

# CHAPTER 7

# **DIY ACTIVISM: THE DIALOGICAL INFLUENCE OF BAKHTIN IN POC ACTIVIST ZINE CULTURE**

**S. Patrice Jones**

This chapter will focus on the results of a study in which the researcher independently read, coded over 50 zines written by people of color. This qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009) was framed by the work of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia and double-voicedness and W.E.B. DuBois's concept of double-consciousness (Bakhtin, 1981; DuBois, 1903). These theories all emphasize the validity and multiplicity of voices and languages, especially those languages that are marginalized. According to Sandoval and Fuchs, they posit that alternative media, which I suggest in this context are zines, participate in a dialogical relationship "between actors (producers and recipients) and structures" (2010: 145). The research question that guided this study: In what ways do zines produced by people of color in the United States participate as forms of activism within alternative media spaces?

**Keywords:** zines, Bakhtin, heteroglossia, afrofuturism.

## 7.1. Introduction

*What you do? What you say? I shall enjoy the fruits of my labor if I get freed today. (Kendrick Lamar, 2014)*

Kendrick Lamar's lyrics are ripe with the notion of freedom. A freedom that for marginalized people, speaks to the not seen and the sometimes-imagined place where ideations are not fiction but, rather a truth that is touchable. Lamar's words do the work of time travel; they remind me of a time that has not occurred yet in the reality of many people of color who reside in the United States. Whether our realities are through forced migration or border crossings, our relationship to our home is similar to Gloria Anzaldua's description of los intersticios, "the spaces between the different worlds... an intimate terrorism" (2012:42).

In the last year, there have been multiple political, environmental, economic and religious uprisings across the globe. Both violent and non-violent in nature, activists are attempting to interrupt the dominant discourse by creating images and sounds that are a direct reflection of their embodied experiences. Within those interruptions -those spaces between worlds - other forms of resistance are being created and distributed that focus on a myriad of experiences. This article focuses on one of those mediums in particular: the zine.

Zines (pronounced "zeens") are customized self-publications by youth or adults that are motivated by a desire of self-expression (San Diego, 2014). Zines, which allow for an unlimited and unrestricted space for creative freedom and autonomy, offer a way for writers to instigate, create, and connect with the personal and political narratives of their lives (Piepmeier, 2008). Zines and zine culture are quintessentially part of the do-it-yourself (DIY) culture in that zines are produced initially by hand and then reproduced using copy machines. Each zine is distributed at a free or low cost or, at times, traded for other zines.

Due to embodying nature and required action of zine culture, it is relatively easy to view zines as a form of activism (Guzzetti, Foley & Lesley, 2015). Zines serve as direct responses to the connections – good or bad – that exist between citizens and community. Zine culture has split into numerous other genres including literary zines, mamazines, art zines, and political zines. The space afforded within a zine allows writers to disrupt what Licona calls the “invisibility...from imposed subordinations, restrictions, and obfuscations of identity binaries” (2012: 115) Zine writers can respond to those “restrictions” by creating a new knowledge, one that does not have to be vetted or authorized by others.

Prior research on zines has been relegated primarily to adolescent zine writers (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004; Poletti, 2005; Knobel & Lankshear, 2002). While that research is valid and needed for the purposes of understanding adolescent literacies, there is a gap in the literature as it relates to zines produced by people of color--adolescents or otherwise. One attempt at bridging this gap is through Adela Licona’s (2012) work on third space and zines. Her argument situates zines as a space in which to explore the “production of borderlands rhetoric” (Licona, 2012: 10), a rhetoric that focuses on the different knowledge systems created through zines written by marginalized people. Yet, I have discovered a number of zine writers of color whose work could be reexamined through a lens of how language and activism work together.

Little is known about how zine writers of color are taking up this form of activism. I wondered whether if the zines could be useful in expanding what we know about activism and its goal of personal and systemic change. Therefore, I purposely selected zines written by people of color who are interested in creating and sustaining a creative form of activism, a new world where their voice is centralized.

