Spring 2023

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Abstract

In fall 2019, students at the University of Mississippi began the process of starting the university's first creative publication for/by LGBTQ+ students and allies. Over the course of two years, I helped these students plan, create, and produce their zine. These kinds of texts promote identity-formation and help students feel a greater connection to campus as they see the coexistence of their embodied identities within their academic community. Early in our production process, I realized our localized context presented certain theoretical, ethical, and practical issues in the formation of this counterpublic. Because of the function of counterpublics, *Missy*'s early editorial discussions centered on audience and means of circulation. This personal reflection explores literacy practices connected to our publication of a queer zine in a conservative part of the country.

Zine-troduction

In fall 2019, I attended a workshop on using zines in community writing classes at a conference hosted by the University of Mississippi (UM). The workshop leaders Don Unger and Liz Lane placed self-published zines along with scissors and stickers on tables for participants to collaborate on a zine. The genre is rooted in a DIY culture of assemblage, and a lot of zines, like the one we made in this workshop, mix modalities like hand-drawn images, texts, comics, cut-outs, and found objects. I had made my first zine over a decade earlier with an artist/psychic/comedian in Chicago, and I returned to them at various points in my life to publish creative work for/with my communities.

Stephen Duncombe traces the lineage of zines to alternative presses in the United States and asserts they became a distinct form in the 1930s when members of the science fiction community created "fanzines." He notes another "defining influence on modern-day zines" occurred four decades later in the mid-70s with punk rock music and fanzines for the counter-cultural movement (7). Creators from other social and political groups soon began to publish similar texts which de-emphasized the

"fan" aspect. In the 1980s, zines helped certain queer communities establish themselves. Zines provide spaces for "personal exploration and growth" and community formation as members come "together around zines, learning and growing together" (Quint). This discourse circulated during the AIDS crisis when the LGBTQ+ community faced heavy stigma. The genre created alternative spaces for queer people to express their identities, desires, and futures.

The UM Pride Network's president wanted to create a similar space for LGBTQ+ students on the flagship campus. He attended the conference's zine workshop, and it inspired him to start one at the university. UM had made strides toward inclusivity, but some queer students expressed discomfort on campus. He thought a zine would increase visibility, and I agreed to help him with the publication, which the editorial team later named *Missy*. The name functioned as a sassy rhetorical move to queer the university's problematic nickname Ole Miss, which Ellie Campbell writes is a "reference to the mistress of a plantation." Throughout this reflection, I'll use the collective we, but, as the advisor, I refrained from voting on decisions for it to remain a student-led project. This personal reflection traces the zine's trajectory and situates its ethos into a history of literacies in LGBTQ+ communities. There aren't many LGBTQ+ specific publications for students in the Deep South, so I hope a discussion of our work can add to conversations on the ways educators and other stakeholders can help such students create spaces for community-building and counterpublics in their localized contexts.

After the UM Pride Network president approached me with the idea for *Missy*, we recruited Michael Martella, a native Mississippian who, at the time, was a Creative Writing MFA candidate in poetry. He had lived in Oxford for nine years and agreed that queer students needed a publication to build community through art and writing. "The campus can sometimes feel stifling and like a difficult place to find community," he said during a panel discussion at a conference. "There are a lot of ways for heteronormative students to find community, but not so much for queer students." Diverse queer souths—full of life and love—exist, but there weren't many spaces for LGBTQ+ students to explore issues related to their sexuality.

Early in our production process, I realized our localized context presented certain theoretical, ethical, and practical issues in our formation of a counterpublic. Michael Warner writes that the circulation of text creates a type of public, and textual circulation by/for marginalized groups constitutes a counterpublic. These counterpublics center non-dominant subjectivities and allow for specific discourse to emerge in ways it often can't in more visible spaces. Warner gives the example of a queer counterpublic where "no one is in the closet," so "the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended" (86). Counterpublics allow for alternative discourse to emerge and can help individuals find community. Historically, these spheres have created "parallel discursive arenas" where subordinated groups can have in-group discussions about "their needs, objectives, and strategies" (Fraser 66). Fraser describes these arenas as subaltern counterpublics and claims they provide a necessary space for marginalized subjectivities to express identities. These are powerful spaces, but they are also risky. The circulation

of alternative discourse into a more general audience can potentially have harmful effects.

