zine is personal, it will meet you where you’re at. You can take or leave a zine; it won’t sit across the room on the shelf, unread, making you feel like a guilty fake. Zines don’t require
3. complete sentences. They don’t need to be polite or even wholly decipherable by the randos who come across it. I might not ever know how these things land or how they affect the readers. But the process of creation was transformative – with a lot of initial hand-wringing, I eased into following my creative impulses and trusting my intuition. The results are a series of mini manifestos which directly reflect an aesthetic that I do hope communicates the multi-colored joys and struggles of learning, maturing, and

transforming. A zine is the perfect medium for depicting the hodgepodge that is relationships.

4. A zine is the perfect medium for conveying oral histories! The conversations I had with narrators are not so dissimilar from the conversations readers will have with the work, if only in their own minds. The reader and I essentially share the same seat, we both become privy to the narrator's thoughts and experiences. We're lucky enough to wade deep into the waters of intersubjectivity and emerge with new knowledge. I want RELATIONSHAPES to be a vehicle for self-exploration, without the fear of being told "you're doing it wrong." I want the zine to whisper, "you *could* try this."
5. Collage is also a prime deliverer of oral history. Just as perceptions of time and memory are non-linear, fragmented, amalgamated, imperfect, smooshed together, and chaotically arranged – well, so are collages. Sure, a *rehearsed* story has a beginning, middle, and end, but do we ever tell our stories in this way? Far more often, the background bleeds into the foreground, minor details occupy the same space as crucial moments; and when you put the whole thing together, it looks complete, but – what does it mean? Well, pal, it can mean a lot of different things. What's it mean to *you*?
6. I didn't want to just include oral histories, though. What can I say, I'm a sucker for "multi-media" – and a lover of variety! Including games, texts ("theory"), community resources ("praxis"), and journal prompts was a way for me to invite the reader into a more active

relationship with the material. I wanted involvement from the reader, I wanted to implicate them because these zines are as much about the reader as they are about the narrators. I guess I do have a secret impish wish that the reader feels like they're being asked the same questions the narrator is.

7. Dr. TallBear's *100s* are far steamier than mine. Mine are more...unsure. I'm hoping that completing this trilogy (the first three issues), will have stretched and strengthened my confidence, clarifying for me, at least in some ways, what exactly my talents and abilities are. Dr. TallBear seems unafraid to bring her whole self to her autoethnographic practice; I've been reticent. I began my project attempting to conceal my imposter syndrome from the narrators. It was important to me that they thought I had it all together. That I was a "professional." That I wasn't as frightened as I actually was.
8. But trust wasn't going to be built because I could convince them I knew how to record acceptable audio. My (attempted) effortless and breezy interviewing style wasn't the reason they wanted to speak with me, be in relationship with me. Trust was built in other ways: through continued conversation about shared goals and outcomes, casual check-ins during which we felt no need to "get down to business," and – to be quite frank – it didn't hurt that these folks were my friends and had previously expressed interest in this work. Trust was built by consistently including them in the process.

9. After the narrators and I spoke, and after I had transcribed and indexed the interviews, and after I picked some select excerpts for consideration in the zine, the narrators and I (not all together, one by one) spent a good amount of hours making “word collages” out of their original statements, developing a narrative that reflected the initial conversation but could tell a complete story in just a few pages. Each narrator had their own reaction to this process, but overall it was a true joy to *play* together. To ask each other, “Does this work? How ‘bout this?”

10. If any of this sounds similar to actually being in polyamorous relationships...well, I’ll just say that every time I was struggling with myself about this project, quotes from the narrators would pop out and speak directly to me in the moment, giving me exactly what I needed to move forward. I’m convinced that the lessons of polyamory shouldn’t just exist for non-monogamists. Relationship-building looks remarkably similar whether or not romance or sex is involved; at a certain point, those specific distinctions almost become immaterial. How do we learn to be kinder to ourselves and to clarify our own needs?

