

The 'zines celebrate grassroots movements, highlight values of resilience and curiosity, and connect optimism with accountability. Together, they envision a future for the field that is both hopeful and full of change.

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Thinking Through 'Zines: A Collaborative Visual Essay Inspired by Systems Thinking, Queering the Museum, and Emergent Strategy

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Abstract: In this visual essay, students enrolled in a museum education and administration specialization, centered in a university art education department, respond to course readings on museum work and Emergent Strategy through journaling and 'zine making. While the course is intended to prepare students for the political and practical realities of working in an art museum, it is structured to elicit group and individual understandings of the readings, projects, and other assignments as well as to consider the ways in which we can collectively and incrementally create museological change.

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Introduction

In spring 2022, I taught my fourth iteration of a practicum course intended to prepare Master's and Ph.D. students for the realities of working in art museums. What began in 2018 as a crowdsourced curriculum on what art museum educators wished they would have known before entering the field has become a post-pandemic space for connecting, re-thinking, imagining, and worldbuilding. Our course, ARTEDUC 7748: *Art Museum Practicum*, comprises nine graduate students who engage with three texts and several projects to practice practical skills such as SWOT analyses (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) and grant-writing exercises as well as addressing the real-world issues of museum work, such as job precarity, pay, and benefits that are incommensurate with experience and education (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2022; Wetenhall, 2019; Whitaker, 2021), inconsistencies between stated missions and institutional practices (Ng & Ware 2014), relevance to communities (Gurian, 2021; Simon, 2010), and the legacies of colonialism that permeate museum practices like microscopic filaments (Bennett, 1995; Karp & Levine, 1991; Lonetree, 2009; Sleeper-Smith, 2009).

Our syllabus outlines the goals of the course within a framework of three different sources: *Systems Thinking in Museums: Theory and Practice* (Jung & Love, 2017); *Queering the Museum* (Sullivan & Middleton, 2020), and *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (brown, 2017). Through these texts, we positioned art museums as open ecosystems that exist within interrelated internal and external environments; troubled existing paradigms of museology through the consideration of "queer/ing" ethics, display practices, meaning-making, and engagement toward a new ontology for museums, and then thought about ways tomorrow's museum workers can "grow liberation and justice, learn from the world around us how to best collaborate, and how to shape change (brown, 2017, p. 1). Students grappled with the complex

lineage of American museums in terms of cultural power and privilege as well as the current reconsideration of their positionality and purposes in society and developed 21st century leadership and communication skills both in and outside of the museum.

This class necessarily requires a deep dive into our professional aspirations and positionality while insisting on our obligation to care and work for one another (Kletchka, 2023) as we seek authentic ways of building museological futures together, inspired by the academic research, lived experience, and ancestral work of authors from marginalized identities including women, femme, queer, and Black and Indigenous writers, practitioners, and world builders. Each week one student summarizes our readings and facilitates a discussion that synthesizes content with other readings, course themes, and professional histories. Class activities have included mock program development, creating and enhancing fractal patterns, Post-It note interventions in exhibition spaces on our university campus, and the project that is highlighted in this manuscript: Our work in responding to the weekly provocation of communicating with museum audiences after reading "Systems Thinking in Exhibitions and Programs," (Jung & Love, 2017), "Queer/ing Display" (Sullivan & Middleton, 2020), and "Nonlinear and Iterative: The Pace and Pathways of Change"(brown, 2017).

Personal Zines

Bekah Leathersich, a Master's student, class facilitator for this session, and author of this section of our article, noted brown's framing of emergent strategy as a "philosophy for how to be in harmony and love." Given this, Bekah settled on the idea of per-zines (personal zines), which are "do-it-yourself" magazines that typically revolve around the unique perspective of the creator. The medium of 'zines historically provided a mode for marginalized communities to share art and ideas, acting not only as a means of self-expression, but also community

organizing and activism (French & Curd, 2021). In short, 'zines provide an accessible medium for sharing and decentering knowledge and creativity, while also giving creators a space to reflect on their personal interests, experiences, and opinions. The creation of 'zines in this class served to facilitate creative inquiry while disrupting the traditional power structure of typical university classrooms, thus queering the pedagogy of our encounter.

While reading the aforementioned texts (brown, 2017; Jung & Love, 2017; Sullivan & Middleton, 2020), Bekah noticed the emergence of important themes worthy of personal reflection through 'zine making. Jung & Love (2017), use the concept of systems thinking to frame each aspect of the museum as part of the working whole. In that system, the experiences of individuals within the museum space impact the institution's trajectory in terms of growth, effectiveness, and community engagement. Sullivan and Middleton (2020) draw attention to the hegemonic narrative evident in contemporary museum displays. They call on museum professionals to question their privilege and assumptions that drive the interpretation of museum displays and encourage "critically interrogating not only the museological practices that are the lifeblood of museums, but also our own professional identities and dispositions," (p. 31), through the lens of queer/ing and queer ethics, which positions the knowledge, shared through the act of display as "multifaceted, complex, contradictory, and shifting...reduce[ing] monochromatic knowledge and its exclusionary effect," (p. 33).

Sullivan and Middleton (2020) ask readers to reflect on museums as spaces for sharing knowledge and disrupt them by finding ways to share diverse perspectives. brown (2017) asks us to rethink the process of transformation and growth. Rather than linear systems that rely on what she calls "a framework of failure," she conceptualizes transformation and growth as cyclical, "iterative cycles," in which we should be asking ourselves "how

do we learn from this?" (p. 105). In short, brown (2017) reminds us that growth emerges from consistent, intentional reflection of both ourselves and the systems we participate in—those systems in which we hope to evoke positive change. The theme of transformation triggered by reflection situated the 'zines as an ideal way to begin considering these topics as a group.

