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**Cyberspace, Y2K:
Giant Robots, Asian Punks**

RACHEL RUBIN

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The views contained in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily of the Institute for Asian American Studies.

Cyberspace Y2K: Giant Robots, Asian Punks¹

RACHEL RUBIN

On the eve of the 21st century, a group of young Asian American writers bravely announced—tongue partially in cheek, in keeping with the aesthetic of sincere irony that characterizes the so-called Generation X—their recreation of “a monster.” This announcement, posted on the internet (at www.gidra.net), was drafted by the “editorial recollective” of *Gidra*, a *samizdat* (self-published) monthly newsletter launched thirty years earlier by a group of UCLA students who wanted a forum where they could address the particular concerns and issues facing Asian Pacific Americans in the Vietnam War era. Writers and editors of a new *Gidra* declared in 1999 with a flourish their intention to create a publication that would provide a way to “get off our collective asses, look ahead and define the world of tomorrow.”

The circumstances of *Gidra*'s moment of rebirth—from the idealism and bravado demonstrated by its writers, to its relatively low profile on an internet positively cluttered with volunteer-produced websites—encapsulates a number of important directions in which popular culture (especially popular print culture) had developed since the original *Gidra* ceased publication after five years. Non-commercial “amateur” publications like the new *Gidra*, known as “zines,” are the result of consequential international, national, and local processes that have radically altered the entertainment industry (as well as the relationship of audiences to that industry). And Asian American young people (women in particular) have found in zines a remarkably congenial venue for self-expression and self-definition: scores of zines are devoted to the tal-

¹The following essay has been written as a chapter for a forthcoming book, *Immigrants and American Popular Culture* [NYU Press]. The book, which is geared toward undergraduate classroom use, uses six case studies over the span of the twentieth century to show how immigrants have used popular culture, and how popular culture has used immigrants, to identify, define, and respond to both conflicts and alliances among different groups marked off by race/ethnicity, region, linguistic identity, and so forth. Each chapter will include glossary, maps, and illustrations. “Cyberspace, Y2K” is the book’s final chapter.

ents, cultural needs, and political realities of Asian Americans. An understanding of the import of these zines takes us from military history through the history of its offspring, technological innovation: the Internet has traveled from its origins inside the war machine all the way to the sex lives (and other personal spaces) of its users.

Who is Asian American on the Internet?

Amy Ling defines “Asian America” in a poem as “Asian ancestry/American struggle” (Ling 1). This couplet captures the duality of experience, the divided heart, that Ling feels characterizes the lived lives of Americans with Asian ancestry. She continues in this vein to describe a “tug in the gut” and “a dream in the heart”—definitions that are wonderfully evocative, but elusively (and purposefully) non-concrete. Indeed, the *feeling* of being Asian American, the varied and internal processes by which that name acquires particular meaning, for all its ineffability, is actually much easier to pin down than it is to formulate an answer that refers to a map. Because while Asia is the world’s largest continent, accounting for more than a third of the world’s land mass and two-thirds of the world’s population—including some 140 different nationalities—the term “Asian American” has been mostly used to refer only to American immigrants from certain Asian nations, but not others. Furthermore, the term’s application has not been entirely consistent, so that “Asian American” can include one list of ethnic groups in the federal census, another list of ethnic groups in a college’s Asian American Studies curriculum, yet another list in the political rhetoric of an

activist organization or an elected official, and so on. And when it comes to individuals choosing how to identify themselves, there is a similar range of usage: some consider themselves to be Asian American while others do not, even though they or their parents have immigrated to the United States from a country on the continent of Asia. Finally, the meaning of the term has changed over time to suit the rhetorical needs of different times.

Asian American zine publishing reflects this complexity. A majority of the zines do use the word “Asian” or “Asian American” (instead of exclusively using narrower categories such as “Korean American”). But when more specific identifiers are added, or when “guest books” (open forums some web creators place on their website, so that people who have “visited” the site can comment) are examined, it becomes plain that “Asian American” has been embraced as a way to self-identify by Americans of certain backgrounds, while other Americans with Asian ancestry choose different ways to identify themselves. On the pages (web and print) under consideration here, “Asian American” seems to include backgrounds that are Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Filipina/o, and sometimes South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Nepalese, Bangladeshi). In contrast, writing by Arab Americans or Armenian Americans, for example, does not surface when Asian American search engines are used to navigate the Internet, and does not tend to use “Asian American” and related language as descriptors of its content or creators.

In addition to being constituted by a large number of nationalities, the term “Asian American” is further complicated by the fact that it can refer to immigrants, their children, their grandchildren, or even subsequent gen-

erations. Since the mid-1800s, when Chinese workers came to build the cross-continental railroad, multiple generations of Asian immigrants have made their way to the United States; and from the very beginning, Asian immigration was linked to restriction and racial anxiety. In fact, the notion of controlling immigration based on ethnic and national factors was born in xenophobic fear of Chinese immigrants: welcomed at first as a source of cheap labor, Asian immigrants were soon the subject of pressures to stop the influx of workers. The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, denied admission to Chinese laborers, and subsequent laws in the next two decades further extended the act. The Chinese Exclusion Act also made explicit a provision that had been invoked vaguely since the first American naturalization law of 1790 announced that only “free whites” could naturalize: Chinese immigrants were “aliens ineligible for citizenship.”

The rhetoric surrounding this legislation identified the Chinese and Japanese as forever alien, as “heathens,” as so immutably different from white Americans that they could never assimilate into American society and adopt “American” ways. It was here that the precedent was set that immigration to the United States was something that could and should be regulated by the government based on group definitions. This approach to controlling who entered the United States represented a significant departure from earlier notions of immigrant desirability based on individual qualifications. The exclusion of Asian immigrants from American citizenship culminated in 1924 with the Quota Act that declared that “no alien ineligible for citizenship” could be admitted to the United States.

Restrictions against Asian immigration began to loosen somewhat following World War II. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed, and the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, while restrictionist in nature, nonetheless gave token quotas to all Asian countries. A bit earlier, in 1945, the War Brides Act allowed wives and children of members of the American armed services to enter the United States, without being subjected to evaluation by racial or national criteria. These moves are generally considered to represent a progressive wedge in anti-Asian exclusion; however, historian Rachel Buff has recently pointed out that such measures actually opened up systematic opportunities for a kind of sexual imperialism, in which United States military men created personal circles of influence, which they then claimed as “American” and incorporated into the United States (personal discussion with author about ongoing research). Buff’s quite ground-breaking analysis reveals a power dynamic within Asian immigration, acted out on a sexual and domestic plane, that Asian American zine creators took up in force a half-century later.

