

Reflections

Zines beyond a means: crafting new research process - commentary to Valli

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In this commentary I engage with Chiara Valli's creative zine-making in Bushwick, NYC. In keeping with the spirit of zines, this piece offers a series of (not always connected!) reactions, questions, feelings which address the key question raised by Chiara: how can research become more inclusive? Chiara provides a wonderful reflection in her commentary and I conclude by engaging on the questions of consent that she got me thinking about.

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In her article, Chiara Valli (2021) offers a brilliant account of zines – both how they have been mobilized (especially by geographers) and how they may be used to promote deeper participatory research. Chiara argues, to heed long-standing feminist calls for participant engagement in the *entire* research process, we need to think about zines as more than a means to an end. That is, zines should not be simply seen as a product but rather, a process that empowers participants to actively be part at all stages of research. This includes engaging participants in the reading/discussion of participants' own transcriptions.

Inspired by the creative zine-ethos that Chiara offers, I will continue not through the conventional essay-form but rather through a series of (not always connected!) reactions, questions, feelings. I seek to embrace a more casual (one might say erratic?) mode of communicating to (hopefully) provoke some ongoing chats on the theme that Chiara identifies: how research can become more inclusive.

First – let’s start with zines. It’s hard to represent zine-making in the linear space of a Word document, with its cursor flashing awaiting tidy lines and complete sentences. If I had to, it might look something akin to:



cut
+paste

Find a piece of scrap of paper (maybe a receipt ... maybe a gum wrapper)
and **repurpose it**: jotting notes all over = until it’s something new

Shift words over here on the page
(and under here)

~~Scratch through and refuse this bit~~

Paste a photo

Glue some images all together here, making a collage of thoughts/emotions/blurred-put-through-blender-poetry*

*Chiara describes in her article, zines are the practice of “cutting, rearranging, and creatively pasting printed materials in a new pamphlet” (Valli 2021, 25).

In a generative turn, Chiara streeeeeeetches (this already stretchy) zine process by proposing something new: **bring the beauty of zine-making to the practice of analysing and disseminating research**. Instead of asking participants to work with magazines, or other ephemera as source material to draw inspiration Chiara suggests that *scholars take seriously their own data (transcripts from interviews etc.) as source material, waiting to be cut into – and repurposed*.

Chiara coins the term **‘Interviews-Based Zine-Making’ (IBZM)** to describe this process, which culminates in a collectively produced zine, to be disseminated in academic and more-than-academic outlets. Grounded in feminist scholarship (from Alison Mountz, Harriet Hawkins, Caitlin Cahill, Sarah De Leeuw to Cindi Katz...), Chiara makes the case that encouraging this type of participation with transcribed texts (from researcher-conducted interviews) we may be able to democratize the research process.

I think it’s great that Chiara develops this method through practice [BTW: her main research is situating in gentrifying neighbourhood of Bushwick (NYC). The Big QUESTIONS animating her work:

Big Q no. 1: How long-time residents experienced and made sense of the process of gentrification underway in their neighbourhood and if – and how – there were trying to resist.

Big Q no 2: How new residents, and particularly members of the ... local art-scene, made sense of their own role within the process of gentrification, how they related to long-term residents and how if at all they were trying to resist gentrification].

AB's of IBZMs as described by Chiara:

1. Conducts interview
2. Transcribe
3. Selects a few interviews
4. Print out interviews – with different fonts/colors
5. Workshop: researcher invites participants (those involved before or new)
6. Read and discuss the material
7. Create a ZINE cutting/pasting up the interview materials
8. Researcher assembles zine, prints and distributes

= I think this step-by-step guide is a great springboard, to encourage co-production! I especially like the idea that through these workshops the researcher can help unearth perspectives from interviews otherwise foreclosed...finding “assonances, disagreements, and connections...” (Valli 2021, 25). Great!

Learning how Chiara used zine-making in her work, provoked a few questions:

Jen: You note that “the researcher, possibly together with facilitator, sets up the workshop.” I know in your case you did work with a facilitator. I wondered: do you think with IBZMs there's benefit in relinquishing the organization to a facilitator who – perhaps – has been less involved in the research process?

Chiara:

Jen: I also wonder: did you feel your presence shaped the outcomes of the crafted zines? Did you sense participants looking to you as the researcher, to shape their crafting in a way that reflects your vision?

Chiara:

Jen: I also wondered about the dissemination: did participants get a chance to decide where these did not go? I wonder if you've read Sara Smith's new book, *Intimate Geopolitics: Love, Territory, and the Future on India's Northern Threshold* (Rutgers University Press, 2020). I think you'd enjoy this – and it reflects on some of these questions of refusal/consent.

Chiara:

Jen: And, what would you say to the sceptic who argues that giving participants the chance to re-work (potentially) their own testimony/quotes somehow moves this away from capturing anything resembling authentic responses, and becomes more of a performance (PS: I don't believe this – but curious your thoughts!).

Chiara:

Jen: Did participants have a chance not to cut up the materials – if they felt they represented their views in tact?

Chiara:

Jen: Something I've increasingly wondered about zines, do you feel their highly tactile nature is exclusionary? I guess I am wondering about the ableist bias of zine-making (partly because a great PhD student in my Department @DPPhillipJones recently pointed out to me in a workshop that for his participants – with Tourette's – zine-making can be a powerful mode of communication but also one that spark challenges for some participants.

Chiara:

[after reflecting on Chiara's responses to the commentators]

... I was very interested in Chiara's reflections, especially as they relate to questions of consent. She notes: “I feel that the question of refusal/consent in using research materials from interviews is always a very delicate one, and although anonymity provides some protection, in conflicted communities this

might not be enough." I like the fact that she honestly reflects how she is "constantly working on this" – indeed it is ongoing work. She has offered us some important tips for orienting ourselves, as researchers, to keep open to this (sometimes uncomfortable) work. Thinking seriously about questions of 'ethnographic refusal' raised by Audra Simpson work in *Mohawk Interruptus* (2014) might also be generative in this context. Here refusal is framed in generative terms and structures possibilities. It is also an engaged research ethos that "acknowledges the asymmetrical power relations that inform the research and writing" (Simpson 2014, 104).

Chiara's text and her responses are a WELCOME addition adding to the geographer's methodological toolbox. I can't wait to try experimenting with research data in this crafty way. Thanks Chiara!

References

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