I speculated that zines created and distributed by people of color in the United States are participating in the co-construction of a new and free world--as modeled by Lamar’s “fruits of my labor” with the purpose of creating and sustaining dialogues about social and political inequalities; race, class, and gender disparities; and interpersonal conflicts. My main research questions were: In what ways do zines produced by people of color in the United States participate as forms of activism within alternative media spaces? And in what ways does language help to create an imagined world for zine writers of color?

## 7. 2. Frameworks

It is important to historicize that people of color have created alternative texts and literacies as part of their community building practice. Specifically, in the African American community, there has been a strong tradition of literary and literacy-based practices, often resulting in the creation of organizations, independent presses, and reading groups (McHenry, 2002). Thus, the creation of zines as a form of literary activism can be linked to earlier forms of community literacy, even in the time of state sanctioned laws against teaching African Americans to read and write.

This study was approached with a line of inquiry that helped to investigate the ways in which zines are using language to promote their own forms of personal and political activism. Also, it was important to consider not only the ways in which zines are using language, but also to understand to what ends this language provides the writer with a new imagined space of freedom.

I approached this study from the perspective of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia and double-voicedness (Bakhtin, 1981). Theories on how language and dialogue are constructed are helpful to understanding how literacy and identity is developed through zines. Specifically how Bakhtin characterizes the presences of multiple voices through terms such as heteroglossia and double voicedness.

The concept of heteroglossia is the idea that there are multiple voices and perspectives present in language. There is no such element as a single voice, but rather borrowed language taken up by the user (Bakhtin, 1981). Often referred to as dialogism, double voicedness is connected with heteroglossia in that it still recognizes the presence of multiple voices, yet double voicedness can be characteristic of not only multiple voices within one person's language, but across entire texts. Bakhtin's theories helped me to approach this study by understanding the ways in which language and voice is being used as a literacy practice within zine culture. Even more specifically, how these multiple voices contribute to activism.

As a reader of zines, I also needed a perspective that could speak to the idea of people of color existing and flourishing in a time where their words and experiences are centralized. It is well documented that literacy practices are situated within cultural practices and that those practices vary within the contexts in which they are created (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 1999; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Because of the lack of literature that centralizes the realities of people of color, the framework of afrofuturism allows me to put people of color and their experiences as a central component. Thus, this study is aligned similarly with the goals of afrofuturism which is to seek to put people of color "at the heart of the theorem" (Womack, 2013: 21).

### **7.3. Afrofuturism**

Similar to the theme present in Kendrick Lamar's lyrics at the beginning of the chapter, afrofuturism is focused on the "intersections of imagination, technology, the future and liberation" (Womack, 2013: 9). Afrofuturism makes clear that in this new, imagined space that its participants have authority to create a re-vision of the past while also providing cultural critique of the present and future. The zine, similar to Afrofuturism, moves along the continuum of time, thinking and speaking in multiple dimensions. The zine is multi-dimensional - a literal and chronological three-dimensional take on the experiences of Black people. Afrofuturism as a framework values a number of important characteristics including: the power of creativity and imagination to reinvigorate culture and transcend social limitations (Womack, 2013: 24) and thinking about a sustainable future is a necessary and

important attribute of a society where people of color and their ideas are not distilled but rather concentrated and centralized (Womack, 2013: 41). In an afrofuturistic society, there is an expectation of transformative change. This expectation means that all mediums can be used towards those efforts, including art and language. In this study, an afrofuturistic framework is useful to understand how people of color can create realities through language that are a form of activism in themselves.

## 7.4. Methodology

The data collection commenced with the researcher collecting a number of privately-owned zines and zines curated by Barnard College Zine Collection and a tumblr site on zines written by people of color<sup>73</sup>. It was important and to specifically collect zines that were composed primarily by someone who self-identified as a person of color. Also, central to this study was whether their racial and or ethnic background was mentioned as part of the content of the zine. This is important to consider how zine writers are taking up the work of being an artist of color because it can help to clarify how these writers see themselves in both present and future tense.

Approximately 50 zines were independently read over a three month period. Included in these readings were considerations of both text and images used throughout the zine.