Because of the function of counterpublics, *Missy*'s early editorial discussions centered on audience and means of circulation. This personal reflection, then, documents our process of bridge-building and explores literacy practices connected to our publication of a queer zine in a conservative part of the country. The textual data I present includes drafts of various public documents like the mission statement and call for submissions. I also incorporate statements Michael Martella made during a conference panel I moderated on the zine.

Missy: Goals

Missy's early editorial meetings often centered on issues of identity and context. The history of queer world-making through zines shaped the way I approached these conversations, specifically as it relates to practical and ethical issues in terms of content. Many queer zines published sexually explicit work. We wanted to cultivate an ethos aware of the history of dissent in queer zines/writing, but we needed to think about the lived realities of current and former students in Mississippi.

These conversations were difficult for me because I hadn't had such frank conversations with students about sexual literacy and because I had to balance my competing subjectivities as a writer and advisor. The writer-in-me didn't want to censor students in any way while the advisor-in-me felt a responsibility to consider the harm a submission could potentially cause. A few of the *Missy* contributors, for example, wanted to use a pseudonym because they feared repercussions either from their home community or larger campus networks.

Mission Statement

Although we initially envisioned *Missy* as a counterpublic specifically for LGBTQ+ students, the editorial team decided to open submissions to allies. Kathy Obear suggests straight people can "be powerful allies and use their privilege to combat individual, cultural, and institutional homophobia and heterosexism" (62). The editorial team decided the inclusion of allies could help contributors who might be in the process of coming out. A queer contributor could claim allyship if confronted by someone for their piece in *Missy*. The move provided both a space for contributors in various stages of coming out as well as for allies to submit work in an act of solidarity. "The goal in all of our discussions was to provide a space for queer students to put their art into the world and establish a sense of community," said Michael, "but we also wanted to make an impact on the larger community, which takes building bridges and making connections." These discussions of audience and rhetorical ecology were some of the most nuanced I've had with students. I'd like to now excerpt an exchange from my interview with Michael as it materializes complex issues connected to the publication's goals and mission statement.

Michael: We had so many intense and complicated conversations about these things. The goal in all of our discussions was to try to not only provide a space for queer students to bring their art into the world and to support one another and love one another and establish a sense of community but also to do some form of outreach and to actually make an impact on the larger community, which takes building bridges and making connections outside of our queer community.

One of the ways we thought to do that was to bring in the voices of allies, non-queer students who may have things to say relative to the content of our publication and our interest in hosting different perspectives. Our opinion was that the more perspectives we could bring in—within reason, obviously—the better able we'd be to facilitate a dialogue that might bridge these disparate communities we wanted to bring together. We wanted to make it such that it wasn't just a queer bubble we were creating but a queer community engaged with people outside of itself, and in so doing, hopefully etching ourselves into this broader community at large. We wanted to do those two things at the same time, which is hard to do.

In this exchange, I'm struck by the nuanced discussion of queer community and literacy practices. Michael believed the publication helped "etch ourselves into the broader community," and articulated the difficulty of providing a space for queer people to be authentically themselves. These are ongoing and complicated conversations many LGBTQ+ organizations must address. Although we couldn't fully resolve some of these issues, we were able to create a mission statement grounded in our literacy practices and connected to our goals of community building. In our mission statement, we described the publication as by/for members of the LGBTQ+ community and allies to that community, but we said submitted work does not need to be LGBTQ+ related as such a stipulation may restrict creative expression. We determined the Masthead would be conscious of our various audiences in the selection of published pieces and noted "historically, queer writing and queer rhetorical modes often challenge accepted norms through subversion," so "selection decisions will avoid censorship of the community" but will consider "any harm a piece could bring to the community if published."

Submissions

Our conversations on writing, queer history, and mediums of queer text encouraged us to be expansive in our call for "poetry, short fiction, creative nonfiction, graphic narratives, fan fiction, satire, interviews, manifestos, reviews, visual art, photography, collage, drawings, and anything else fit to print" ("Call for Submissions"). As many LGBTQ+ communities use the internet to spread text like ezines, we also envisioned an online space for "video and audio submissions—podcast segments, readings, twines, visual performances, etc."

We circulated our original call for submissions in spring 2020, then put *Missy* on pause after the COVID-19 outbreak. At the time, we had six students on the editorial team, but when we came back together in fall 2021, our original crew was down to two. Some folks graduated or became overwhelmed with other responsibilities.

Our team may have dwindled, but *Missy*'s spirit didn't.