Asian mass immigration did not return until 1965, when the so-called “new Asian immigration” followed the liberalization of the quota system under the Hart-Celler Act. By 1970, Asians were the fastest growing group of immigrants to the United States. By 1980, nearly half of all immigrants to the United States came from Asia.

The “new” immigration would completely change the nature of Asian American communities, which previously had been made up largely of Chinese- and Japanese-Americans. Now, the variety of Asian groups expanded; soon, the fastest-growing Asian ethnic groups in the United States were those previously not

represented. The “new” Asian immigrants came from South Korea, the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Singapore and Malaysia.

The “new immigration” was marked by two visible groups of immigrants. First, in contrast to the earlier generations, came what historian Reed Ueda has called “a human capital migration” of highly educated professionals and technical workers (65). These elites from India, the Philippines, China and Korea worked in health care, technical industries, and managerial positions.

The “new” immigration also brought waves of low-skilled and poor immigrants from Asia. One million refugees from Northeast and Southeast Asia came to the United States from the end of World War II to 1990. Chinese refugees fled to the United States following World War II. The devastation of the Vietnam War brought refugees from Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos (including minority subgroups such as the ethnic Chinese from Vietnam and the ethnic Hmong from Laos and elsewhere). Unlike the Chinese railroad workers of a century earlier, these “new” immigrants were planning to stay permanently in the United States. They therefore naturalized in large numbers, brought over extended families, and formed new Asian communities as well as transforming and revitalizing older ones.

The history of Asian immigration gives some sense of how complicated and fraught the definition of “Asian American” can be. The idea of a pan-Asian identity, implied by the term “Asian American,” dates back to the political activism of the 1960s; the term was first used as an organizing tool to facilitate discussions around issues of racism in the United States and issues of global politics in

Asian countries, such as the recognition of China, the Vietnam War, the presence of American military rule in South Korea, and so forth. (Indeed, the original *Gidra* also was born out of anti-Vietnam war movement, and stressed the movement’s particular importance for Asian Americans; articles such “GIs and Asian Women” and “The Nature of GI Racism,” for instance, addressed the implications for race relations in the United States of the United States Army’s tactic of dehumanizing Asians—particularly Asian women—as a way to create psychological conditions that would allow the killing of Vietnamese.)

The geopolitics of Asian immigration to the United States is, therefore, responsible for the very notion that there is such a thing as “Asian American” identity. In the various countries of origin, an “Asian” identity would not be primary; people might identify as “Korean” or “Chinese” or “Indian”—or, even more likely, according to even more specific categories of religion, caste, region, and so forth. While there are certainly cultural as well as environmental similarities among various Asian nations, lumping together the dozens of ethnicities of the huge continent can obscure much more than it explains. But as part of the compound “Asian American,” “Asian” gains relevance and specificity as a social or cultural identifier. In large part, this is because of the way that “mainstream” American vision has categorized Asians from without, and speaks to the status of “other” conferred upon them; after all, “Asian” still has not fully replaced the word “Oriental,” formerly the general term and rejected during the 1960s and 1970s as reflecting a colonialist mentality. (“Oriental” means “Eastern” or having to do with the East. Since directions are relative, the word “Oriental” betrays

Eurocentrism; in other words, Asia is east of what?) In short, while there is a big difference—not to mention many miles—between, say, a Buddhist from Tibet and a Japanese Hawaiian, or between someone from the Indonesian islands and someone from Kazakhstan, that distance has tended to be collapsed in the public imagination once these immigrants arrive in the United States. (This conflation has at times occurred against the efforts of Asian immigrants themselves, as during World War II, when some Chinese and Koreans wore buttons claiming “I’m Chinese, not Japanese,” and still faced abuse or ostracization.)

But immigrants from the various Asian countries also have had their own reasons for embracing an Asian American identity. A strategic essentialism can facilitate the cultural empowerment that permits Americans like the editors of *Gidra* (in both incarnations) to speak of an “Asian” experience in the first place—not to mention building the solidarity that could allow for Asian representation in elected bodies of government. Thus, while individual Asian countries and cultures are often singled out in Asian American zine culture (*Bamboo Girl* targets the Filipina/o community, for instance, while *Half Korean* speaks to Korean intermarriage), more often zine writers bolster the symbolic ethnicity of “Asian American”—symbolic, because of its rhetorical and deliberate nature, but nonetheless possessed of real-world implications. Singer/songwriter Chris Iijima explains this dynamic:

We were able to construct an APA [Asian Pacific American] identity precisely because our shared experience as Asians in America—always cast as foreigners and

marginalized as outsiders—allowed us to bridge ethnic lines and allowed a platform and commonality engage and understand other people and their struggles... You ask whether there is an “authentic” Asian American sensibility. Asian American identity was originally conceived to allow one to “identify” with the experiences and struggles of other subordinated people—not just with one’s own background. (Ling 320-321)

Iijima’s words emphasize that Asian American identity is a deliberate and motivated thing: experiential rather than biological, grounded in the present as much as or more than in the past. For Asian American cyberzine writers, whose numbers include immigrants, the children of immigrants, or the grandchildren of immigrants, the constructedness of “Asian American,” coupled with the definitively de-centered nature of virtual reality, creates a wide-open, compelling cultural opportunity.

Where did cyberculture come from?

The technological innovation upon which cyberculture is built was, as is often the case with new technologies, an outgrowth of military research. In other words, the wars and international conflicts that were responsible for the mass migration of Asians to the United States after 1965 also provided the impetus for the research that led to the creation of the Internet. The germinal idea of the Internet was first conceived some thirty years ago by the RAND Corporation. RAND, the United States’s foremost Cold War think-tank, was trying to answer a particular strategic question: How could United States authorities communicate with each other following a

nuclear war? The problem was that any network would be shattered by a nuclear bomb, and furthermore, the network's central command station would be an obvious target for attack. So RAND's scientists came up with a network that was assumed to be vulnerable at all times—but would work anyway, since there would be no central station, and no single path of communication. If part of the network should be inoperable, the information would simply travel via an alternative route.