## 7.5. Data Analysis

A thematic approach to data analysis was used in order look across each of the zines. This allowed for the zines and the language used across each zine to be coded as categories. All of the zines were read multiple times and coded using the theoretical guides of Bakhtin and afrofuturism. All themes that were similar, aligned, or connected to each other were placed in within larger codes and subsequently, these larger codes became themes. Both the text and image codes were coded in separate tables initially and were later taken up as part of the iterative process of creating and combining codes and larger themes.

The visuals that are often a significant part of the zine itself were considered an extension of the narratives present. So, each visual was taken into account and noted for their style and contributions to the other texts present. These characteristics included: the types of drawings, how often, location on the page and accompanying captions. It should be noted that Afrofuturism as a framework extends beyond written texts and is extremely helpful when considering how art can speak towards a future not yet realized.

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<sup>73</sup> <http://poczineproject.tumblr.com/>

## 7.6. Findings

To report the thematic findings for this study, a number of zines will be profiled under each of the themes: (re)defining the self and resistance through rejection. In the descriptions that follow it is stated the name of the zine, its content and purpose, and its connection to Bakhtin and afrofuturism. Although a large number of zines were read and coded, it is important that in order to see the intricacies of language and how people of color are envisioning themselves both presently and in future, that a few zines be explained in detailed. The themes described in detail through these select zines are indicative of what is present across the spectrum of collected zines.