To center our 'zine making workshop around our reading, Bekah returned to the texts and isolated questions that acted as prompts to help guide their projects. Some students chose to use these prompts; some used their own personal reflections on the readings. Questions included "What role do museums play in society? What role do I wish they played?," "What does peace look like to you?," "What are the roots of my knowledge about the world? Do I value some roots above others?," and "How do we ensure museums are spaces for healing and transformation?" Bekah prepared the blank booklets ahead of time and brought a variety of materials with which the class created their 'zines. What Bekah anticipated would be a thirty-minute activity soon took over the entirety of the two-hour-forty-five-minute seminar. While we created together, we spoke about our readings, as well as about our 'zines and the meaning behind them. Our conversations revealed our anxieties and hopes for the museum profession, which were then reflected in our visual creations. Students explored a variety of themes, including concerns about hegemony and inequitable power dynamics, capitalism, colonialism, heteronormativity, sexism, and White supremacy, but also their hopes for peace, transformation, and growth in both museums and broader society.

The Visual Journal

The images in this visual journal reflect each participant's response to a specific question posed by Bekah and one page of accompanying text written by each 'zine creator. As the professor of the class, I participated as a both co-learner and co-creator of

this, a 'zine along with the student makers. Two participants opted to let their 'zine pages speak for themselves. We offer these images in the hope that readers will take time to conduct their own visual analyses of these pages in connection with the themes of systems thinking, queering the museum, and emergent strategy. (see Figures 1-10)

Conclusion

These images speak to problematic issues prevalent in the museum field—sexism, racism, colonialism, and neoliberal capitalism—yet they are also overwhelmingly hopeful. The 'zines celebrate grassroots movements, highlight values of resilience and curiosity, and connect optimism with accountability. Together, they envision a future for the field that is both hopeful and full of change. We as a class cohort collectively invite readers to imagine the potential ramifications for the future of the field if all emerging museum professionals are taught to think through systems thinking and eschew practices that foster fierce competition between siloed departments and stem from scarcity mindsets. We encourage readers to critically interrogate museological practices and imagine them queerly—blur boundaries, resist exclusion, and question precedent. We wish joy for museum workers who need solidarity, care, and support in addition to fair pay, professional development, and recognition for the work that they do. We hope readers reflect on the questions in this essay and recommend that those who work with emerging museum professionals introduce these texts to their syllabi (or vice versa!).

Additionally, we encourage emerging museum professionals to start book clubs with these texts and their colleagues or professors, working through the reflective prompts in *Systems Thinking* and *Emergent Strategy* as a team to ensure that museums are spaces of healing and transformation. It is our earnest hope that this provocation encourages critical museological practices and care for

colleagues and communities in the same way it has lifted and sustained us as emerging professionals and supportive co-learners.



Figure 1.

The question that served as provocation for my 'zine is "How do we ensure museums are spaces for "healing and transformation?" While I hope that my research and participation in the field ultimately changes museums' trajectory into rich spaces for community engagement and learning, I know that the most important legacy I might possibly leave is through the students with whom I work. They are the dreamers, the thinkers, the trailblazers, the future makers . . . they are creating and building a world that I could not have imagined when I began working in art museums. And they are doing it **collectively**, with compassion, care, and love. Given the monumental social, political, health, and economic challenges that we are navigating personally and as a society right now, our weekly time together feels precious and rare—an escape into a care-full, conscientious world that we are cultivating together.