We had received enough submissions to produce an issue, and the editorial conversations we had about representation were similarly present in these submissions. Many submissions explored identities through text and art. We published a short story titled "Destruction of Eden," drawings of socially constructed/obstructed bodies, and an essay about the self-expression a student found through a hair journey. "We want to represent the queer community as a complex and nuanced group of people," said Michael. "That's been our agenda from the beginning."

A photo series submission connected to our goal of representation as it showed members of Mississippi's LGBTQ+ community living their everyday lives. The portraits show images of students in public spaces, living and laughing. These types of images are important for students who enroll at the university who might feel their queerness means they won't be able to laugh much on campus. We chose one of these portraits for the cover because it speaks to the series' goals and directly centers students.

The editorial board contemplated choosing a different portrait: a particularly joyful image of a student at a party. We ultimately didn't choose the party portrait for the cover because the underage student held a beer in it. The image led us to think deeply about how a cover image frames the content within a zine. We worried the circulation of the image might cause the student harm and misrepresent our intentions. "There's more weight to the cover," said Michael, "and in producing and publishing art, there are ethical considerations to the decisions we make."

Figure 1. Cover, *Missy: LGBTQ+ Literary Magazine at the University of Mississippi*. Photo credit: Hooper Schultz.

Missy: Resources

We originally wanted to create physical copies of the zine, but we decided to create a digital-only first issue to minimize costs and because we thought a digital format might be more appropriate for our audience. Queer communities have, historically, used the internet to organize in/through digital spaces and create counterpublics. Megan Opperman posits digital spaces, like Tumblr, have enabled members of the LGBTQ+ community to "blur the lines between private and public" and create queer spaces "in opposition to the status quo" (68). Similarly, we hoped the digital publication would create an "oppositional" space, so we uploaded the first issue to the free electronic publishing platform Issuu.

We created the issue digitally, but we still wanted to enact the materiality of traditional zines. To do this, we created two versions of stickers with the QR code for the issue. We also thought this format spoke to student culture as they often put stickers on their laptops in a rhetorical move to publicly display aspects of their identity or beliefs.
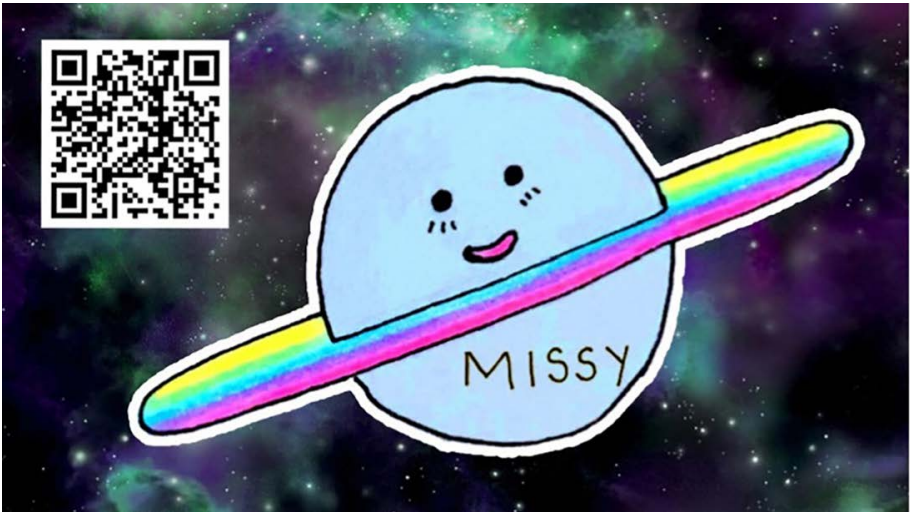

Figure 2. Sticker with QR code for Issue 1.

I'll briefly discuss the process for the *Missy* planet sticker. Michael had hand drawn a planet in his notebook, and then I took a photo of it with my phone and digitally edited it. An artist friend of mine then helped manipulate the image for printing. He'd made sticker art before, so he helped me edit the image, choose the background, place the QR code, and print the sticker. We bought 110 high-quality stickers for $150. The stickers were a big hit at the release party discussed in the next section, and we only had a few remaining after our issue launch.

Custom stickers may be a good option for publications that want to keep costs down and still produce a material artifact. The QR code is an important rhetorical feature on these stickers as it sends people to the actual text. These stickers were a

lot of fun to make and seemed to connect to the aesthetic and ethos of our target audience.