In 1968, the Pentagon's Advance Research Projects Agency funded a large, ambitious project to explore the concept of a decentralized network. High-speed computers were to be the stations in this network (called "nodes"); the first station was installed at the University of California-Los Angeles in 1969. In the next few years, more stations were added. These stations were able to transfer large amounts of data very quickly, and could be programmed remotely from the other stations. Although this feature was a boon for researchers, it did not take long for it to become clear that the most of the computer time on the network was being used not for research or collaboration among scientists, but for personal messages.

The computer mailing list was invented early on, allowing the same message to be sent to large numbers of network subscribers. Thus, almost from its inception, creation of a mass audience was key to the Internet's appeal to huge numbers of users. This was an important step toward the proliferation of cyberzine writing, for it contains the seeds of the technology that provides e-zine writers with an almost unlimited readership.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, more and more social groups acquired powerful computers. It became increasingly easy to

connect these computers to the growing network, turning them into new "nodes" in the system that would come to be called the Internet. The software belonged to the public domain (no one owned the rights and it was widely available), and the leadership was fully decentralized as originally planned by RAND. Connecting cost little or nothing, since each station was independently maintained. Quickly, anarchically, and unevenly, the Internet network mushroomed, and by the 1990s, Internet connection was a necessity for many businesses, "computer literacy" became a requirement for college education, and "personal computers" found their way into more and more homes, in the United States and elsewhere.

The decade of the 1990s saw the fastest growth of the Internet, which was expanding at a rate of twenty percent per month. Moving outward from its original base in military and scientific arenas, the Internet established itself in educational institutions of all levels (including preschool), libraries, businesses of all kinds, and, of course, personal residences. Since any computer with enough memory needs only a modem and phone line to be added to the network, the Internet continues to spread more and more rapidly, on an increasingly global scale.

The chaotic nature of the Internet's spread has gifted it with a uniquely democratic nature. By comparing the Internet to the English language, Internet historian Bruce Sterling stresses the very basic cultural significance of the Internet's easy access:

The Internet's "anarchy" may seem strange or even unnatural, but it makes a certain deep and basic sense. It's rather like the "anarchy" of the English lan-

guage. Nobody rents English, and nobody owns English. As an English-speaking person, it's up to you to learn how to speak English properly, and make whatever use you please of it (though the government previous certain subsidies to help you learn to read and write a bit). Otherwise, everybody just sort to pitches in, and somehow the thing evolves on its own, and somehow turns out workable. And interesting. Fascinating, even. Though lots of people earn their living from using and exploiting and teaching English, "English" as an institution is public property, a public good. Would English be improved if "The English Language, Inc." had a board of directors and a chief executive officer, or a President and a Congress? There'd probably be a lot fewer new words in English, and a lot fewer new ideas. (Sterling 4)

Indeed, it is not uncommon for zine writers to claim that they began their zine because they could not find publications that suited their own cultural needs. According to Sabrina Margarita of *Bamboo Girl*, now 31, she launched her zine several years ago for this reason:

It started in 1995, and I pretty much started launching it because I could not find anything reading material-wise that I could relate to. Because most of the items that dealt with feminism or queer identity weren't really geared toward women of color. So I had to search for items that dealt with women of color. However, when I did, I did not find anything that was very supportive of the feminist or

queer communities. In particular, I was looking for Asian American publications, and most of these only addressed upwardly-mobile professionals. Which totally did not include me. (Margarita interview)

Because of her needs as a reader, Sabrina Margarita started handing out copies of her zine—which is paper, with an informational website that serves to publicize it—to her friends, making up about a hundred photocopies of each issue. A few years later, in 2001, she has a circulation of 3,000, works with about five or six contributors in each issue, and sells the journals by mail but also in some bookstores. As Sabrina Margarita's experience with *Bamboo Girl* shows, in Internet publishing, the lines become thoroughly blurred between consumption (or audience), and production (or writer)—with the democratic access to the Net acting as conduit from one to the other. Another example can be drawn from Kristina Wong's e-zine *Big Bad Chinese Mama*. The site features parodic biographies and photos of fake mail order brides. At first, the 23-year-old Wong used her own photograph and ones she collected from her friends. Now, she says, she receives and posts pictures mailed to her from women around the country and beyond (Wong interview).

That the Internet is, as Sterling puts it, "headless, anarchic, million-limbed" (Sterling 5) also has concrete and particular influence on what webzines look like. There are millions of public files that can be accessed and downloaded (transferred to the computer one is using) easily and in a matter of moments. In other words, zine writers can look around the Internet and find a seemingly endless supply of elements they can add to their zines: pho-

tographs, artwork, language, music, and more can be included with a simple cut-and-paste. And zine writers with just a little more hardware and a few more computer skills can easily scan into the computer images or sounds of their choosing (which other people, after visiting the site, can in turn download to their own computers).

A result of this cut-and-paste smorgasbord is that many cyberzines take their shape and their energy from the contrasts and juxtapositions of the collage. The vast world of the Internet has encouraged zinesters to develop the style of pastiche, already important in print zines. But using the Internet, the collage can include many more forms (animation, music, etc.). Cyberzines can also make their pastiche multi-layered through the use of hypertexting, by which a highlighted word or image, “clicked” with a computer mouse, jumps the reader to another screen from within the first one. Readers can jump back and forth among hypertexted pages, potentially creating endless combinations of pages, images, and sounds. In addition, highlighted links can also take readers to other users’ sites, which might be similar or relevant to the original zine (as in Mimi Nguyen’s list of feminist and Asian American web sites, linked to her zine *Exoticize This*), or might simply be a site the original web writer likes (as in Kristina Wong’s list of other sites that happen to tickle her fancy, linked to her site *Big Bad Chinese Mama*).

As an artistic strategy, pastiche finds its power in juxtaposition and constant re-contextualization. Words, sounds, and images circulate hypothetically endlessly, acquiring new layers of meaning, as they carry the associations and meanings from previous usages with them into their new contexts. One of the rich-

est expressions of this cut-and-paste is the art of sampling in hip hop music, wherein musical, spoken or other sounds previously recorded are included within the rap song. The result is a wholly new frame of reference for the sample—and also an affirmation of shared cultural experience, because in order to understand the new song fully, a listener must remember and recognize the sample.

