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How Many Voices is One? Three Uses of Collage as Activism for Young Women

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Abstract

Positing visual aesthetics, in general, and the artistic medium of collage, specifically, as activist literacies, the author presents critical reviews of three books targeted toward teenage girls. Each book is shown in turn to promote, via written words and collaged images, three distinct modes of activism: assimilative, subversive, and disruptive. The assessment of each book is based upon this particular conjunction of form and content in relation to the intended audience.

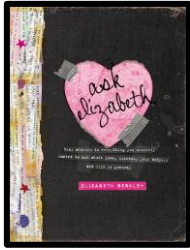
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So profound is our belief in literacy that any question of its apparently inherent goodness can feel like blasphemy. Yet, as a children's library coordinator with a background in philosophy and aesthetics, I see that the very process of acquiring the knowledge and physiological capacity to engage with literacy through reading demands our awareness of a vast program replete with structure, rule, and transgressive consequence. Adults typically retain some memory of these early encounters: being guided aloud through a storybook from the lap of a caregiver or among peers in a classroom or library. . . . Indeed, in their ideal forms the various means of learning such strategic play not only result in the satisfying of "proper" communicative constraints but also in the reinforcement of normative social values. This selfsame play, however, may be put to the task of massaging or even entirely undermining those very norms they might otherwise encourage.

What is generally obtained with less rigorous procedurals, and is therefore generally less well recalled, is our understanding of and assumptions regarding "visual literacy," which involves our ability to discern some intentionality in the graphic work. In other words, any analogy of corresponding literacies is ultimately dependent upon the recognition of a potentially legible encoding of meaning. Because the visual field is taught as one of our "five senses," however, it is all too easily taken as natural intuition rather than constructed artifice. We tend not to consider our very concept of nature as scaffolding that helps order that which fundamentally prepossesses no encoded meaning whatever—but even tea leaves aren't read until steeped in human processes, encoded, if subtly imparted, construct that organizes a society and manifests throughout the entire spectrum of classes, subcultures, races, genders, ages, and so forth, in all their myriad combinations.

Bearing this in mind, the work of activism, broadly speaking, involves attending to one or more literacies in an effort to persuade or force a socially consequential change in the world. This may take the form of assimilation, in which normative cultural mores are taught; the form of subversion, in which non-normative codes are normalized by way of sly tactics; or the form of a relatively independent construction of a non-normative literacy that may appear transparently to normative systems as potentially disruptive.

This essay examines three works of adolescent literature that represent the aforementioned forms of activism: Elizabeth Berkley's *Ask Elizabeth* (2011), Laurie Rosenwald's *All the Wrong People Have Self-Esteem: an Inappropriate Book for Young Ladies (or, Frankly, Anybody Else)* (2008), and Tavi Gevinson's *Rookie Yearbook One* (2012). These books speak to their target audience by means of the common aesthetic device of collage. Collage operates according to a set of simple rules that permit infinite permutations of basic elements: the cut is a line that subtracts an object from its context, allows the object to enter a state of play as a subjective integer, and is reinserted into a personalized symbolic relationship by means of the glue that solidifies the pact between various other appropriated objects. Make no mistake, these books illustrate that, "To command is to speak to the eyes," as Napoleon declared (as cited in Virilio, 2004).



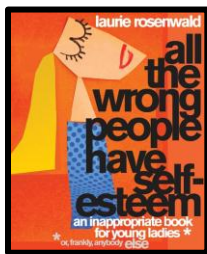
[Ask Elizabeth](#)

Throughout Berkley's *Ask Elizabeth* scraps of paper, business letterhead, printed emails, handwritten marginalia, photographs, memorabilia, and doodles appear to be taped or stapled to each typed page. We learn from the Introduction that the book grew out of workshops created by Berkley to give teen girls “a place to get real—to be able to feel heard, ask your questions, laugh, cry, vent, and most important, know that no matter what you're experiencing, you're not alone.”

Unfortunately, this perfectly laudable project is implicitly founded upon the assumption that young women don't already possess such spaces of “realness” on their own terms. To be sure, there is a wealth of positive written information in these pages, but it is repeatedly couched in terms of the “imperfect reflection” (Chapter One), the “broken heart” (Chapter Two), the “mean girls” (Chapter Three), the “drama at home” (Chapter Four), and the “secret worries” (Chapter Five).