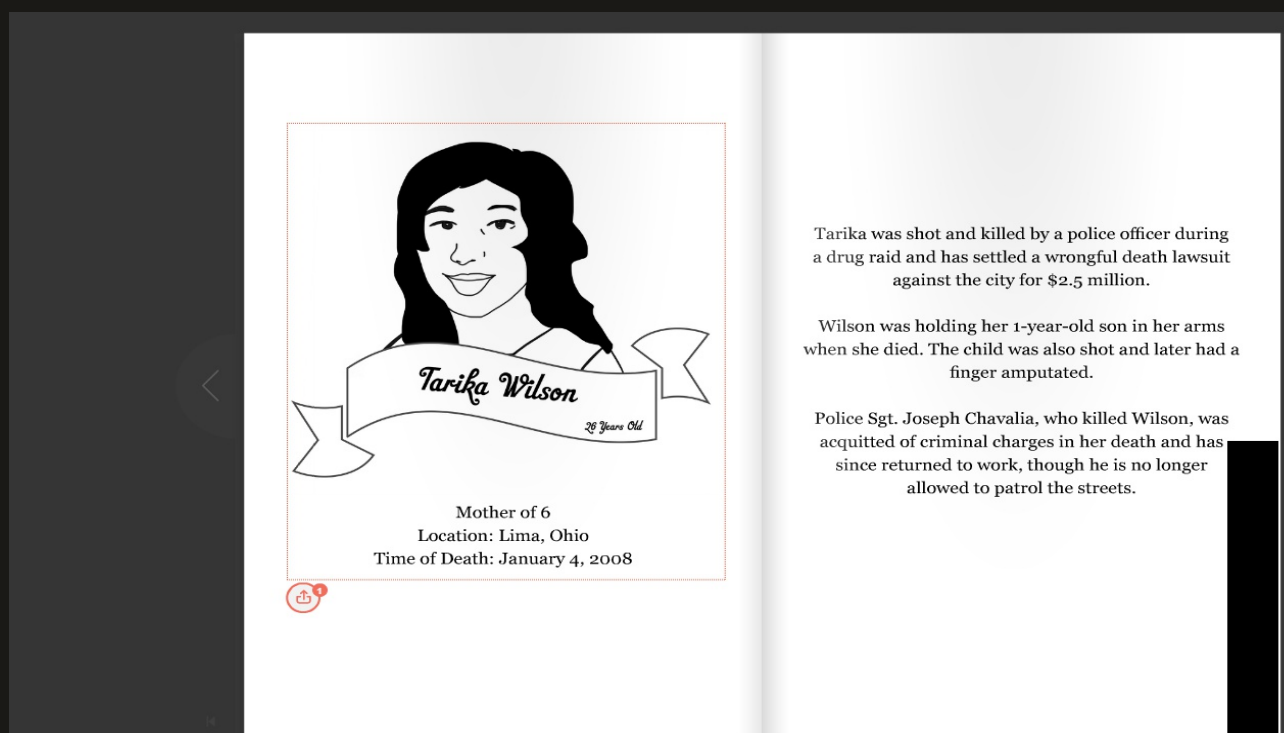
## 7.7. (Re)Defining the self

Under the theme of (re)defining the self, zines constructed by people of color are constantly creating a space where they have the power to define and redefine their lives as necessary. A particular zine sponsored by the ATX Social Justice Artists & Writers Collective looked specifically at the number of police killings of unarmed Black women in the United States. This focus, which seeks not to take away attention from the killings of unarmed Black men, seeks to (re)define what narratives are taken into context when we speak of police violence towards black bodies. This zine, entitled *Black Women Matter*<sup>74</sup>, told the stories of 11 Black women who died at the hands of police and their cases received little to no media coverage and representation.

The author of zine maintains anonymity through his/her participation in the collective, yet the purpose of the zine is quite clear in the introduction. Using bold, curt sentences (Figure 7.1) which could also be considered demands by the writer, this zine asks the reader to (re)define how Black women's stories are told. The three-word sentences at the beginning of the zine are used declaratively and calls attention to both the text and visual to follow. "Know their stories. See their faces. Remember their stories." Interpreting these sentences through a Bakhtinian lens, means that the presence of the single voice (the author of the zine) is actually an amalgamation of voices, and approaches the forgotten narratives through the multiple layers of both past and present language. These sentences are an extension of the language of the activist movement of Black Lives Matter. In fact, its concise title and statement are literally borrowed language that replicates a tone of seriousness and intent to focus specifically on these marginalized stories.

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<sup>74</sup> <https://issuu.com/undergroundsketchbook/docs/blackwomenmatteronline>



**Figure 7.1 Tarika Wilson in Black Women Matter: The Zine Edition, Vol. 1, December 2014: 14-15.**

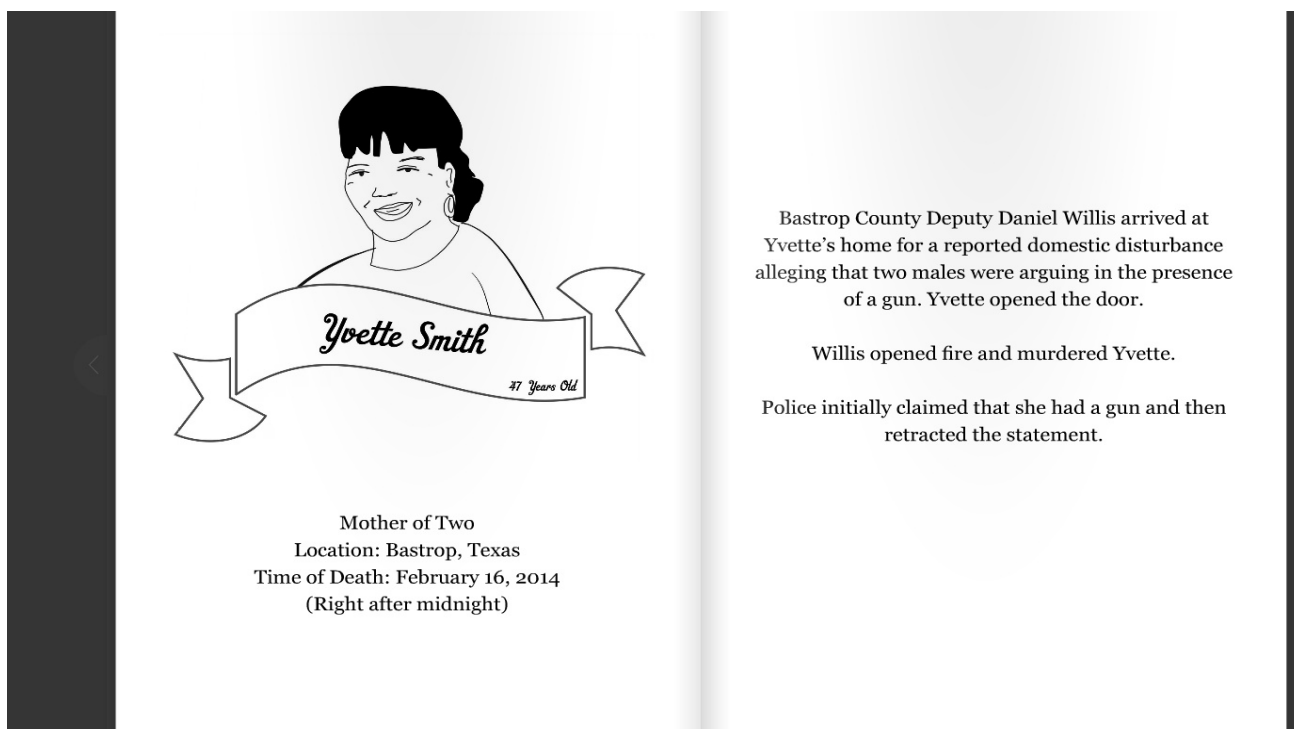
Source: <https://issuu.com/undergroundsketchbook/docs/blackwomenmatteronline>