Because the artistic mandates of pastiche inspire its practitioners to seek new elements to borrow or include in all sorts of places, pastiche also expresses and enacts the web of processes that constitute globalization. The Internet has connected up different parts of the world in a powerful new way: images, words, etc. can flow across borders in more directions and faster than ever before. (Among other things, this makes policing speech that is unprotected in the United States, such as child pornography, much harder to do, as Internet users can simply visit web sites generated in other countries.) The process of importing and exporting cultural bits from all around the globe can lead to a web zine which contains content that originated almost anywhere.

The aesthetics of pastiche, in which originality and newness are not primary values, but recirculation, reproduction and reinterpretation are, is a hallmark of an economic and artistic system called postmodernism. Economically speaking, “postmodern” refers to a system that does not depend chiefly upon industry and production (as did the “modern” economy) but rather on information technologies and service-based jobs: work in offices rather than factories, marketing of experiences rather than goods, and relying upon the rapid transfer of information made possible by fax machines, cellular phones, photocopiers, overnight mail services, and above all, the

Internet. When used in reference to culture, “postmodern” generally refers to a constellation of aesthetic concerns and practices, including a lack of certainty about meaning (privileging the reader’s ability to decode meaning based on his or her interest and experience); an elevation of the popular; and a continuous re-contextualization of pre-existing texts or fragments of texts. Thus, the Internet—with its rapid processing of information—is both product of, and medium for, the postmodern sensibility—which, in turn, speaks for and to an increasingly global economy.

Another hallmark of the postmodern sensibility is a fascination with the body as changeable and socially constructed. This fascination has manifested itself in a variety of ways, including a ferocious surge in popularity of plastic surgery, body piercing, tattooing, and the like, especially on the part of young people who grew up in the postmodern era. (In the case of body piercing and tattooing, the popularity points not only to a notion of the body as shapeable, but also to the process of globalized culture, as these practices have been widely practiced for a long time in other, “developing” countries.) In this regard, the Internet inserts a fascinating twist: what can we say about the idea of the body (as a place where cultural texts may be inscribed) in a circumstance where it is essentially removed? How do bodies function at all, and what do they mean, in cyberspace?

In the world of the Internet, ethnic publishing, such as Asian American e-zines, presents a fascinating contradiction. In the first place, bodies are a major way in which ethnicity or race get written and read, and therefore, a certain amount of exploration of what makes an Asian American body is unavoidable.

Zinester Mimi Nguyen, in her online zine *slander*, meditates at some length about the range of ways her Asian body can “mean” depending upon what sort of hairstyle she is wearing:

All through high school I had “natural” long black hair. A white man approached me in the park one day, told me he must have been an “Oriental” man in a former life, because he loves the food, the culture, and the women. At the mall a black Marine looked me up and down and informed me he had just returned from the Philippines, and could he have my phone number?... I cut off all my hair and damaged it with fucked-up chemicals because I was sick of the orientalist gaze being directed at/on me. (<http://www.worsethanqueer.com/slander/hair.html>)

Nguyen continues to explore the complexities of hair in a racialized setting: can bleaching black hair imply self-hatred? What does it mean to dye your hair green? Does hairstyle have anything to do with politics?

But despite the urgency of Nguyen’s descriptions of how her body has looked at various times, and what physical changes she has made to her appearance, there is no real corporality to the medium in which she registers her complaint. One thing that makes the Internet possible is that place has no literal meaning, and that neither users nor information need be located in a fixed position. Furthermore, it is an Internet tradition of sorts to use that lack of physicality to create, and re-create, various identities according to whim, so that “a central utopian discourse around computer technology is the potential



Illustration A

“Mail order brides” from *Big Bad Chinese Mama*.

offered by computers for humans to escape the body” (Lupton 479). In chat rooms, for instance, men regularly log on as women or women as men, users invent entire personas for themselves including made-up physical descriptions, and people have “virtual sex”:

Role-playing sites on the Internet...offer their participants programming features such as the ability to physically ‘set’ one’s gender, race and physical appearance, through which they can, indeed are required to, project a version of the self which is inherently theatrical. Since the ‘real’ identities of the interlocutors...are unverifiable...it can be said that everyone who participates is ‘passing,’ as it is impossible to tell if a character’s description matches a player’s physical characteristics. (Nakamura 712)

For some Asian American zinesters, bodies are an obsession because sex and sexuality have been so central in the process of marginalizing and commodifying Asian Americans. On the Internet, pornographic images abound that hawk the stereotype of the physically small, submissive Asian woman, or the emasculated Asian man. Several zinesters expressed to me a kind of annoyed weariness at still having to harp on the “I’m not a geisha” protest, while web sites like the one maintained by the Asian porn star Annabel Chong—who caused a stir by filming “the biggest gang-bang in history,” in which she had sex with 251 men in ten hours—strive to emphasize agency and humor in the sexualized Asian body. Nonetheless, the zinesters admit, these notions remain ubiquitous. Sabrina Margarita has received drawings sent without apparent malice to *Bamboo Girl* of Asian men having sex

with white straight men; Holly Tse, editor of *AsiaZine*, points out that even a purportedly Asian-oriented web site, Click2Asia.com, registers under its umbrella literally hundreds of porn-swapping and sex-oriented clubs that advertise young Asian women (Margarita interview and Tse interview). To further complicate matters, according to cultural critic Lisa Nakamura, when white people create Internet personas that are non-white, Asian personae are by far the most common—and the way these personae are drawn tends to reiterate and reinforce a handful of very recognizable racial and ethnic stereotypes, such as the submissive woman or de-sexed man mentioned above (Nakamura 714).

In this light, the most daring and oppositional aspect of Kristina Wong’s *Big Bad Chinese Mama* might be the fact that she publishes photographs of Asian women—all looking ugly on purpose (see illustration A). This completely flies in the face of what Asian women are “supposed” to do with their bodies—or what any women are supposed to do with their bodies, as the multi-million dollar cosmetics industry attests. The captions accompanying the photos of young women making absurd faces, picking their noses, sitting on the toilet, or sticking out their tongues refer to the cultural expectations they are working to thwart: “Not quite a lotus blossom, but the next best thing,” one reads. Another, cleverly, offers a haiku: “I know my purpose/my life is but to serve ME/get your own damn beer (<http://www.bigbadchinese.com/meredith.html>).

