

Burning Questions

Benjamin Zender

Benjamin Zender has degrees from Syracuse University (BA), University of Massachusetts Amherst (MA), and Northwestern University (PhD). Zender is a multidisciplinary teacher, researcher, and performer who explores why we collect, care for, and publicly exhibit objects. Zender currently serves as the Public Humanities Fellow at Sarah Lawrence College in partnership with the Yonkers Public Library. At Sarah Lawrence, they teach classes in public humanities, gender and sexuality studies, and performance. At the Yonkers Public Library, Zender leads an initiative to reimagine the library's special collections in the "Local History Room" as a vibrant community space. Through a series of workshops, day-long public events, and expanded research resources, the library hopes to build community trust, ensuring broader access, and reexamine library archival collections practices to include broader documentation of life and culture in Yonkers and the greater Westchester area. Zender's interest in this project stems from their work grassroots archivists queer, trans, and women of color archivists who curate grassroots archives. This work centers small independent libraries, museums, and archives as key sites for understanding how marginalized communities build knowledge, history, and community in a world that is ambivalent about their survival.

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Minnie Bruce began to teach me thirteen years ago in a cramped circle of tiny desks in a windowless room next to a stack of her notes and an electric kettle. Before our first meeting, she asked the class to email each other our "burning questions," the "myster[ies] or dilemma[s]" that would frame our work together. And then, for two frequently harried summer weeks, we wrote and revised in response to fifty prompts as we followed these questions. Minnie Bruce provided the space to reckon with something pragmatic, something profound: we faced the reality that a single piece of writing could never actually deliver the urgent desires that demanded it.

More menacing still, it seemed we couldn't actually begin to grapple with these demands without first producing drafts. Many of them. Each one with the knowledge that no amount of revision or feedback would ever ensure the writing's sufficiency to ourselves.

Earlier this year, preparing to teach in my first faculty position following my PhD, I tried to use my syllabus to share Minnie Bruce's lessons on the promises of writing and revising in community. My draft claimed that she described our burning questions as the "visceral, urgent, but often underexamined questions that motivate our intellectual work." But my description of the burning question is absent from my final syllabus. Then, like now, I knew something was missing. I had made a mental note to email Minnie Bruce. I didn't.

There were—are—so many of us who depended on Minnie Bruce for pithy and crisp language when we brought her a morass. Minnie Bruce taught us to use a single, located, sensuous

moment as a key to the world. It seems so silly to think about the lilt of her voice over the dusty linoleum of a humanities building, as if a mundane moment in an unremarkable classroom could say anything about her you don't already know.

This writing is not sufficient. I've had *Peitho's* short call for memorial writing about Minnie Bruce open on my screen for weeks, but I could only write when the option was to something insufficient or nothing at all. Our sole job as writers, according to Minnie Bruce, is to produce something that is honest and accountable *enough*, and then to let it go. I want to believe I have the wherewithal to contribute to an archives of our love for her, using the tools she helped me develop. Yet, I'm wallowing in the worst kind of irony in trying to write about the mentor who helped me find my voice. It seems my voice just won't stay found.