11. There’s much more to be said about the similarities between building relationships in polyamory and building relationships in oral history. You show up and continue to show up. You reciprocate energy in mutually agreeable (pleasurable?) ways. You check in, you ask for consent. You ask for consent again. You learn a person’s inner language and give them the space to speak it. You become brave enough to show your cards, you don’t

hide behind pretense. You make it clear what you're there for. You show honor and appreciation and you don't take more than they're willing to give. But –

12. You also learn how to nudge a little, how to create room for experimentation. You learn how to be flexible, emotionally or intellectually limber. You respect their boundaries while maintaining yours, and you apologize when you mess up. Sure, you're not trying to date your narrator, but what *is* there, and in large order, is a palpable *love*. Oral history springs from the same spiritual source as polyamory. That source being a deep love for humans and the experiences they've gone through to become who they are in the moment you meet them. And gratitude for that shared moment.
13. But why did I constantly think I should be doing this all alone? The most fun parts of this project were the parts that directly resulted from close collaboration, whether with the narrators, the printer, my partner who assisted with digital layout, and my dearest friends and advisors who consistently bandied about ideas with me. The times I felt most low-down were the moments I shunned input and tried to defend an arbitrary wall of control. I felt guilty asking for help. I was afraid the project would be less "mine" the more hands that touched it. I'm silly.
14. My own programming tripping me up again. Who can "possess" knowledge? Who can "own" beauty and love? These zines, born of love and community, are inextricable from the individuals who participated in their creation. The very goal of this project was to co-

create a community resource; *co-created* like the richest of oral histories are, *co-created* like the most energizing intimacies are. Despite being the interviewer, designer, editor, and publisher of these queer little books, I believe my true fundamental responsibility in this endeavor is not unlike the gardener who makes a bed from which new abundant life can grow.

15. When I was able to get out of my own way, I did indeed enjoy many moments of pleasure from this work. I believe I thrive in an interview space – if anything, oral history has reminded me just how much I like listening. Every moment with a narrator was pleasurable, even if also challenging. Additionally, I loved creating the hand-painted papers from which the collages were assembled. Legitimately therapeutic, I was able to let go of meaning and formality and allow my affection for striking colors and abstract shapes to be centered metaphor, rather than just an artsy predilection.

16. I began this project with a much broader focus – do the interviews, amass the proper auxiliary materials, and create a collection which could be housed in the right archive. While I still hope to do this, I'm glad I took a turn towards the small and honed in on what gets me excited and fills me with life, that being eccentric and collaborative community art-making. There are some clear next steps for RELATIONSHAPES, which include donating copies to Milwaukee's Queer Zine Archive Project, the DC Punk Archive Zine Library, the Barnard Zine Library, and, hopefully, the Library of Congress.

17. A few other donations are also to be made – the Denver Zine Library and Jewish Zine Archive are on my list. And as of this writing, there are two Little Free Libraries in my home neighborhoods of Petworth and Hill East, D.C. which have copies ready to be added to any passerby's collection. And because I'm incorrigible, I still have four interviews to fully process and three interviews to be scheduled, with more potential narrators already getting in touch for future issues. If I don't lose steam and keep up my gumption, I may have actually started a "thing!"

18. If I were to start all over again, I'd probably use a transcription service, and I'd probably make the collages by hand, rather than digitally. I'd also get a better scanner. I'd also triple and quadruple check for typos, some of which are literally keeping me up at night in shame. But I've gotta learn how to walk the walk – I appreciate imperfection? I appreciate ambiguity and openness? I appreciate unironic sincerity, revealing and embarrassing as it may be? Well, all the narrators were brave enough to put themselves out there for this, and I need to be, too.

19. In this way, oral history has emboldened me. The narrators for RELATIONSHAPES showed such frankness and honesty about who they are and what they believe, and how that's changed over time. I hope this inspires readers as much as it inspires me. Even with all the privilege that comes with being cis-male and white, I still shrink sometimes when asked about my nonheteronormative life. To my surprise, my own project affected me

the way I'm hoping it affects others. Despite this, I'm still nervous about its release and how it reflects on me. (I'll deal with that in therapy.)

20. Feeling so thankful to do this. Feeling thankful to have studied with the teachers I've had, almost exclusively femmes, by the way, and alongside fellow students who have taught me just as much. Weirdly, despite RELATIONSHAPES being the culmination of my formal oral history studies, I feel as green as when I started two years ago, with much more learning to do ahead. I've been welcomed into this world exactly as who I am, a goofball performer and artist who can't get enough of people's stories, and is trying to find dynamic, creative ways to move hearts and minds.