~Dana Carlisle Kletchka, associate professor

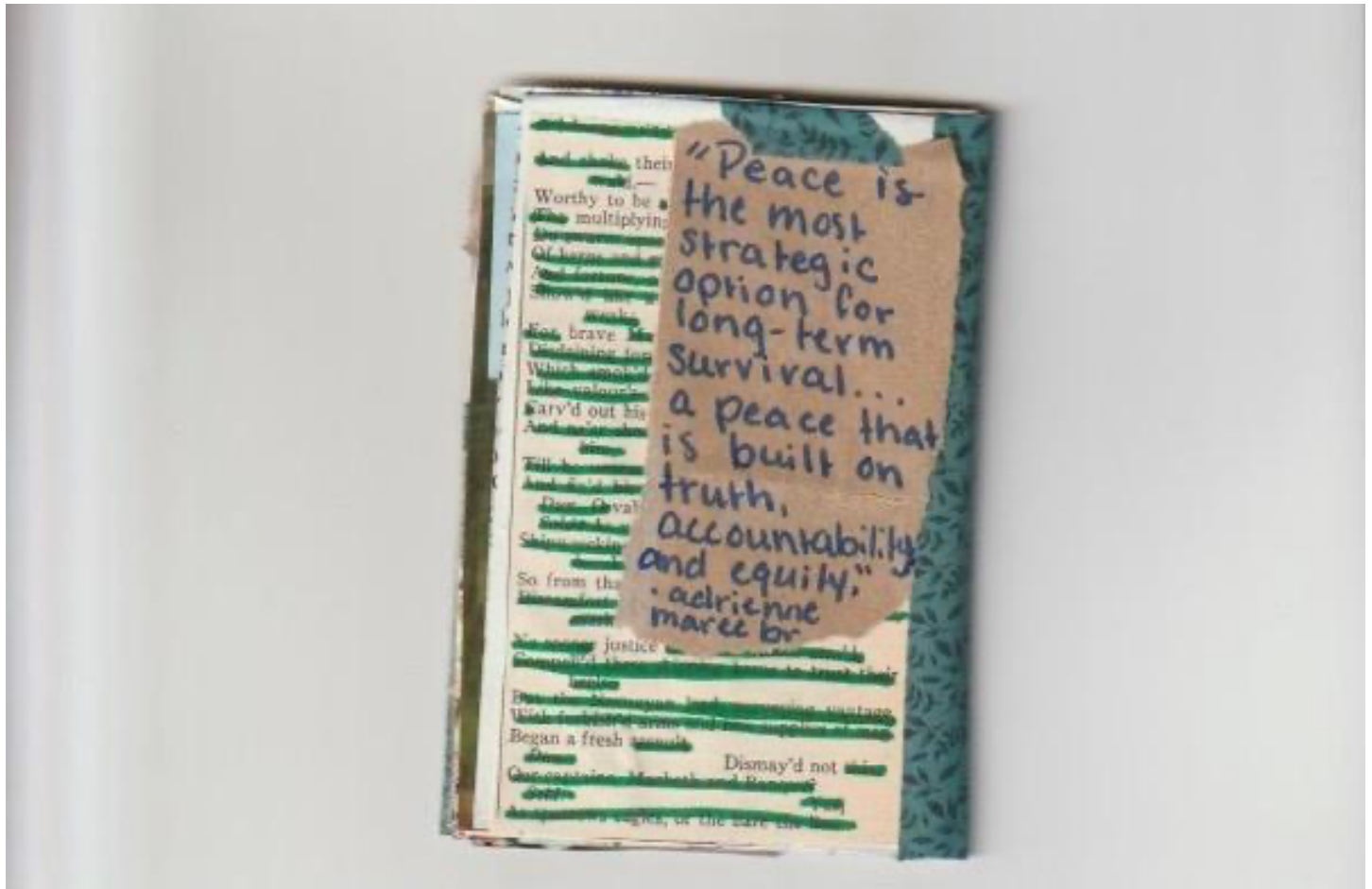


Figure 2.

Responding to the prompt "How do we ensure that museums are spaces of healing and transformation?," I began my 'zine with a quote by adrienne marce brown (2017), which highlights such spaces as essential for survival. I then follow with a question about the possibility for museums to act as these spaces given their histories. The page incorporates a tag torn into pieces which lists some of the evils that museums have participated or been complicit in. The following pages list hopeful strategies inspired by brown's "transformative justice." Throughout the 'zine I tried to incorporate symbols traditionally affiliated with museums (classical architecture and statuary, columns etc.) and disrupt them through tearing and subverting them. Plant motifs also spread throughout, inspired by brown's call for biomimicry, growth, and resilience. I finished the back cover by adding another quote from brown about the importance of peace, along with a blackout poem in which I isolated words and phrases that reflected the ideas from my 'zine and from brown's Emergent Strategy (2017).

~Bekah Leathersich, facilitator for 'zine project and M.A. student.

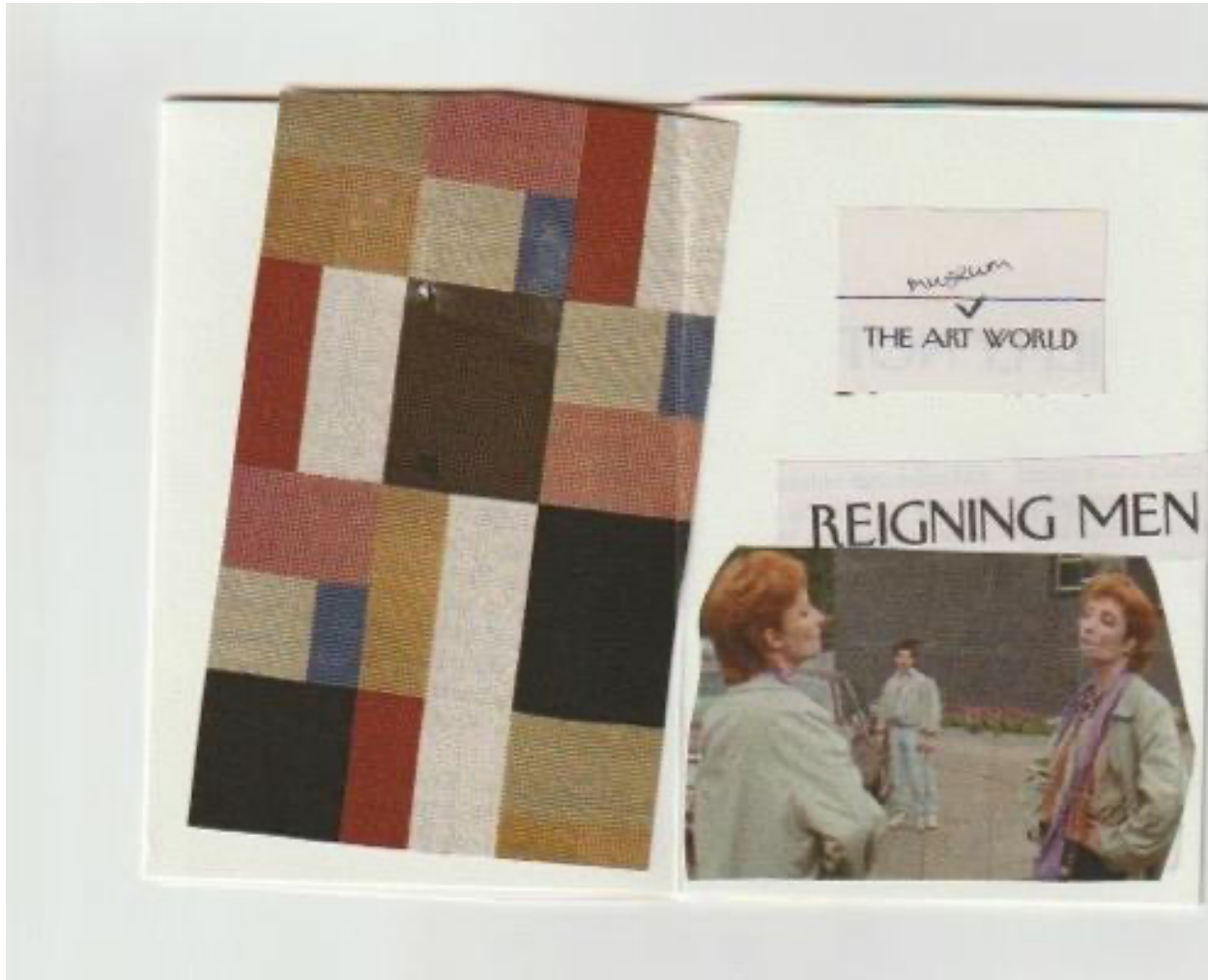


Figure 3.