Where did zines come from?

The world of zines is incredibly varied, so that most definitions will tend to be inadequate. Until fairly recently, zines were part of a cul-

tural underground; self-produced and haphazardly distributed, they were driven by passion rather than profit, and, although their focuses could literally be on any subject, they generally shared a contempt for big-business publishing, a celebration of the quirky and the confessional, and a respect for the open expression of unpopular tastes and ideas.

At the present, zines can be divided into two basic categories: print zines and cyberzines (also called e-zines). By now, paper zines range from handwritten sheets, stapled, photocopied, and mailed to friends, to elaborately produced publications created by editors with skills in desktop publishing and sold in alternative bookstores and even some big chain stores (such as Tower Records). Cyberzines run a similar gamut: some of the designs are visually spectacular, and make use of video clips, digital photographs, links to other sites, and so forth, while others are essentially text-only rants. While there are still hundreds of paper zines being published, cyberzines are proliferating even faster, because they are even cheaper to produce, there is no need to worry about distribution at all, and the potential audience is practically limitless.

The name “zine” is not directly descended from the more common “magazine,” as might be supposed. Instead, the antecedent for “zine” is “fanzine,” a term that originated in the 1930s to describe cheap periodicals that published science fiction stories. The growth of the popularity of science fiction coincided

with the surge in popularity of the mimeograph machine, with the result that the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s saw a boom in self-publishing of these fanzines, which began to contain not only science fiction but also comics, fantasy stories, mysteries, and other popular forms of writing. These fanzines left an indelible mark on the popular cultural landscape. For instance, in the third issue of *Science Fiction*, published in 1932 by Jerome Siegel and Joe Schuster, a character named Superman was introduced.

The tradition of self-publishing was further developed during the 1960s, when activists in a number of grass-roots organizations began publishing their own newsletters and alternative newspapers across the United States. In addition to *Gidra*, some of the more prominent alternative papers of this era included the *Berkeley Barb*, the *Los Angeles Free Press*, and the Detroit’s *Fifth Estate*. The era of the 1960s also added underground comix (most famously represented by cartoonist R. Crumb) and music fanzines to the mix.²

The late 1970s and 1980s saw the birth of punk subculture as a reaction against the incorporation of rock and roll music into big business, at the expense of its rebellious nature and musical frisson. As Greil Marcus put it, with the introduction of punk,

Very quickly, pop music changed—and so did public discourse. A NIGHT OF TREASON, promised a poster for a concert by the Clash in London in 1976, and

² The word “comix” (as opposed to the more common “comics”) generally refers to a body of work associated with the 1960s counterculture and comprising the “scene” of underground/independent art, while “comics” refers mostly to newspaper strips and comic books produced by the major publishing companies such as Marvel and D.C. It must be noted, though, that these categories are extremely permeable and at this point the two spelling variants indicate a difference in emphasis, rather than discrete groupings.

that might have summed it up: a new music, called “punk” for lack of anything better, as treason against superstar music you were supposed to love but which you could view only from a distance; against the future society had planned for you; against your own impulse to say yes, to buy whatever others had put on the market, never wondering why what you really wanted was not on sale at all. (Marcus 2)

Hundreds of publications such as *Punk* took a philosophical and aesthetic stand against the bland seamlessness of corporate popular culture by developing a publishing style that fit the punk credo of D.I.Y. (or Do It Yourself). In this light, it is important to emphasize that the unpolished, non-professional style of zines is a positive statement, rather than simply a condition of not being able to do a “better” job. The style of D.I.Y. (and its successor, “indie” or independent) continues to represent a multi-layered critique of the popular culture industry: its motivations, its methods, and its material.

This outspokenly oppositional stance, in the words of R. Seth Friedman (the first compiler and reviewer of zine writing), gave fanzines in the 1980s “the heart of a music fanzine but the character of an underground comic” (Friedman 12). The lessons of punk, coupled with the proliferation during that era of cheap copy-shop chains such as Kinko’s and the introduction of personal computers and printers into a mass number of homes and workplaces, led thousands of people to create their own idiosyncratic zines. And the distribution of the zines also dovetailed with the phi-

losophy of D.I.Y.: authors generally handed them out, or mailed them out themselves after receiving a request and money to cover postage. Even more notably, zine writers often offered a trade instead of a price tag: you send me a copy of your zine, and I’ll send you a copy of mine. The result is a kind of cultural swap-meet that undeniably has its utopian qualities in its ability to create a community of zine producers and consumers without being ruled by the marketplace.

Of course, producing a D.I.Y. zine requires a large amount of commitment on the part of the authors. Holly Tse, who is thirty years old and works full-time, spends from forty to sixty hours producing each issue of *AsiaZine*, which comes out every three months (Tse interview). *AsiaZine* is an extraordinarily attractive and elaborate zine, and sticks to its quarterly production schedule with unusual success, but Tse’s dedication is not unusual.³ Sabrina Margarita of *Bamboo Girl*, for instance, not only makes time to publish her zine but also maintains an e-mail mailing list for “updates” that she sends out between issues.

Why Asian Americans? Why zines?

“Zines have been very good for young Asians,” declares a female college student who helped to organize a zine conference at her Massachusetts college. Lorial Crowder of *Bagong Pinay*, an e-zine with the stated goal of producing a “positive representation for Filipinas on the Internet,” agrees: “It [the zine movement] been really important, a major voice for us” (conversations with the author,

³ In 2002, *AsiaZine*’s production schedule was reduced to three issues per year.

25 July 2001 and October 17 2001). Given the power and frequency of such personal testimonials, it is worth considering concretely what it is, exactly, about the form that has proven to be such a congenial media of expression for Asian American youth. The aesthetic mandates of zine publishing have turned out to serve some particular needs of young Asian Americans.

Asian American zines—paper and electronic—flowered at a time when Asian culture reached the American mainstream in a big way. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Hong Kong action movie hero Jackie Chan became an American star with his crossover hit *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995), which grossed \$28 million during its first release. Americans spent millions of dollars on products from lunchboxes to trading cards to t-shirts touting figures from Japanese animation (most notably Pokemon). Karaoke became a popular pastime for white Americans across the United States and grew into a multi-billion dollar industry. “Japanimation” on television and at the movies broke from its cult status and gained widespread appeal. Girls of all ages began sporting clothing and makeup emblazoned with the resoundingly cute cartoon portrait of the Japanese project trademark “Hello Kitty.”

