

## Comparative Perspectives Symposium: Feminist Zines

### Grrrl Zines in the Library

Jenna Freedman

**T**hrough zine collections like the one I curate at Barnard College, young women's voices find a home on library shelves. Libraries do not typically house works unmediated by publishers and editors or those by authors uncredentialed by educational degrees or professional accomplishments. Libraries also may not be strong on current criticism of their institutions, first-person narratives from young mothers of color, the naughty things red-and-black-clad protestors shout at political demonstrations, or the recipe for an herbal abortion.<sup>1</sup> While the peer review process and other checks on the validity of authorship are important, librarians and scholars also need to be mindful of the contributions made by nontraditional publishers and authors.

The first two tenets of the American Library Association's Bill of Rights reflect the importance of including a variety of voices and publications in any library: "(1) Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval. (2) Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation."<sup>2</sup> Furthering the imperative made clear through this bill of rights, the Barnard Library zine

<sup>1</sup> On institutional criticism, specifically a labor strike at Barnard College in New York, see Cagan (1996); one example of writing by a woman of color is Noemi Martinez's *Hermana, Resist* (La Blanca, TX, 2001-); one example of political protest through zines can be seen in *Radical Cheerbook* (ca. 2000); for an herbal abortion recipe, see Gautheir and Vinebaum (1995).

<sup>2</sup> "Library Bill of Rights," American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/statementsif/librarybillrights.cfm>.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2009, vol. 35, no. 1]

© 2009 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0097-9740/2009/3501-0007\$10.00

collection policy states: “Barnard’s zines are written by New York City and other urban women with an emphasis on zines by women of color. A woman’s gender is self-defined. We also collect zines on feminism and femme identity by people of all genders. The zines are personal and political publications on activism, anarchism, body image, third wave feminism, gender, parenting, queer community, riot grrrl, sexual assault, and other topics.”<sup>3</sup> The topics listed, while covered in many publications housed in our library, are uniquely addressed in zines because of the point of view of the authors and because of the authors’ demographics, the key demographic factor being their youth.

I know of twenty-two academic libraries with zine collections, but not all of them have discrete and active collections.<sup>4</sup> The Barnard Library zine collection currently houses approximately 1,300 zines in its archive and 800 plus in its circulating collection, and another 500 or so zines are awaiting processing. The archival and circulating zines are fully cataloged in the online catalog Barnard shares with Columbia University, CLIO.<sup>5</sup>

Zines make up a genre of self-published texts that has grown out of the punk rock DIY ethic. Those familiar with punk know that the culture emphasizes passion and creativity over skill and talent. This is not to say that punk music and writings are without artistic merit or even that the musicians and writers are not skilled and talented. It is to say, however, that zine form and content are not always of a quality or caliber that would make it through a mainstream publisher’s editorial process.

Zine writers, especially those coming out of the riot grrrl movement—a third wave feminist rebellion against the male domination of punk—question, explore, lecture, and rant with not only a broad spectrum of opinions but also a shared openness and authenticity. Other forms of girl- and woman-voiced primary sources exist in the form of diaries, blogs, and even alternative press publications from earlier eras. What differentiates zines is the motivation behind them. As the print expression of punk rock, unlike diaries, they are written to be shared and are more likely to be shared in the author’s lifetime. Unlike that of blog posts, the distribution of zines is somewhat controlled, reflecting an intimate connection between author and reader. And compared to 1960s-style alternative press publications, zines

<sup>3</sup> See the description of Barnard’s collection at <http://www.barnard.edu/library/zines/#collection>.

<sup>4</sup> For a list of libraries with zine collections, see <http://www.barnard.edu/library/zines/links.htm#libraries>.

<sup>5</sup> CLIO (Columbia Libraries Information Online) can be accessed at <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve&AMS3996>.