It's bad enough that nowhere does a positive exist without its corresponding negative, but the totalizing effect is made all the worse by being set against what comes across as an overwhelmingly affected facade. Perhaps it is worth noting that *Ask Elizabeth* was designed by two men, Paul Kepple and Ralph Geroni of Headcase Design, with “design direction” by Berkley and her husband Greg Lauren. The point of mentioning this is not to say that men cannot aesthetically speak to young women, but simply to draw attention to the fact the collage aesthetic was in this instance executed with a high degree of intentionality in order to appeal specifically to young women. Consequently, a work that is most powerful when Berkley allows the teenage participants of her workshops to speak directly about their personal experiences is immediately undermined by what its aesthetic mediation in turn allows Berkley. Every facsimile of youthful, individualistic handwriting is taken as an opportunity to follow up with an “afterthought” in the form of a handwritten note, a casually typed memorandum or suggested series of “action steps.” By having the final word, Berkley only affirms the homogenizing effect that is already evident in a graphic format calculated to speak to the broadest possible collective body of young women: a litany of very real concerns takes on the tone of stereotypical “teen girl” problems with stereotypical “adult mentor” solutions, all of which is permitted by speaking in the stereotypical “teen girl” language of collage.

For all its well-meaning, *Ask Elizabeth* ultimately comes across as cynical as if the authors had repeatedly utter the phrase “like, totally” in order to speak “their” language. One is left with the feeling that Berkley's support of young women “being themselves” is tantamount to reassuring them that it's okay to be awkward because one day they'll be normal. The great positive of this, of course, is that “normal” girls need books, too. The negative is that normality apparently comes preternaturally loaded with problems and solutions that activism ought perhaps strive to overturn entirely rather than reproduce by merely working through them.



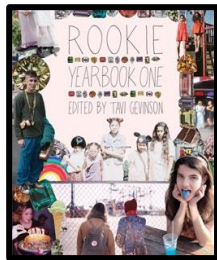
[All the Wrong
People Have
Self-Esteem](#)

If book is a volume of graphically denoted self-esteem workshops, Rosenwald's *All the Wrong People Have Self-Esteem* is its counterpoint. “I think self-esteem,” writes Rosenwald, “is a myth perpetrated by psychologists, movie stars, magazines, and the pharmaceutical industry. They want you to think something's wrong with you because you don't have self-esteem like you 'should'” (Rosenwald, 2008, p. 7). This contrarian position affords Rosenwald a great deal of freedom, which she gleefully shares with her audience. *All the*

Wrong People . . . undoubtedly benefits from Rosenwald's profession as a graphic designer, but rather than co-opting the “look” of collage she uses the medium as an authentic means of direct self-expression. Collage feels like Rosenwald's natural language. As a result, her cut paper, photographs, drawings and typeface play across the pages, and so do our eyes. The words, in which Rosenwald might make a single irreverent quip or recount stealing make-up at age twelve, are not simply facilitated by the technique of collage but are an integral part of its general composition.

It is likely that certain readers will find this experience chaotic and bewildering, unsure of where to find answers. The great joy of the book, however, is that it operates as a complete object. Large swaths of color, blank lines, and figures emerging out of randomly found shapes—every element begs some question, invites participation, and demonstrates Rosenwald's belief in disorder as creative process. Nevertheless, the well-ordered individual is likely to view any endorsement of purposeful mistake-making as essentially useless, and a young person who requires structure might well see the collage aspect as decoration in lieu of “real” content rather than as content itself.

Rosenwald, like Berkley, is of course an adult speaking to young people, and the intentionality is frequently felt. Perhaps, however, this reveals a greater subversion of structural integrity than her offer of a grab-bag of inspired “uselessness” because it requires adult readers to consider reorganizing the way we speak to young people. While *All the Wrong People* might not appeal to every young reader, it might well offer a way for adults to relate to those young people who the book does appeal to—the ones that thrive in a state of healthy disarray.