Initially, I hesitated to write a response to my page. I couldn't decide between the competing goals of the visual medium of the 'zine and my preference for narrative writing. The activity called for expression through selected images. It's an exercise that I usually struggle with, but I wanted to try my best to follow the spirit of it and rely on words as little as possible. Writing, as I related to it, might undermine the purpose of the 'zine as a visual/interpretative media and the value of the reader's response to it. In the end, I settled on expressing my apprehension and leaving the story of the page to the viewer.

~Travis Deal, M.A. student

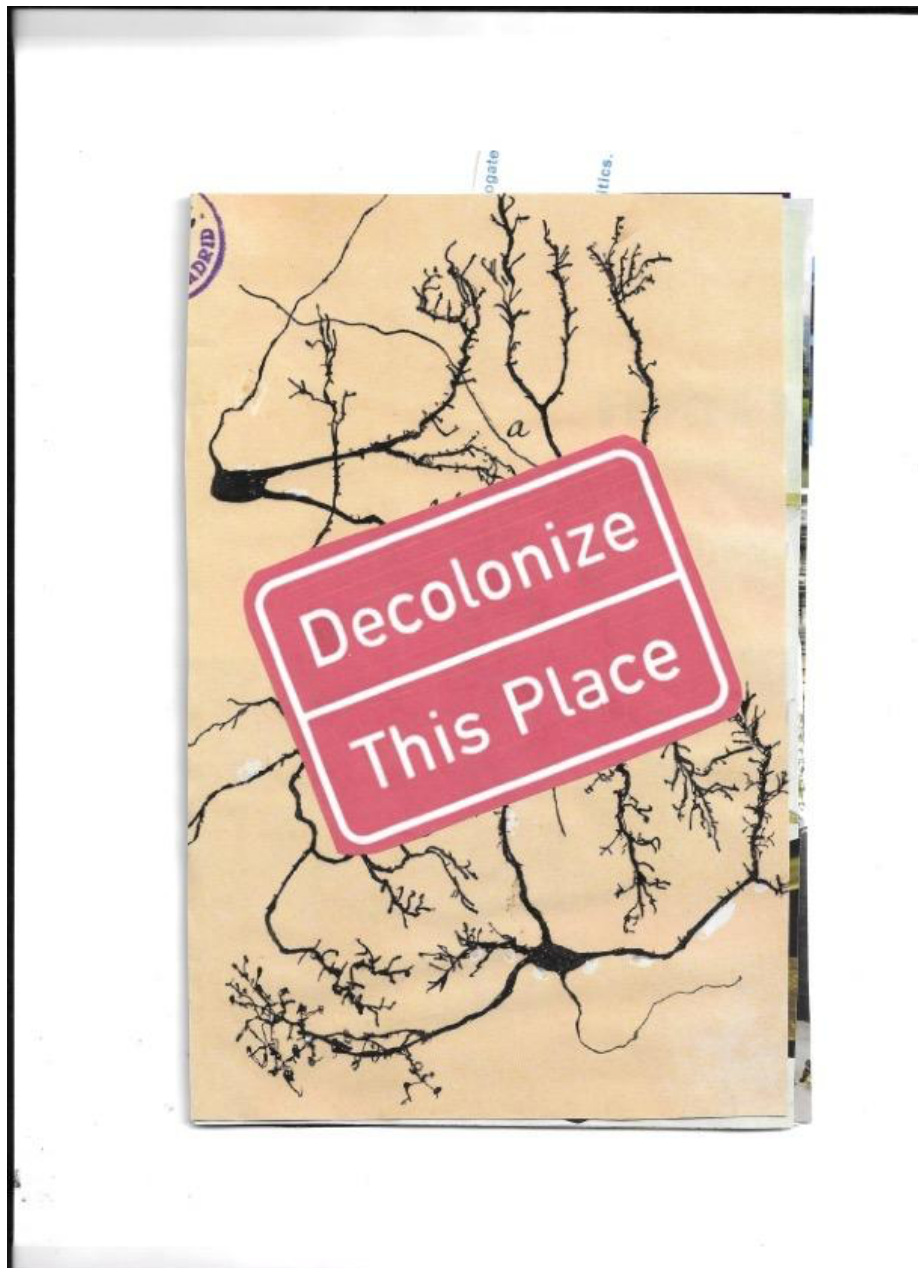


Figure 4.

Bekah's zine assignment encouraged me to consider "What it means to decolonize the museum?" It prompted me to once again consider the land that museums occupy, and the cultural belongings contained within their walls. Further, it prepared me to concentrate on and design a workshop where other museum educators could critically examine exhibition spaces and perhaps consider some issues I found pressing. Several months later, I produced and led a "Gallery Interventions" workshop at the National Art Education's Museum Education Division preconference, where art museum educators utilized post-it notes to leave critical questions, comments, lyrics, and small drawings in exhibition spaces. While I recognized that such a workshop might evoke art museum educators' room to critique an exhibition setting and work together to discuss various issues, the workshop revealed that several museum educators were not only interested in repeating the session at their institutions but doing so with members of their curatorial departments. Some participants recognized that the workshop might act as a bridge between museum education departments and curatorial. A few commented on how the hands-on activity could provide a better way to collaborate and counter the ways in which some museum educators find themselves preparing education programs after a curatorial team has led a project.