Looking further into this zine, the author uses each page spread to profile a Black woman and the story of her death at the hands of police. On the left is a computer-generated image of a woman followed by her name, a brief description, the time and location of her death. In juxtaposition to the image, is a detailed albeit brief narrative about their deadly encounter with police. This narrative, which begins in medias res, completes two significant actions. First, the story directly names the officer responsible for the shooting, which is a dramatic rewrite of the police killing narrative. Often police officers remain unnamed, seeming as a “reversed” protection of the innocent, while the victims are often researched for past encounters with law enforcement. Second, the narrative included accounts of the shooting that are rarely included in the overall telling of the narrative, at times offering insight into what led to the encounter itself. These narratives include the daily normalcy of life, ones that would not preclude a purposeful encounter with deadly force.

As part of the methodology of this study, visual images were also taken into consideration. The ways in which images, or the lack thereof, can be interpreted as ways in which people of color are using the zine space to curate personal experiences. In the aforementioned zine about the death of Black women by the hands of the police, each narrative is accompanied by a simplistic computer-generated image of a woman (Figure 7.2) whose story is told in detail on the opposite page. Most zines, with a mind towards cost, print using one color. Yet, the images used in this zine represents the fragility and normalcy of the women who were gunned down. Each face is drawn from the neck up, with a slight smile. Seemingly reminiscent of



funeral program, each face is surrounded with date of death and personalized details about the victim's life. Although I could not consult with the writer of this zine, the profiled women and their accompanying images means that this zine attempted to write about these women as whole human beings whose lives were interrupted and subsequently ended at the hands of police. Too often, these narratives are focused on the deceased and their previous negative encounters with police or a rationale of why this scenario had to conclude as a justified shooting. The zine and its aim of providing counter stories would have taken on a different perspective if there were no images, no personal pieces of information, or if their pictures were not centered as part of the overall narrative.



**Figure 7.2 Yvette Smith in Black Women Matter: The Zine Edition, Vol. 1, December 2014: 8-9.**

Source: <https://issuu.com/undergroundsketchbook/docs/blackwomenmatteronline>

Overall, this zine and many others like it are engaging in the act of renaming. To name or to define something or someone is an act of power. Yet, to (re)name, to take back ownership of what was once labeled as something else, is resistance. This author retrieved the stolen police-centered narratives and completed a more authentic retelling of these women's encounters with the police. Typically, there are no safe spaces in which people of color can write safely and not under the analysis and gaze of white readers. Zines, however, penetrate these structures by allowing their writers and readers to have a space that dissects and reassembles incorrect narratives to showcase the realities of people of color living in the United States.