Missy: Relationships

University Partnerships

We wanted to produce a print run, so to cover costs we secured partnerships with the university's Department of Writing & Rhetoric (DWR), the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies, and the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. The financial partnerships allowed us to focus more on our creative goals and less on the financial aspect of publication, but they also led us to question *how these partnerships (in)directly affect what we publish.*

The impact of the financial ties of our partnerships, even with supportive departments or organizations, are important to consider. These stakeholders may potentially impact content, which could be an issue for publications connected to sex(uality) and identity. Our affiliations with university partners made us more cautious and think more thoroughly about any repercussions a student could face for publishing a piece on sex—graphic or otherwise. We also considered the repercussions we could face in terms of funding. "There were so many interwoven questions that you might not have to consider if you're just the poet writing," said Michael. "When I'm writing for myself, I'm like, yeah, screw that, I can write what I want to write, but when your art is positioned within the context of financial relationships or organizational authority, it changes things."

Paul Feigenbaum and Veronica House argue even the most thoughtful partnerships can lead to unintended negative consequences. They suggest community literacy projects interrogate the ways "power imbalances and implicit biases manifest in the relationships" and face the "implications of austerity capitalism" (2). Financial support can help sustain publications, but it may not be worth committing to a university partnership if the organization wants to exert any editorial control. It's important to have discussions about these issues with potential partners so the publication can maintain its creative freedom and speak to the community it hopes to help represent. Ultimately, our university partners didn't ask to have any input on our content. They wanted to help us reach our goals and celebrate the work. Also, when we shifted to a digital publication, we didn't need nearly as much financial support as initially projected, so digital-only publications may be a good option for others in a similar position.

Community Networks

In fall 2021, we organized a release party on campus in the LGBTQ+ lounge—a dedicated space for queer students and faculty in a campus classroom building. One of the publication's exigencies was to help create community networks, and we thought a release party would be a fun and social way to further make these connections. We also wanted to celebrate the great art and writing from the contributors as well as honor

the hard work the editorial team had put into the issue over the course of nearly two years.

We invited three *Missy* contributors and one out faculty member to read their work. Because of COVID-19, this was one of the first times we'd been able to mask up and gather in a physical space together. One of the readers joked that he hadn't been around this many queer people in a while, and that he'd "forgotten how to be gay." Another reader came out to the crowd as trans and gave a moving reading of their work.

During intermission, a student performed a duet with his teacher; he played the saxophone while she played the flute. A *Missy* editor had insisted there be live music at this event, so she messaged the university's music department and made it happen.

After intermission, we hosted an open mic so other community members who felt compelled to read their work could participate. Over fifty people attended the event, and an attendee commented on how the event's energy was electric and positive. We had submissions and an editor application emailed to us by the next week.

Conclusion

Missy started as an idea by one student who wanted to increase LGBTQ+ visibility on campus. I became part of this community literacy project because of my visibility as an out professor on a conservative campus. A team of student editors then worked to create networks of community voices through this text. Jason Luther, Frank Farmer, and Stephen Parks argue in community literacy contexts "voice is real because it is originally social, not individual" and these "voices are heard, and only heard, because they exist in relation to other voices" (1). We hoped the zine would create a counter-public for LGBTQ+ voices, but we also needed to consider the potential (negative) outcomes of its circulation to other audiences. There are progressive pockets of the Deep South, but some students still feared they'd be disowned by their families for their sexuality or would face repercussions from campus networks. The nature of the queer subjectivity—and the potential for violence to be enacted on these bodies— made us deeply consider our rhetorical ecologies.

Educators who might want to create a similar literacy project or connect youth with such publications must seriously consider localized contexts and the time it can take to produce this kind of work in marginalized communities. Because this was a self-sponsored literacy project, we didn't have a designated class time to meet or deadlines to make. Ultimately, these factors worked in our favor because we had the time to engage in conversations about many complicated issues. "The process helped us build community," said Michael. "It brought together a group of people who would have never otherwise met, and who probably wouldn't have come together in this same way." COVID-19 delayed our production, but it's important to internalize that these types of projects can't be rushed. This kind of work in programs or courses needs adequate time/space with participants to engage in layered conversations of representation.

I'd never worked so closely and for so long with a group of LGBTQ+ students. I enjoyed the process, and my investment in the project made me think about the sustainability of such student-led literacy projects. The student editors were all passionate and brought energy to the project, but this doesn't mean a similar group of students will emerge. Because this project wasn't tied to a class, it might publish intermittently or only last a few issues like some of the queer zines that came before it. I hope this project continues to provide LGBTQ+ students a space for self-expression, but I don't want to put too much pressure on its future. We're here and queer *now*, and *Missy* is helping the UM campus get more used to it.

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