~Anna Freeman, Ph.D. student.



Figure 5.

By the time I arrive to class on Friday afternoon, I'm typically a combination of exhausted and flustered. A week full of back-to-back meetings, readings, and assignments is the norm for graduate school, and I feel like I am imperfectly juggling a complex set of responsibilities. This semester, our readings from adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* have offered me much-needed permission to pause. Her lessons about adaptation and resilience provide opportunities for self-reflection and self-love, and through the notion of fractal change, she positions personal growth and individual relationships as essential to systemic and transformative justice (brown, 2017). Once again stressed on a Friday afternoon, I chose to respond to the prompt "What does peace mean to you?" as the basis for my 'zine. I explored the ways that I find peace as an individual, through walks and family dinners, a swim, or watching a sunset on my balcony. With each image I glued or flower I sketched, I felt more relaxed, as well as more capable. Following brown's thinking, my hope is that my personal peace has a fractal effect, rippling to a broader scale. brown states that "peace is the most strategic option for our long-term survival. Not an uninformed or compromising peace—a peace that is built on truth, accountability, and equity" (brown, 2017, p.132). How might we each contribute to this form of collective peace? What does peace mean to you?

~Julia Harth, Ph.D. student

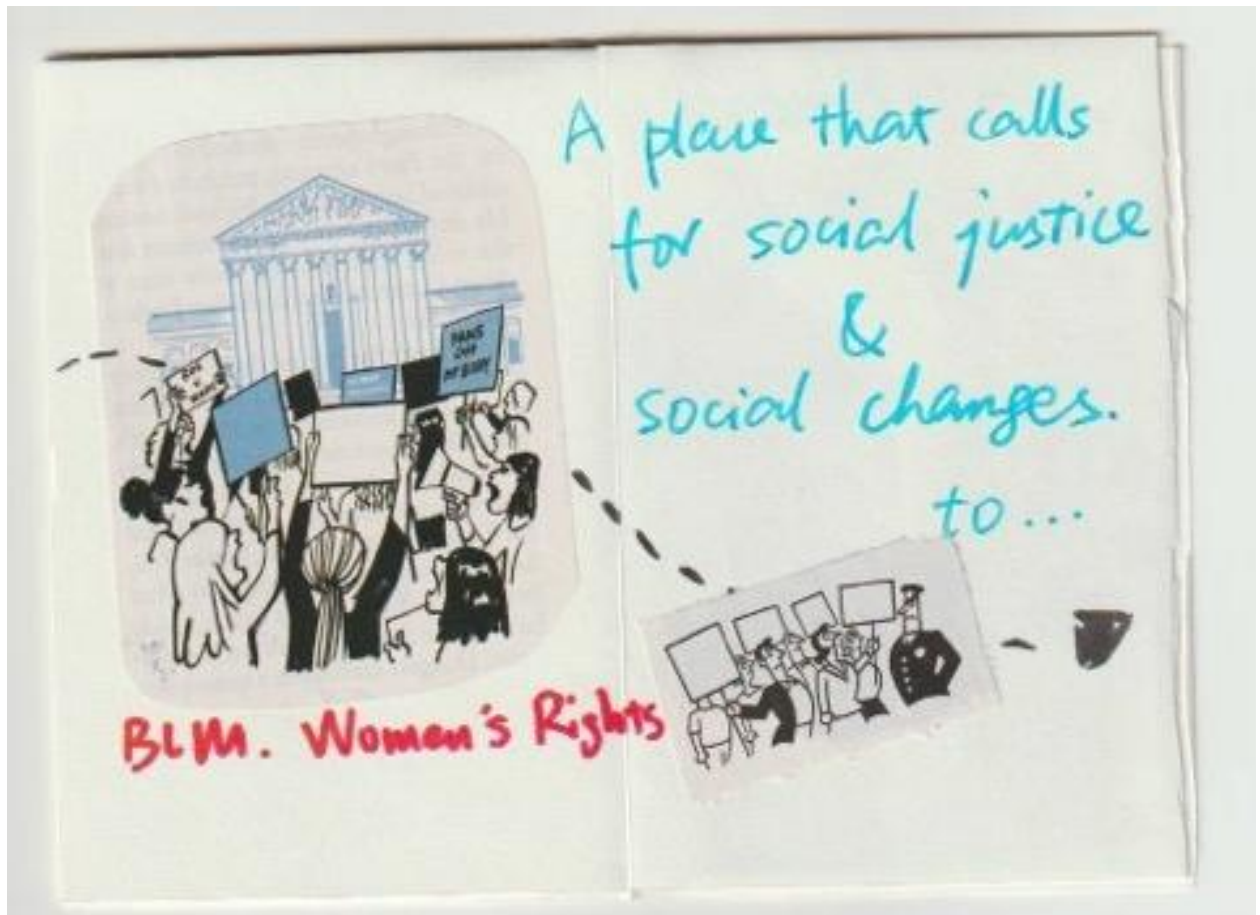


Figure 6.