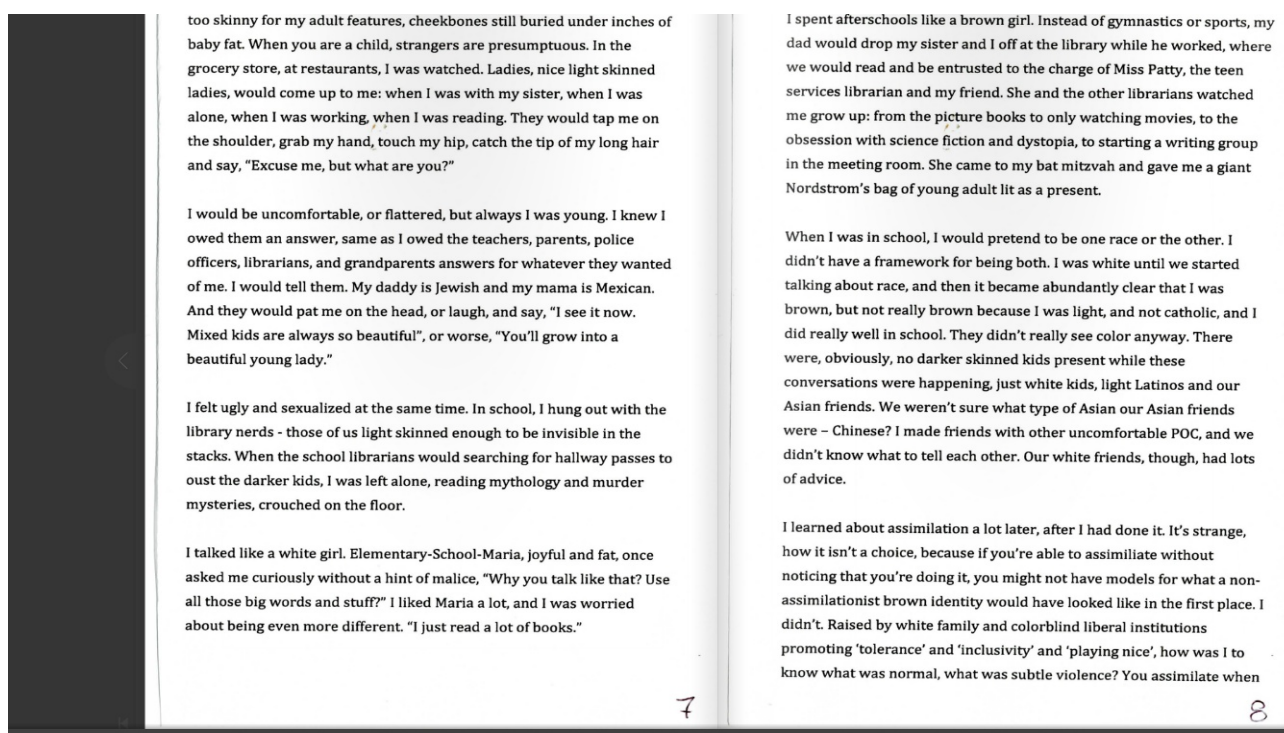
This zine exemplifies the characteristics of afrofuturism in that the redefinition of our stories is aligned with the goal of imagining a new world. The narratives of these Black women were frozen in their position in time and preserved so that others may know of their stories. As a frequent reader of recounts of events involving unarmed shooting deaths at the hands of police, I was unaware of a number of the narratives profiled, which directly corresponds with the aim of the zine. Afrofuturism contends that people of color can move through the time continuum thereby transcending concepts of space and time. This zine and others participate as a curation of our narratives so that they may be preserved in the here and now. There are multiple voices present in zines written by people of color, including this zine on Black Women Matter. This is supported by the author's retelling of the story, the story of the victim as gathered from multiple sources of information, and possibly the invisible narratives that the zine addresses. When we consider all of the voices present, zines transform into a zone of do-it-yourself activism, where the voice of the oppressed and a call to action are centralized. In this instance the activism of the reader begins with knowing about the silenced narratives of Black women who were killed by the police. In this knowing, there is the potential to carry out social and political change.