It is no coincidence that zine production, with its anti-professional stance and its edgy aesthetic, would snowball at precisely this cultural moment of crossover and cooptation, or that its writers and webmasters would voice a nearly continuous appeal to “keep it real” by resisting commercial polish and by defining and describing Asian culture from within. *Gidra*, for instance, refers directly in its inaugural issue to the plethora of “slick, full-color, high-fructose eye syrup publications” about Asian culture that fill the newsstands.

(http://www.gidra.net/Spring_99/bring_it_back.html.) Similarly, the two young writers of “Hi-Yaa!”, June and Phung, refer to the plethora of elaborate websites that exoticize Asian culture as a motivation for starting their own zine (<http://www.hi-yaa.com/index2.html>). The relatively democratic nature of zine publishing (see above) has facilitated to an unprecedented degree for this kind of self-expression.

An important touchstone in Asian American zine publishing reveals unusually clearly this tension between commercial and D.I.Y., between mainstream and marginal. This is the case of *Giant Robot*, launched in 1994 by Martin Wong and David Nakamura. GR, a quarterly zine of Asian American pop culture that comes out of Los Angeles, began as a photocopied affair with a run of 450 copies. GR quickly came to exemplify what would be known as “GenerAsian X,” growing so rapidly that the editors claimed a circulation of 12,000 by the ninth issue. Over the years of its production, GR has taken on a wide range of subjects, including Asian squatters in New York City, Margaret Cho’s stand-up comedy, the Asian American Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Asian haircuts, Asian junk food, and a skateboarding trip by the editors through an abandoned World War II internment camp.

With *Giant Robot* firmly established as a critical and commercial success, a fascinating kind of self-backlash occurred. Issue 17 came out on time in 1999. A photograph of comic Margaret Cho, the first Asian-American star of a TV sitcom (*All-American Girl*), graces the cover, along with a bar code for scanning by large retailers. The perforated subscription blank offers a credit card payment option. Advertisers tout products ranging from books,



Illustration B

Angry Little Asian Girl and friends.

videos and CDs to toys and skateboard gear. In many important ways, the zine maintains its in-your-face stance: headlines scream “milk farts,” “sluts and bolts,” and “eat bugs.” Even so, this is a journal with high production values, a big budget, and wide distribution.

But Wong and Nakamura, it seems, missed something about the indie aesthetic to which self-produced zines generally hew. They created a second zine, which they called “Robot Power,” a raggedy spin-off of *Giant Robot* billed as “Issue 17.5.” (This inaugural issue was followed by subsequent releases, which are released after each issue of *Giant Robot*). *Robot Power* looks very different from its parent: no glossy paper, no color graphics, staples instead of glued binding, and much less advertising (especially by bigger companies). In short, the homemade quality of zines is clearly part of the point, and Wong and Nakamura’s ambivalence about leaving it behind speaks to a central dynamic between the commercial and the “authentic” in the electronic era.

According to R. Seth Friedman of the *Factsheet Five*, the first popular review of zines, the centrality of this dynamic has made the singer Kurt Cobain an icon of zine publishing. Sub Pop, Cobain’s record label with Nirvana, had started as a music fanzine called *Subterranean Pop*. When Nirvana achieved national success, zine culture also grew in prominence. And zine writers elevated Cobain as a figure from the underground music scene who finally got recognition—but who continued to critique the star system and the huge-profit music industry into which he had entered (Friedman 102).

Zines, then, have proved to be an especially congenial forum for the cultural needs of Asian American youth because of the way they allow young people to “talk back” to a cultural industry turning huge profits by selling things Asian. It has also been important that zines, and the punk aesthetic generally, tend to be organized in gleeful opposition to decorum and propriety. In other words, zine publishing has “worked” so well for Asian



Illustration C

The secret life of Hello Kitty.

American youth because it is uniquely successful at providing a means of expression that flies directly in the face of the “polite Asian” stereotype. For young people chafing under the label of “model minority,” the slaphappy world of zine culture is a significant opportunity for opposition. An example is “Dead Fish Online Magazine: An Asian Online Zine.” In addition to the disgusting title (and the illustration that accompanies it), the zine has a banner across the bottom of its home page that declares, “Warning: we are not experts on anything, so complain to someone who cares” (www.deadfish.com).

Similarly, Lela Lee’s character Angry Little Asian Girl (first presented online in 1998) refuses in various comic strip adventures to be anyone’s nice girl—and found a surprising large and loyal audience along the way (see illustration B). This intentional refusal to be polite can be quite emphatic, as illustrated by the many, many references to shit, farts, and comic sex that crop up in the zines. Much artwork by Kristina Wong, of *Big Bad Chinese Mama*, for instance, pivots on the rejection of

being a silent “good girl.” Wong redraws the Japanese cartoon character “Hello Kitty,” an extremely cute kitten drawn with no mouth who appears on a huge number of products, with a caption reading “What Hello Kitty would say if she had a mouth.” Word balloons show the dainty feline saying, “Who’s up for a threesome?” or “Who are you calling a pussy?” (see illustration C).

As these young Asian Americans have it, the notion of “model minority” is both limiting and condescending in the way it seeks to congratulate Asians for knowing their place and buying into the American dream. By focusing on well-off young people who make it to Ivy League colleges, the “model minority” myth leaves out or penalizes Asian immigrants who are struggling against great challenges—language barriers, poverty, racism—and whose future is not assured. A new stereotype emerges of a driven, studious, hyper-competent and above all, conventionally successful Asian American, one that encourages anti-Asian backlash as well as misrepresenting the diversity and complexity of Asian America.