~Yanshing Li, M.A. student (no written text)

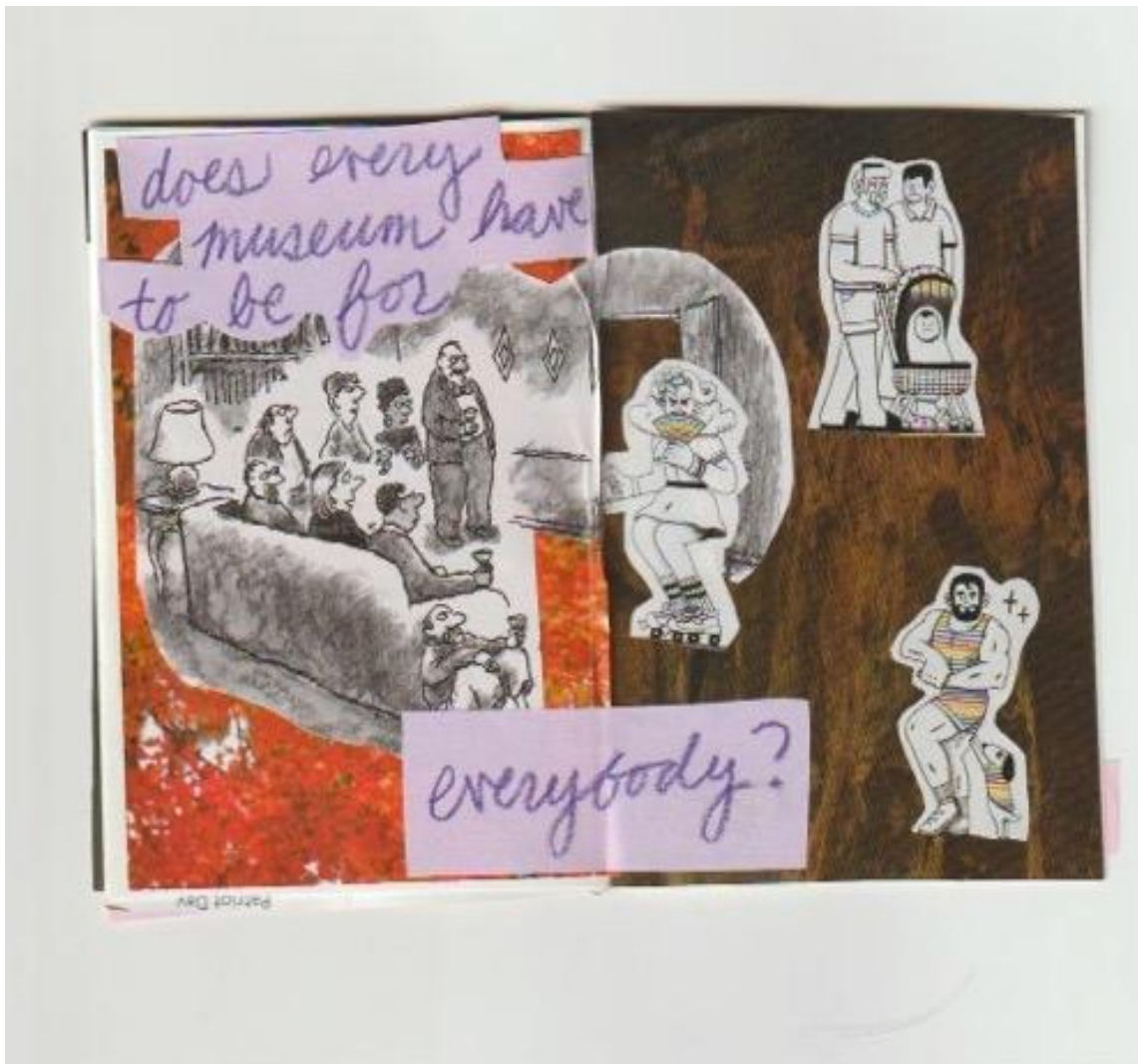


Figure 7.

Life is/as a museum. Inspired by a cute, folded booklet, whimsical New Yorker Magazine cartoons, and lush photos from tourism calendars, I created a 'zine for all ages, to inspire and elicit thought. In museum studies coursework, we study the systems, networks, and operations of contemporary museums and their collective move toward decolonization, representation, and accessibility. My 'zine highlights main questions that arise as I explore this museum world, regarding my relationship with museology and artifacts.

I was raised near Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, and I left the state when I was 18. Pages one and two represent the cognitive dissonance I experienced as queer in a Southern state and in reframing the broader historical context (colonial is literally in the name . . .) of my upbringing. This mirrors the museum's responsibility to present accurate and inclusive depictions of history.

Pages three and four represent travel and embodied arts practice. Every location one visits is imbued with histories and filled with artifacts. With well-honed vision, these stories and artifacts can be effectively and affectively presented to audiences. My home is a museum, a curated cabinet of curiosities that tells many stories. Embodied everyday arts practices can reveal that the classroom, office, or alleyway is also a museum.

I often rearrange my home. Different juxtapositions of my mementos reveal new stories upon rearrangement. But I'm not done. Like the museum, I will continue to explore, rearrange, and reframe until my museum for one is truly for all.