## 7. 8. Resistance through Rejection

Throughout this study, there were a number of zines that were coded and thematically linked together under "resistance". In some way, either the text, the visual images, or both were recognized as being part of an internal or external struggle. This struggle is part of the discourse that people of color have to be constantly engaged in. One zine that highlights resistance in a powerful way is *Light Skinned Tears*<sup>75</sup> by Lena F-G-M. Almost resembling a memoir of sorts, Lena uses her zine as a space to discuss what it means to be bi-racial or mixed-race woman. She infuses memory, theory on race and gender, and boldly states how she chooses to confront and reject white supremacy through her rejection of assumptions made about mixed race identities.

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<sup>75</sup> [https://issuu.com/flyoverdistro/docs/lst\\_web\\_version](https://issuu.com/flyoverdistro/docs/lst_web_version)



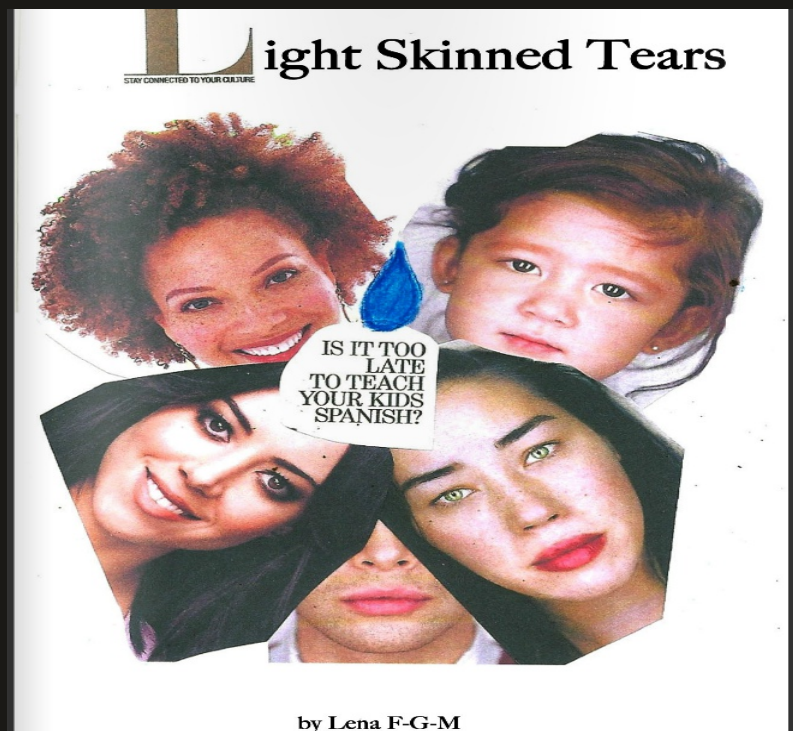
**Figure 7.3 Light Skinned Tears Zine, September 2014: 7-8.**

Source: [https://issuu.com/flyoverdistro/docs/lst\\_web\\_version](https://issuu.com/flyoverdistro/docs/lst_web_version)

This zine, which is text-heavy, is broken into several sections that delineate how Lena arrived at writing the zine and how her personal narrative is intertwined with the structural design of white supremacy (Figure 7.3). As an example, Lena takes the first page of her zine to move backwards on the continuum of time where she describes how her identity was confusing to others. Lena writes, "When I was in school, I would pretend to be one race or the other. I didn't have a framework for being both...They would tap me on the shoulder, grab my hand, touch my hip, catch the tip of my long hair and say, 'Excuse me, but what are you?'" (Light Skinned Tears Zine, 2014: 7-8). Lena returns to this memory - where multiple voices treat her as the indefinable, the exotic - as a way to show how her racial ambiguity was rejected for not fitting into predetermined labels, but also how she was aware that the language used to discuss racial identity had failed her. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia helps to explain how all of these voices concerning racial identity are present, but a form of activism appears in how the author, while exposed to all of these voices, listens and then rejects them as an authentic representation of self. Lena through her rejection is disrupting the conversation about racial identity and daring to take it to a futuristic place where her bi-racial-ness can move beyond the limiting binaries of black and white.