The “model minority” myth also praises (if backhandedly) Asian Americans at the expense of other so-called minority groups, most notably African Americans, thereby making Asian American social mobility complicit in racism—a bitter stance indeed for the many zine writers who clearly identify themselves with African American cultural practices, especially hip hop culture. This dynamic has led Mia Tuan, in her book on the Asian ethnic experience, to frame the fate of Asians in the United States as stretched between two poles: “forever foreigners or honorary whites.”⁴

Thus, although not all zines are explicitly political (as are *Gidra* or *Asian American Revolutionary Movement Ezine*, among others), the zines overwhelmingly share an emphasis on what I’ll call attitude, revealed through direct and belligerent addresses to the reader, use of slang and sarcasm, pugilistic graphics (frequently featuring a person punching or kicking directly at the reader’s face), and so forth. This quality of “attitude” is hard to define or pin down, but it is nonetheless central to the rich world of Asian American zine writing. “Attitude” is the means by which Asian American zine writers give their publications what Michael Denning would call “accent”—a symbolic and rhetorical device by which they mark themselves as immigrants, children of immigrants, or grandchildren of immigrants struggling toward a nuanced understanding of American identity (Denning 3-5). “Attitude” includes a range of tactics by which zine writers loosen themselves from inadequate categories such as conformist “American” or traditional “Asian.”

The Asian-American youth “attitude” is transmitted across a variety of styles or forms of zine production. *Gidra* makes use of words and expressions associated with hip hop culture, quoting rapper KRS-ONE and announcing, “Gidra’s back. Spread the word, yo” (http://www.gidra.net/Spring_99/bring_it_back.html). *AsiaZine* uses sly wordplay; its slogan “Get oriented!” is at least a triple pun, which each meaning mocking an aspect of the (nonetheless) urgent construction of Asian American identity, which is an organizing principle for the zine (see illustration D). The title of *Hi-Yaa!* also reminds us of the multiplicity of identity: the authors expand “Hi-Yaa” into “Hi, Young Asian Americans!” while the name simultaneously reiterates the stereotypical sound made in kung fu movies—or by small children playing at kung fu (see illustration E).

Many zines by and about Asian American women use zine “attitude” to confront dominant images in popular culture of Asian women: the submissive geisha-girl, the China-doll, the Indian princess. Zinester Mimi Nguyen writes, “Now I will be what they least expect. I will be scary. I will be other than the stereotype of the model minority, the passive Asian female” (<http://www.worsethanqueer.com/slander/hair.html>). Nguyen sets out to confront notions of what an Asian American woman should be, and makes clear in various mission statements that this is her intent. “Go ahead,” dares a self-portrait on the website, in pugilistic pose. “Exoticize my fist” (see illustration F). Likewise, Lela Lee’s *Angry Little Asian Girl* turns cuteness inside out—and in the process, has attracted a lot of attention,

⁴ This binary, posed as a question, forms the title of Tuan’s book.

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ASIANS

Angry Asian	Asian in Denial	Banana/Coconut	Asian FOB	Politically Correct Asian
Very angry about how Asians are viewed by Western society. Has big chip on shoulder and goes on and on about "Asian pride" and "elevating our race".	Usually grew up in a predominantly White neighbourhood. Pretends to be White. Does not acknowledge that they are Asian.	Yellow/brown on the outside, white on the inside. Generally raised in a Western society, but has experienced the quirks of being raised Asian. Does not deny heritage.	Fresh Off the Boat. Usually spent formative years in an Asian society. Holds onto Asian values and attitudes. Limited influence by Western attitudes (except for shopping).	Generally raised in a Western society and as such, is highly influenced by Western ideals of political correctness. Quick to judge others about judging others based on skin colour.
Personal Mantra: "If you don't see things my way, you are anti-Asian, you f**king a**hole!"	Personal Mantra: "I am White. I am White. I am White."	Personal Mantra: "I used to wish I was White, but I'm mature and grown up now. I have the best of both worlds."	Personal Mantra: "Everything Asian is far superior to everything Western."	Personal Mantra: "I do not make distinctions regarding race. This is a bad thing to do."
Buzzwords/ Phrases: "Asian pride", "f**k you", "you dumb sh*t", (any grammatically incorrect expletives)	Buzzwords/ Phrases: "If they live here, they should speak the language." "My friends think I'm more White than they are."	Buzzwords/ Phrases: "It's ok when I make (insert nationality here) jokes because I'm (insert nationality here)."	Buzzwords/ Phrases: "Are you (insert nationality here)?" "How come you don't speak (insert Asian language here)?"	Buzzwords/ Phrases: "eracism", "we all bleed the same colour", "let's all get along", "perpetuating stereotypes"
Social Interactions: Hangs out only with other Asians in a big group. Has a confrontational attitude and looks for racism in every gesture.	Social Interactions: Will only hang out with White people. Avoids other Asians like the plague. May talk to other Asians in Denial, but will never be caught dead in a group of Asians.	Social Interactions: Has friends who are Asian and friends who are not. However, is always aware of the racial dynamics of the group.	Social Interactions: Friends are all Asian. Has a "stick-together" mentality. Will hang out with someone solely because they're Asian even if they don't really like them	Social Interactions: Hangs out mostly with other Politically Correct Asians. Has a few token White friends. Makes a point to not notice race.
Thoughts on Lucy Liu: "She's a sell-out."	Thoughts on Lucy Liu: "I think she sucks. I prefer Calista Flockheart."	Thoughts on Lucy Liu: "I heard she's a bitch." OR "Way to go! Another Asian in mainstream media."	Thoughts on Lucy Liu: "I secretly admire her, but publicly look down on her because she is not truly Asian."	Thoughts on Lucy Liu: "She perpetuates the dragon lady stereotype."
Thoughts on ASIA'ZINE: "Your 'zine sucks. You don't know anything about Asian pride."	Thoughts on ASIA'ZINE: None, as an Asian in Denial would never read this 'zine.	Thoughts on ASIA'ZINE: "I laughed my ass off."	Thoughts on ASIA'ZINE: "This is not true."	Thoughts on ASIA'ZINE: "People are ridiculed everyday because of their skin color or ethnic background. This is shit, and you shouldn't publish it." (Actual quote, spelling errors and all)

Illustration D

Multiplicity of identity as parody.



Illustration E

In your face (literally) attitude.

just try it. go ahead.



exoticize my fist.

Illustration F

“I will be what they fear most,” says zinester Mimi Nguyen.

inspiring Lee to create more defiant characters (other Angry Little Girls). And sometimes, when zine writers begin to take their thoughts to the public, the confrontation happens automatically, as when Holly Tse of *AsiaZine*'s found that her first choice of titles for her zine, *InvAsian*, was taken already—by a porn site. (Tellingly, if one performs an Internet search with the keywords “Asian + women,” the results will include zines like Wong’s and Nguyen’s—and an enormous number of pornography sites.)⁵

Conclusion: Where will zines go?