~Cary Mitchell, Ph.D. student

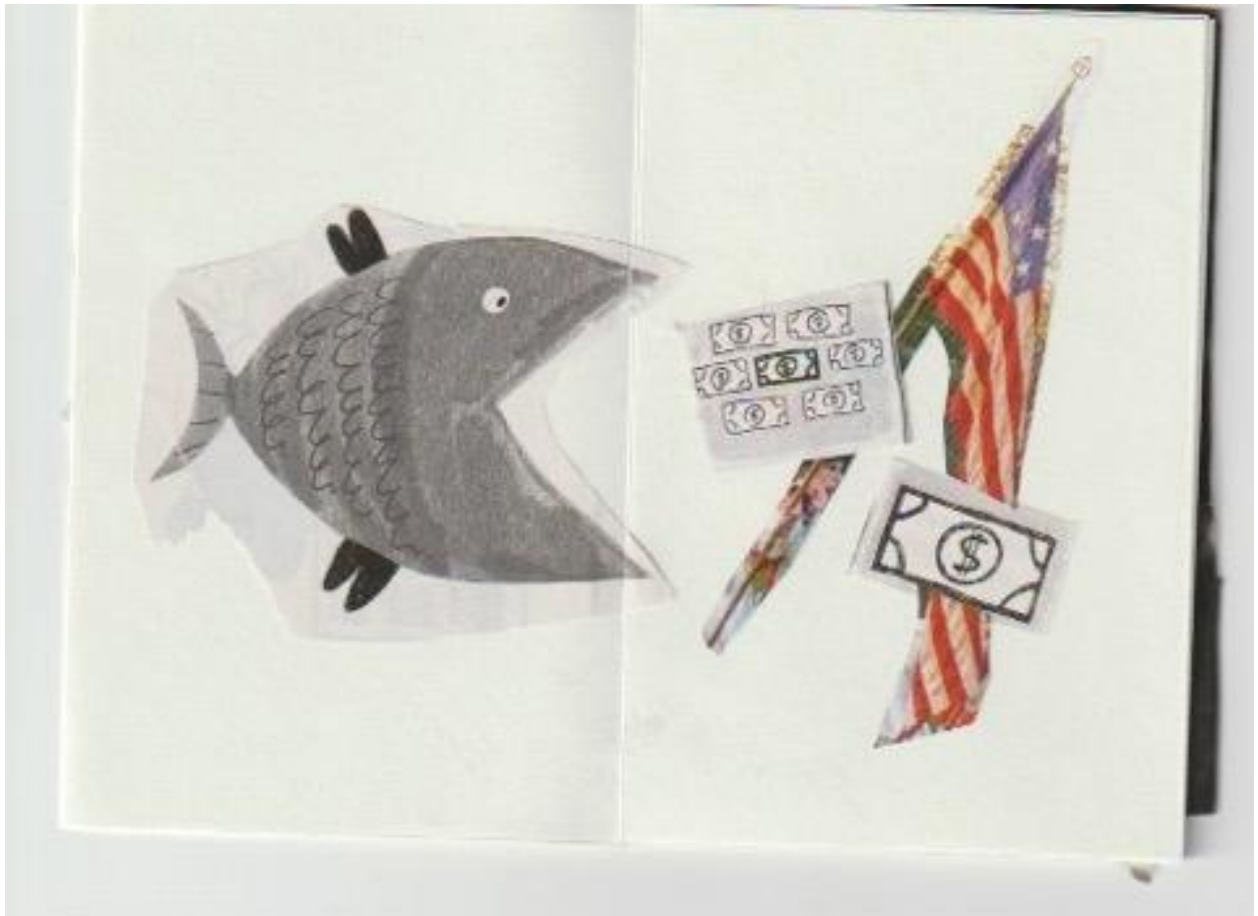


Figure 8.

I opened my 'zine with a representation of a black hole. The prompt—"What old ideas of the museum am I ready to release?"—recalled artist Sarah Rosalena's (Huichol) engagement with outer space as a contested terrain in neocolonial exploration and the crisis of climate change; Rosalena uses the black hole as a metaphor for the theoretical exits from our habits of violent extraction and exploitation. The following pages of my 'zine, then, feature elements of the museum world that I hope get drawn into a black hole, never to be seen in their current formations again: The service to interests of capital and nationalism, the deferral to out-of-touch board members and elite donors. Created against the backdrop of an ongoing labor strike at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I continued the 'zine with an image of a tree branch extending into space, a fractal symbol of change and growth, and finally end with a quotation from Ariella Aisha Azoulay's (2019) goosebump-inducing *Imagine Going on Strike: Museum Workers*. Azoulay imagines the radical, transformative potential of a strike organized "not in terms of the right to protest against oppression, but rather as an opportunity to care for the shared world," where "going on strike is to claim one's right not to engage with destructive practices, not to be an oppressor and perpetrator, not to act according to norms and protocols whose goals were defined to reproduce imperial and racial capitalist structures" (p. 157–158). Through this zine, I invite you to join with Azoulay and the growing number of unionizing museum workers to "imagine a strike like this" (p. 161).

