Zines and Zine Libraries

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Over the years, the purpose of libraries has grown beyond their early mission of public service to include entertaining and informing the public about a variety of issues. Recently, zine libraries have developed with the same goals, but a narrower focus in media. Though zines can be defined in a variety of ways, Stephen Duncombe describes them best as "noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute themselves." (Duncombe, 2008, p.10) The goal of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the history and culture surrounding zines, the communities they create, the importance of zine libraries, and the role of both in modern society.

As detailed by Duncombe (2008) in his book, *Notes from Underground,* the modern conception of zines originated with science fiction fanzines in the 1940's, which provided fans of a particular series with a place to discuss the media and their theories. With the emergence of the punk music scene in the late 1970s and increased public access to photocopiers, the current format of zine began to develop. In her work "Navigating the Media Environment: How Youth Claim a Place Through Zines," Julie Chu provides insight into why zines rose in popularity in the 1980s. She explains that as third spaces, or places other than home and work, disappeared and law enforcement began to emphasize curfew and anti-loitering laws, young folks began to feel increasingly isolated from each other and stereotyped as rebellious and unruly. (Chu, 1997, p. 73) These feelings guided the content of zine media produced by youth during this time and encouraged them to find a platform where their peers could hear their voices and where they felt free to express themselves. This motivation of self-expression has continued into the modern era, helping to spur forward the Riot Grrrl movement and providing a safe space for queer and BIPOC individuals to share resources and personal stories.

The most well-known layout uses a single sheet of paper that is cut and folded in such a way as to form a booklet about an eighth of the size of a letter-sized sheet of paper. Zines are often published in the most cost-effective and simple way possible, maximizing the number of copies that can be produced on a limited budget, hence the desire to capitalize on space by utilizing a single sheet of paper. While booklets made perfect sense for the content and format of fanzines, the world of art zines is ever-expanding, leading artists to create zines that are collections of ephemera or drawings small enough to fit inside a snail shell. In my visits to Philly Zine Fest, I have encountered zines covering topics ranging from reasons to continue masking in public, strange items found while thrifting, and explanations of how and when to use person-first language. There is a sense of freedom within the zine-making community that encourages creators to explore their ideas fully and present them in unique ways, knowing that the makers around them will happily provide support and constructive feedback.

In her 2013 article, Jessie Lymn explains that zines "are more than the object that you pick up and read through. Indeed, they are practices constituted through the production and consumption of everyday narratives, both drawing from and expanding on, the communities that they exist within." (Lymn, 2013, p. 53) The everyday nature of most zines is one of the things I find particularly attractive about them - they help us find joy and excitement in the mundane and encourage us to slow down to observe what is happening around us. If we look broadly at the subjects of zines, we can see that they often provide authors with a way of sharing their experiences and bonding with those who feel the same way. This seems to be a huge reason zines are so popular in marginalized communities. They allow creators to explore their feelings in a small but powerful way, where they can then choose to share them with folks they know will understand their perspective. One of the biggest benefits of making zines that share your niche

truths is that they are more likely to resonate with someone within your community and help them understand that they are not alone in their experience.

Living in a digital age, it is important to participate in activities that help us stay connected to ourselves and the things we deem most valuable. As Alison Pipemeier stated in her 2008 article, “In a world where more and more of us spend all day at our computers, zines reconnect us to our bodies and to other human beings.” (Piepmeier, 2008, p. 214) This was one of my biggest takeaways from attending the Philly Zine Fest for the first time in 2022. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had continued avoiding attending large, in-person gatherings. However, I decided to take a chance on this event as it was something I had heard many people speak fondly about at my university. I left the event feeling deeply connected to the Philly arts scene and encouraged to continue creating art and sharing my thoughts, even if they seemed small and inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. This was the first time I’d felt so encouraged by a community and it had such an impact on me that I decided to create a zine as one of the elements of my BFA thesis. I also learned about barter culture among zine makers, and how often creators would rather trade you a zine for a zine than have you pay them outright. With this in mind, I created a few zines that I could take to the 2023 Zine Fest and begin to make trades of my own. Bringing my work to the event led to more conversations about what it means to be a creative mind in this day and age, but it also led me to discover the existence of zine libraries.

Philadelphia has two zine libraries; one is hosted by The Soapbox, a community print shop, and the other is organized by the Consonant Collective - The East Falls Zine Reading Room. Many other zine libraries are hosted by colleges and universities across the country, as well as being housed in public libraries or independent organizations such as the Queer Zine

Archiving Project (QZAP) in Milwaukee. Kirsty Fife's 2019 article discusses the ethics surrounding the archiving of zines, and the ways "zines can offer rich amounts of materials for research into subcultures, communication and community networks and marginalized subjects who are otherwise not represented within archival holdings." (Fife, 2019, p. 231) For researchers and students at these institutions, zine libraries provide a large repository of firsthand accounts of life and the opinions of marginalized communities during particular moments in history. At universities, in particular, zine libraries create opportunities for professors to engage their students in conversations about the creative ways we spread information and share our stories. Additionally, zine collections within larger libraries help ensure they are closer to providing a true representation of the diversity of our society and its opinions.