The many and varied print and cyber-zines that have been produced and distributed in the last few decades provide a goldmine of valuable materials for cultural observers. In the case of Asian American youth, web writing represents a place where they are prominent and visible as cultural producers. As noted above, scholars, editors, book publishers and the like have started to take note of the zines’ significance in American cultural history.

But zine publishing brings challenges as well as opportunity to those who would study them. Their guiding aesthetic, as well as the conditions of their production, make them hard to study. In the first place, there are so many, both on-line and in print, that systemic approach to the material is practically impossible. Furthermore, the zines often have irregular production schedules (frequently tied to the amount of free time the producer has) and

short lives: it’s impossible to know even approximately how many are in existence at a given time, and a particular title might disappear altogether entirely without warning. Finally, zines can change their names frequently, at the whim of the author(s) or to convey a new message; for instance, Sky Ryan changed the name and focus of her zine with every issue.⁶

The challenges posed by zines extend beyond the practical: they call into question some fundamental tenets of the American cultural hierarchy while upending practices of the popular culture industry. Perhaps the most fundamental challenge is to the system of cultural value. There is still a dominant ideal that what’s valuable must be lasting, as indicated by the word “classic.” (Although the marketing of the “instant classic” in our consumer age could be seen as making the notion of “lasting culture” irrelevant.) In order to evaluate zines, “disposability” must replace “lasting” as a key concept. Disposable culture has practical implications for scholars as well, as most of the zines are not archived, particularly in ways that are accessible to the public. The creator of *Bamboo Girl*, for instance, maintains the zine’s entire run—in her apartment (Margarita interview). This means, simply put, that it can be hard to get your hands on a particular run. While there are now some collections that excerpt zine writing, these are, of course, partial and biased. And because of the sheer volume of zines, it’s hard to make a case for the importance of any particular one;

⁵ Mark Kalesniko’s graphic novel *Mail Order Bride* (2001) works similar ground in its story of Kyung Seo, who turns out to be much stronger and more complex than her Canadian husband expects. This kinship points to the relationship between zine culture and the culture of underground comix.

⁶ Some of Ryan’s titles were *Fuck Off and Die*, *Schmooze*, *1985*, *Cryptic Crap*, and *How Perfectly Goddamn Delightful It All Is, To Be Sure*. *Factsheet Five Zine Reader*, ed. R. Seth Friedman (1997), 90.

rather, analysts must read a large enough number of that to get a sense of general currents in a manner not unlike scholars who write about romance novels, or television shows.

The grassroots nature of zine production and distribution also resists the academic frame. The “indie” aesthetic flies in the face of the “great artist” vision of literature—although many of the zines themselves are intensely personal. Distribution of the zines has also attempted to remain outside of the culture industries; early zine writers describe handing out copies to strangers who caught their attention on the bus; while some zines are carried by some bookstores, the majority of them change hands much more informally. And with cyberzines, individual sites can be linked to other sites at will, and do not require an apparatus of distribution beyond the technology to access the internet. Therefore, incorporation of this body of work into the story of American culture will necessitate a revised value system. Finally, since many zinesters use computers or copy machines at work to produce their zines, the inter-relationships among culture, work and leisure must be reevaluated.

To shed some light on the dramatic ways in which zine writing has transformed popular culture, this chapter has focused largely on a particular hallmark of cyber-publishing: what I have referred to variously as de-centered, anarchic, independent, outsider and democratic. The final, key question about the future of cyberzines will be whether this productive chaos continues to characterize Internet relationships. Will the possibility of “empowerment through connectivity” (Weinstein and Weinstein 213) cede to the demands of an increasingly regulated and centralized techno-

logical marketplace? Will the Internet as a (relatively) free and playful space for expression give way to the Internet as ultimate achievement and perpetuator of cyber-capitalism? Which will ultimately reveal itself as what the Internet has facilitated most: peer-to-peer communication—or business to customer? The number of creative and heartfelt zines on the Internet continues to grow everyday—but so does the number of pop-up ads, spam e-mail messages, and on-line megastores. In short, what opportunities the Internet offers to individuals and groups in search of a workable identity, it can also take away, with its ability to co-opt, to commodify, to package and re-sell.

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SELECTED ZINES

(Note: In the following list of particularly interesting zines with an Asian American focus, I have done my best to include the zines' Internet addresses. However, as I mention above, the nature of both zine publishing and Internet publishing is fairly ephemeral. In some cases, the address will have changed or the zine may no longer exist.)

- Angry Little Asian Girl* (e-zine; www.angrylittleasiangirl.com)
- Asian American Revolutionary Movement E-Zine* (e-zine; www.aamovement.net)
- AsiaZine* (e-zine; www.asiazine.com)
- Bagong Pinay* (e-zine; www.newfilipina.com)
- Bamboo Girl* (paper zine)
- Banana Café* (e-zine, <http://www.bananacafe.ca/0203/0203-16.htm>)
- Big Bad Chinese Mama* (e-zine; <http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com>)
- Blast@explode.com* (e-zine; blast@explode.com)

Dead Fish (e-zine; www.deadfish.com)
Exoticize This! (Also called *Exoticize My Fist!*)
(e-zine; [http://members.aol.com/
Critchicks/](http://members.aol.com/Critchicks/))
Gas 'n' Go (paper zine)
Geek the Girl (e-zine; [www.nodeadtrees.
com/eazines/geekgirl](http://www.nodeadtrees.com/eazines/geekgirl))
Giant Robot (paper zine)
Gidra (e-zine; www.gidra.net)
Half-Korean (e-zine; www.halfkorean.net)
Hi-Yaa! (e-zine; [http://www.hi-yaa.com/
index2.html](http://www.hi-yaa.com/index2.html))
Koe (paper zine)
Moons in June (paper zine)
Evolution of a Race Riot (paper zine)
Riot Grrrl Review (paper zine)
Robot Power (paper zine)
Shoyu (e-zine; [http://shoyuzine.tripod.com/
shoyu2010/](http://shoyuzine.tripod.com/shoyu2010/))
slander (e-zine; www.worsethanqueer.com)
Slant (paper zine)
Tennis and Violins (paper zine)