[Rookie Yearbook One](#)

The perennial problem of books for young people written exclusively by adults is remedied by *Rookie Yearbook One*, edited by Tavi Gevinson. The book is based on the first year of *Rookie*, an online magazine founded by Gevinson, which was initially based on her earlier fashion blog *Style Rookie*. When Gevinson was eleven years old she began *Style Rookie* in 2008, fifteen when she founded *Rookie*, and *Rookie Yearbook One* was published about five months after her sixteenth birthday. It is important to point this out not because we ought to be surprised or impressed that a teenager has accomplished such a task, but simply to call attention to the fact that this is a work fundamentally controlled by a young woman and her friends. Additionally, because much of the written and photographic content originally appeared in an online format, it is necessary to point out that the pieces have been specifically adapted for the print medium. As Gevinson says, “This is the stuff that needed to be in pages adorned with doodles and glitter. . .” (Gevinson, 2012, p. 13).

What creates the need for this shift between digital and print mediums? Certainly there are analogs of drawing, of adorning, and of cutting and pasting available through computer technologies, but the tactile quality of these endeavors is always translated into the language of the screen. The printed book is a technologically reproduced item, but with the digital landscape as its reference point, it seems capable of a specific sort of intimacy. Functionally, the use of collage in *Rookie Yearbook One* is perched between marginal decoration and intrusive clashes of textures and colors. But this is only the most cursory sort of collage found in the book.

In fact, there is no aspect of *Rookie* that is not informed by the logic of collage. Not only does Gevinson, as editor, seemingly allow her fellow writers and artists the space to come together and thereby produce a multiplicity of voices, she also understands that an individual might herself be a multiplicity. When CNN's Abbey Goodman stated it was "endearing" that someone so culturally savvy as Gevinson would admire Taylor Swift, Gevinson replied, in part, "Obviously it's not for everyone, but I used to think that there are cheerleaders and there are art kids. And then I realized that's really silly and sometimes you feel like a cheerleader and sometimes you feel like an art kid, and there's a part of everyone that feels lonely or like an outcast. The idea that feeling confident and feeling misunderstood are mutually exclusive really bugs me. So a lot of what *Rookie* is about is just showing that you can be both and you can like whatever you want. In short, yes, I love Taylor Swift" (<http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/02/showbiz/celebrity-news-gossip/tavi-gevinson-profile>). This, perhaps, best gets to the heart of the collage aesthetic, which gathers together a community of diverse elements by recognizing that each one is in itself fundamentally polyvocal.

Rookie Yearbook One is, in a sense, certainly Gevinson's own great collage. But, as a book, it is full of countless voices. Not only do we meet teenagers of all genders, but we meet older friends, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and admired people both famous and unknown. We also encounter, in lieu of mix-tapes, lists of songs organized thematically, which represent an incredible range of musical tastes. We see photographs the teens have taken of each other modeling clothing designed by other friends. We get confessional stories, cautionary tales, anecdotes, interviews, and transcriptions of late-night conversations. And, although it could well have grown organically out of the sort of messiness advocated Rosenwald, the sum total never feels cluttered or disorienting. It feels warm, like the kind of thing you've made in your own bedroom with your own friends so many times yourself.

Possibly the most refreshing thing about *Rookie Yearbook One* is that it doesn't think of itself as an activist cause, but so apparently does everything out of a simple love for the thing-in-itself. Why should teens sharing their thoughts with each other and the world be considered as something extraordinary? There is, for example, no evident life-long benefit to making a zine or crafting yourself a pair of saddle shoes from old white sneakers and a black marker. Yet it is exactly this propensity for creative solutions to arbitrary problems that toys with normative codes, defies institutional classifications, and seeks everyday ways for the outlying voice to be heard. Whatever flaws *Rookie* may possess, they are flaws embodied in a format that reminds the adult reader that teen girls do not need a space "given" to them. In fact, there might not be a collective "them" at all, but myriad communities opening up spaces on their own terms in ways great and subtle.

Whether it is put to the use of assimilation, subversion or an independent, polyvocal expression, collage is above all aesthetics-as-activism par excellence. Every aesthetic is essentially divisive; it is up to us as everyday activists to choose how conscientious we are in deciding the divisions.

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- Virlio, P. (2004). *City of panic* (J. Rose, Trans.). New York, NY: Berg.

Authors' Websites

- Elizabeth Berkley: <http://ask-elizabeth.com/>
- Tavi Gevinson: <http://rookiemag.com/>
- Laurie Rosenwald: <http://www.rosenworld.com/>

Additional Online Resources

- Tavi Gevinson at TED Talks:
http://www.ted.com/talks/tavi_gevinson_a_teen_just_trying_to_figure_it_out.html
- Laurie Rosenwald at Cusp Conference:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zX6kC6KpCIw>