~Amanda Tobin Ripley, Ph.D. student

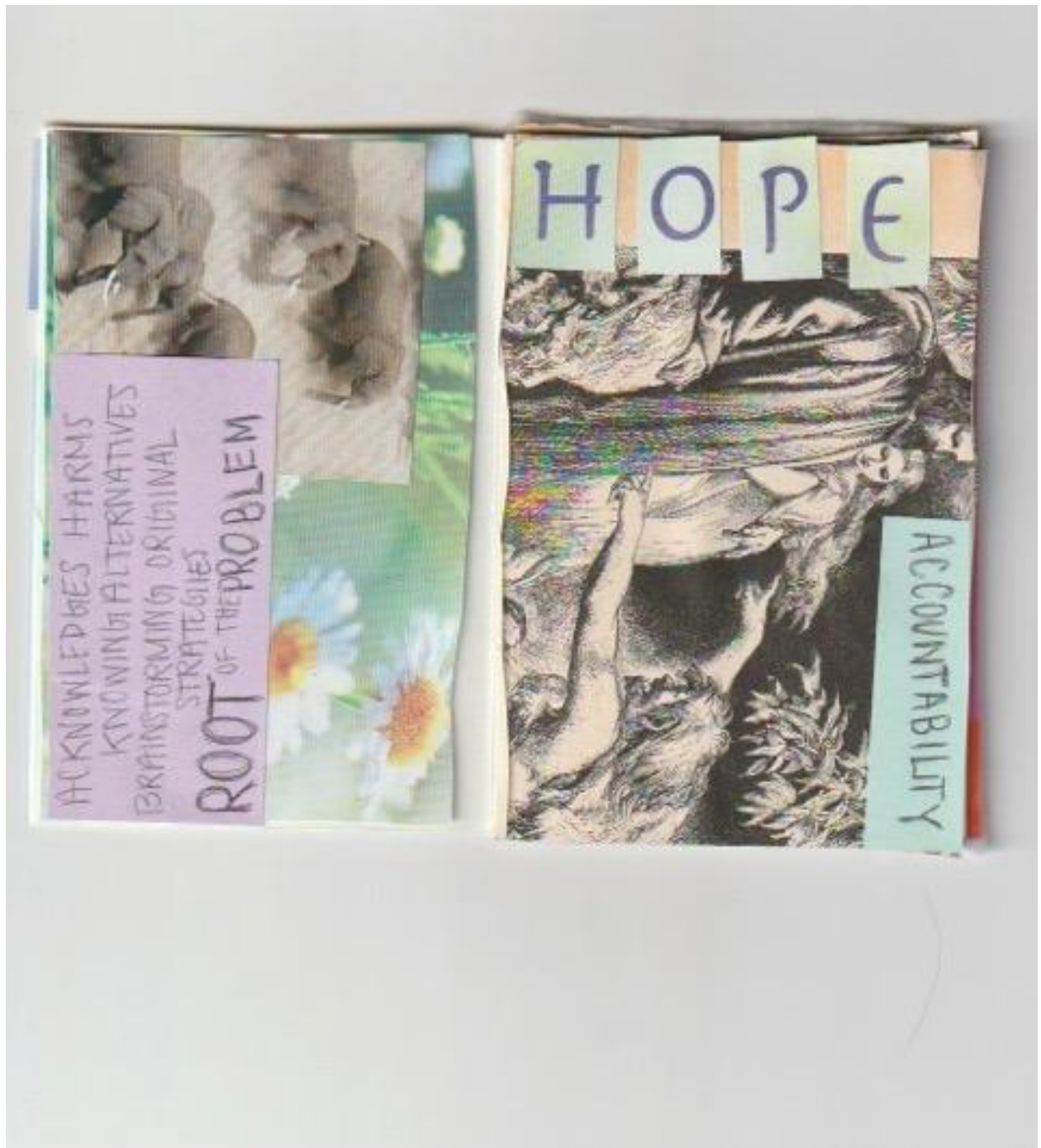


Figure 9.

~Abigail Turner, M.A, student (no written text)

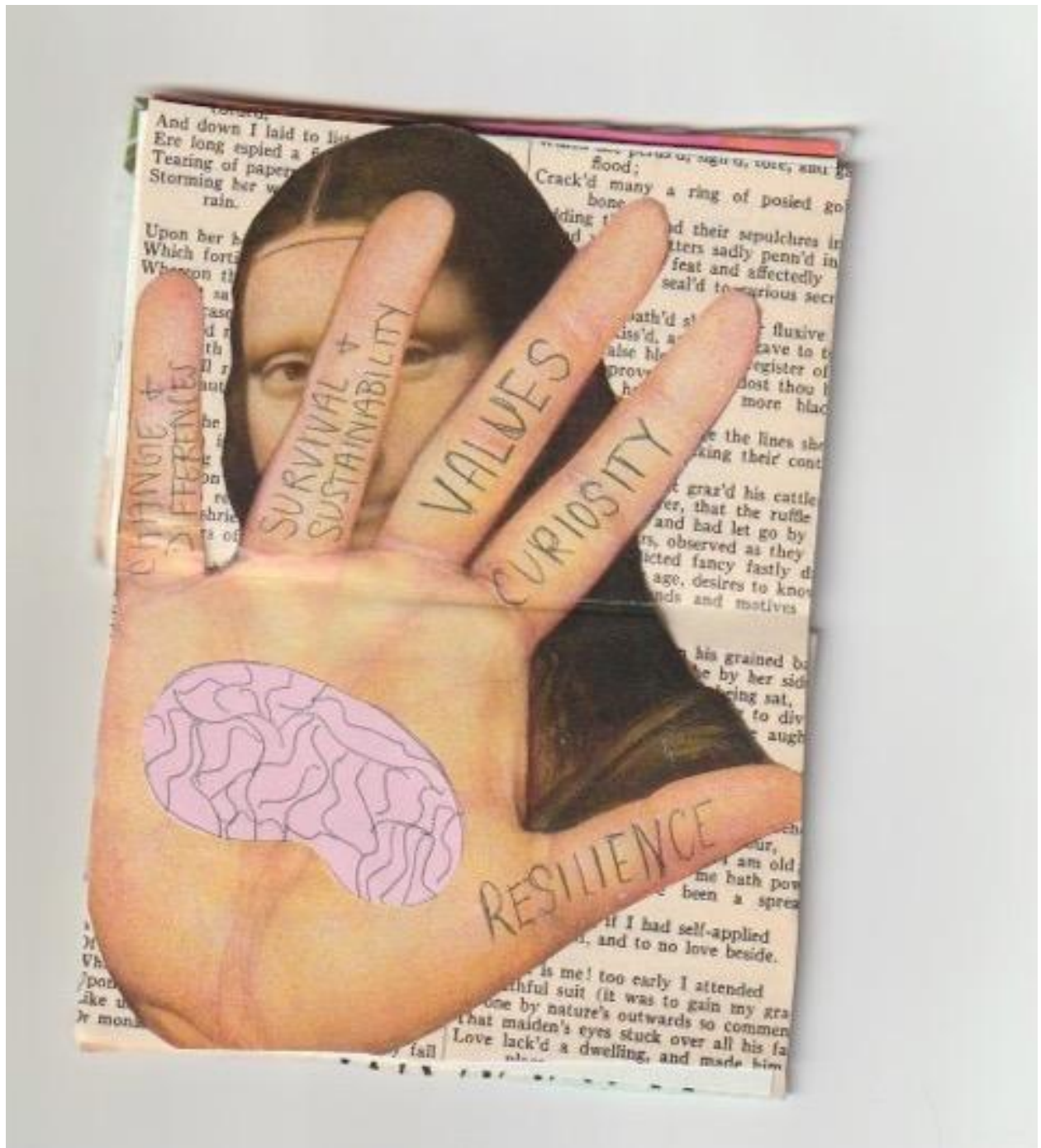


Figure 10.

-Abigail Turner, M.A, student (no written text)

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