There is extensive discussion in archival circles about the ethical concerns of creating public catalog records for archived zines. In many cases, authors were only comfortable sharing their opinions in zines as they limited how many people would get the chance to read and own them. In the Internet era, librarians and archivists must contend with whether the zines in their collections should be digitized and made available for public viewing, which could effectively widen the audience of the zines in their collection to potentially thousands of viewers. Jenna Freedman, director of the Barnard Zine Library, discusses this struggle in her 2021 essay about how she founded the library in 2003 and the many things she considers when archiving the zines in her collection. She explains:

> We are sensitive to zine-makers' privacy concerns, since we have a collection of works by living authors, many of whom were teenagers when they made their zines, and many authors created their works before they knew the way the World Wide Web would preserve—and expose—them. (Freedman, 2021, p. 96)

Among the things Freedman and her staff must consider are the changes that may have occurred in the author's life since the creation of the zine. Some authors now use a different name and pronouns than the zines were originally published under, while others wrote zines using their full legal names and would prefer not to have the content associated with them in their professional lives. In some cases, cataloging records have even been found to include the author's full name and email address even when it is not listed on the corresponding zine (Hays, 2018).

The privacy of creators is discussed extensively in Anne Hays' 2018 study "Zine Authors' Attitudes about Inclusion in Public and Academic Library Collections" which surveyed the opinions of 150 participants the author encountered at zine-related events or through online forums. Overall the authors agreed that zines should be collected and preserved, but their views on attribution and digital access reflected the widest variety of opinions. Hays' survey indicates that creators would prefer to be asked in advance of their zine's inclusion in any library collection. They are particularly concerned about whether or not the library has obtained permission to publish a digital copy of the zine online. (Hays, 2018) Many also shared the concerns Freedman discusses in her essay regarding how their personal information could be recorded in a library's catalog, the level of detail included, and whether their contact information would be made publicly available. Hays sums it up best by stating:

> The stakes for zines in libraries are myriad and include personal privacy, a shift in intended audience from local to global, a possible merging of professional and zine-writing selves if the records appear online, and even the hampering of a type of freedom that the zine format allows: the freedom of discovering oneself through producing subsequent issues over time. (Hays, 2018, p. 63)

In addition to their concerns about personal information being shared online, many authors do not want the full text of their zines to be made available for anyone to download free of charge. This is an interesting area to explore as it was almost certainly not something early zine makers ever considered. While the owner of a physical zine could feasibly make copies and distribute them without the author ever finding out, a quick Google search could easily locate scanned copies online. As Hays (2018) discusses in her article, the idea of providing a high-resolution, scanned copy of a zine is quite controversial, and many authors agree that libraries should be required to pay for this reproduction and obtain the author's written permission, as well as acquiring a digital version produced by the author whenever possible. If a high-resolution scan of the entire work is made available for free, there is always the possibility that consumers will seek out that version rather than pay the author for a copy. The same question pertains to the Queer Zine Archiving Project, which aims to create an online database of their entire collection that allows free downloads of any item. As detailed in the fair use section of their website, they operate under the belief that their archival work falls under the fair use section of the Copyright Act of 1976 and explain that:

> Often zines are donated to us with the express purpose of digitization and reproduction. When we come across material that we believe fits into our archive we also perform due diligence as best we can in terms of contacting original authors and creators to ask permission to include their work in our archive. (*Fair Use Info - QZAP - The Queer Zine Archive Project*, 2015)

The consensus seems to be that if libraries and other institutions plan to offer digital copies of the zines in their collections, they must also be respectful of the author's wishes should they reach

out and ask for their content to be removed. Though it is easy to focus on the negative impacts the Internet has had on the zine community, it is worth considering the positive results as well.

In *Notes from Underground* (2008) Duncombe explains how the advent of the Internet made many think that the zine community would cease to exist - after all, marginalized groups could now carve out spaces for themselves online. In the afterword to the 2008 edition of *Notes from Underground* which was originally published in the mid-1990s, he explains how the Internet has instead had an unexpected positive effect "The price of technology has dropped, public access to the Internet has improved, and new software makes it ever easier to make and share your own media creations." (Duncombe, 2008, pg. 210) While analog zines may be an exercise in nostalgia for some, they are also one of the cheapest and easiest ways to collect your thoughts and lacks the barrier of access that the Internet still presents for some as there's no complicated software involved in putting pencil to paper. It is easy to see where their argument originated since blogs provided folks with a similar outlet for their thoughts and feelings, but with zines, there is a way to limit the audience they can reach. In recent years there has been a growing appreciation for analog forms of media with popular artists releasing vinyl records and cassettes, a period which coincides with my introduction to the zine community, and I find myself making connections between them as a renewed interest in "retro" media. Artists who have been making zines since the 90s have continued to do so and have been joined by the younger generations who are beginning to discover zines as a creative outlet.

Though zines are not the media we expect to find when we visit a library, they serve the same purpose as traditional media - to entertain and inform the community they represent. Zines provide creatives and marginalized communities with a chance to authentically share their opinions and experiences. Even as their formats have changed with the introduction of the

Internet, zines have maintained their role as important outlets for creativity, storytelling, and the dissemination of information.

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