Another way Lena is participating in rejection is through her imagination of the future. Afrofuturism allows readers and writers to shape the unseen future by using our imagination to predict what the experiences will be like. In this case, Lena describes her future where she and other biracial individuals are considered whole beings. She writes, "I want to envision a world where I survive,...where we get to be whole people taking the space we need in communities of abundance" (Light

Skinned Tears Zine, 2014: 34). It may seem as if the basic tenet of survival is a small wish for the future, however the potential to be absorbed into other small, limiting categories means that your identity as a multiracial person could be eliminated. So, for Lena to wish to survive means that she and people like her, their identities can remain intact. To add on to this vision of the future, Lena also takes on the idea that in the future, she is considered a whole person. This idea resonates with a number of people of color in that our histories, our full involvement and participation in society where racism exists, are not fully recognized. In Lena's imagined future, her duality as mixed race person is both acknowledged as a reality and as the social construction that it is. Although we as people of color are held to the expectations that are associated with our particular race, we are not allowed to be whole beings that can sustain the traditions that are indeed part of our racial distinction. In the future, those complexities will not incite questions of what a person "is" but that part of everyone's identity is that we are all something.



**Figure 7.4 Light Skinned Tears Zine cover, September 2014.**

Source: [https://issuu.com/flyoverdistro/docs/lst\\_web\\_version](https://issuu.com/flyoverdistro/docs/lst_web_version)

This zine privileges text as the main form of communication over images. In fact, the zine only features one image, on its cover (Figure 7.4). Typically, being a person of color is not something that can be hidden. We are immediately evaluated by our complexion, the texture of our hair, or even how our bodies are shaped. However, to embody bi or multiracial identity means that, at times, labelling a person becomes both normalized and challenging if that person does not fit neatly into the labels that we have created. The author uses a collage of photos of racially ambiguous women, men, and children, people whose faces do not fit into the categories of white, black, or Hispanic. Situated in a circle, all of the faces are of the same hue, overlapping other face, and looking directly at the camera. This image is quite important to the central idea of the zine. She is prompting the reader to confront the same questions concerning racial identity that she has to embody. As a reader, I can't discern the specifics of the racial or ethnic identity of the individuals and to make an attempt would be to make an assumption based on my own preconceived notions of race. Yet, this is the author's daily experience which is often coupled by vocal confusion about why she doesn't fit into predetermined categories.

Centralizing her own experiences of being multiracial through both image and prose, the author is participating in the rejection of the limited categories and experiences. She takes on the multiple voices who refuse to acknowledge the multiplicity of ethnicity by centering her experiences and situating them in the language and ideology of white supremacy. Within this rejection, this author is also moving towards an alternative, imagined world where multiple ethnicities can exist in the same way that multiple voices can.

## 7.9. Conclusions

Zines written by people of color remind us that the realities of embodying identities at the intersections of race and gender are ripe with layers of voices. These voices resist and reject the constant bombardment of false narratives about what it means to be a person of color. Both of the zines featured in this article use the unedited and uncensored format of zines to talk about the inequities of police brutality and the assumptions around multiracial identity. The presence of zines by POC should remind us that for a certain population it is not possible to live without acknowledging how these identifiers follow us in the world. The politics of race, gender, and violence towards our bodies cannot be broached in every writing space, but the art and discourse of zines allows those safe spaces to exist.

In an afrofuturistic place and time, Black identity does not have to be a negotiation. When this perspective is approached through all people of color, we can talk about the imagined future where our bodies are free from violence and our racial identity can exist in multiple places at once. Until that utopia appears, zines perform as a form of DIY activism for these varied experiences. Zines are a reflection of how people of color are dealing with, and working through their way to freedom.



Reflecting on the themes of resistance and (re)definition, zines are constantly having to respond to how they are seen and treated and do so in way that imagines a place where all voices are considered. So, Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia is aligned with an afrofuturistic framework. There is always room for multiple voices and those voices use resistance as a way of decentering the loudest (and often the most privileged) voices.

The production of zines by people of color, has yet to be fully researched and included in conversations concerning the decentering of oppressive structures and as an exemplar of DIY activism. This study, especially in the context of recent social and political uprisings in the United States concerning racialized trauma, invites consideration of continuing to look at multiple forms of resistance and marginalization from those who continually seek to construct and belong in safe spaces.

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