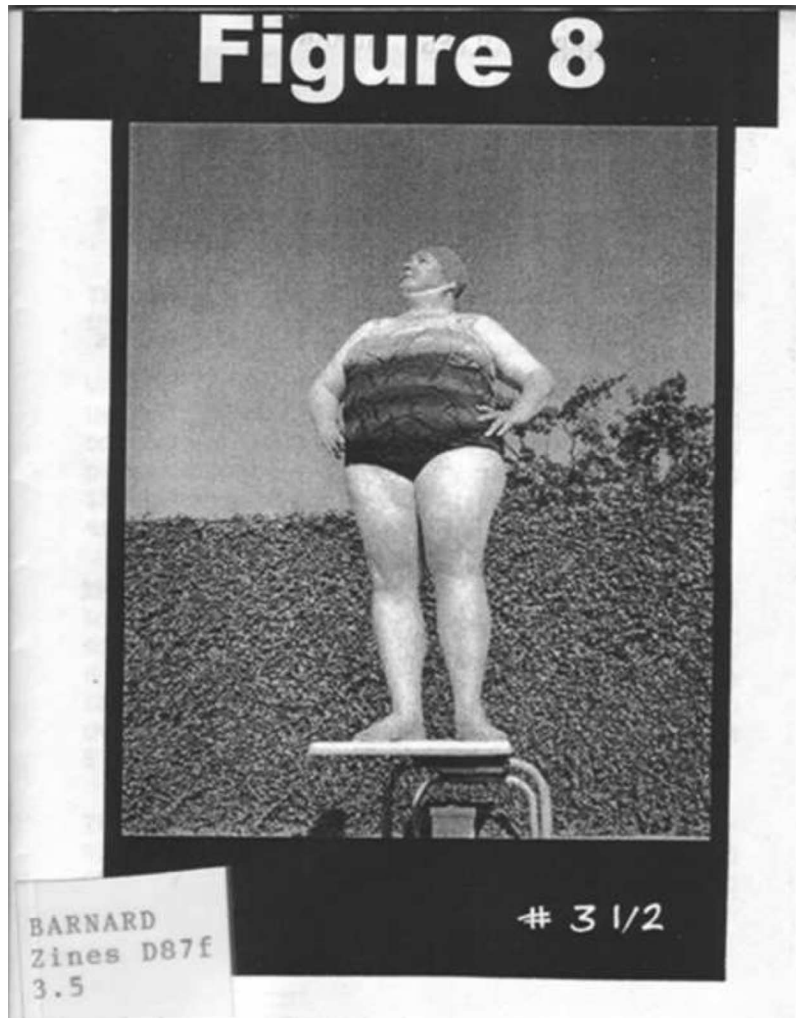
tend to be authored by individuals, not groups, and are thus more personal. True zines also rarely resemble or attempt to resemble the corporate publications that other self-publications mimic. There are some publications that call themselves zines that have mastheads and glossy covers, but I would argue that they are not really of that genre.

When I pitched the idea for a zine collection to my library dean, I did it primarily because I loved zines and had observed that they were not widely housed in libraries, especially as discrete collections (Freedman 2003). I envisioned a collection that would complement the women's studies holdings at Barnard, a women's college. Now that I have read hundreds of zines, I understand how important they are in documenting the riot grrrl movement in punk and in other aspects of third wave feminism. In fact, the two magazines most associated with third wave feminism, *Bitch* and *Bust*, began as zines.

The best way to make the reader understand the role of feminist zines in this activist movement is to examine a few of them in detail. *Figure 8* (see fig. 1), by prolific zine publisher Krissy Durden, collects fat power facts and resources, includes interviews with fat activists, debunks health myths, and offers analyses of media images of fat women. Although some of the resources Durden quotes are online (e.g., "Big Fat Facts," <http://www.bigfatfacts.com>), since I had never done any research on fat power, I had never encountered them. I somewhat unquestioningly believed that fat equals unhealthy until reading this zine. A search in CLIO for <(fat OR obese OR overweight OR obesity) AND women AND health> yields ninety-three results, four of them zines. (We have several issues of *Figure 8*, which brings the total to eight results out of a ninety-seven item set.) From a cursory glance it appears that only about 10 percent of the nonzine materials are fat positive. While *Figure 8* broadens the range of perspectives offered by Barnard's and Columbia's libraries on the fat acceptance movement, it also expands the zine canon on oppression, making strong arguments against sizeism, something many young, skinny punks may not have thought much about previously.

I bought issues of *Figure 8* from three different online zine distributors and in person at the Portland Zine Symposium in 2005. It is still available through various distros and is listed in WorldCat as being held at the Baltimore and Multnomah County libraries in addition to the Barnard/Columbia library.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> WorldCat (<http://www.worldcat.org>) is a catalog of library catalogs, containing information about the holdings of 69,000 cooperating libraries all over the world. See "WorldCat Facts and Statistics," Online Computer Library Center, <http://www.oclc.org/worldcat/statistics/default.htm>.



**Figure 1** Cover of *Figure 8*, no. 3 1/2. By Krissy Durden. © Krissy Durden 2006. Reprinted with permission.

Although zines' strength is not their racial and class diversity, writers from these marginalized groups do make their voices heard. In *Evolution of a Race Riot* (fig. 2), edited by Mimi Nguyen, zinesters of color join together to express their rage in a compilation zine on the topic of race and punk. This expression of anger is a tribute to the anarcho-punk ideals that foster participation on a broad level. While punk anarchists are stereotyped as violent and the music they dance to embodies anger, punks are also responsible for altruistic projects like Food not Bombs, which feed the



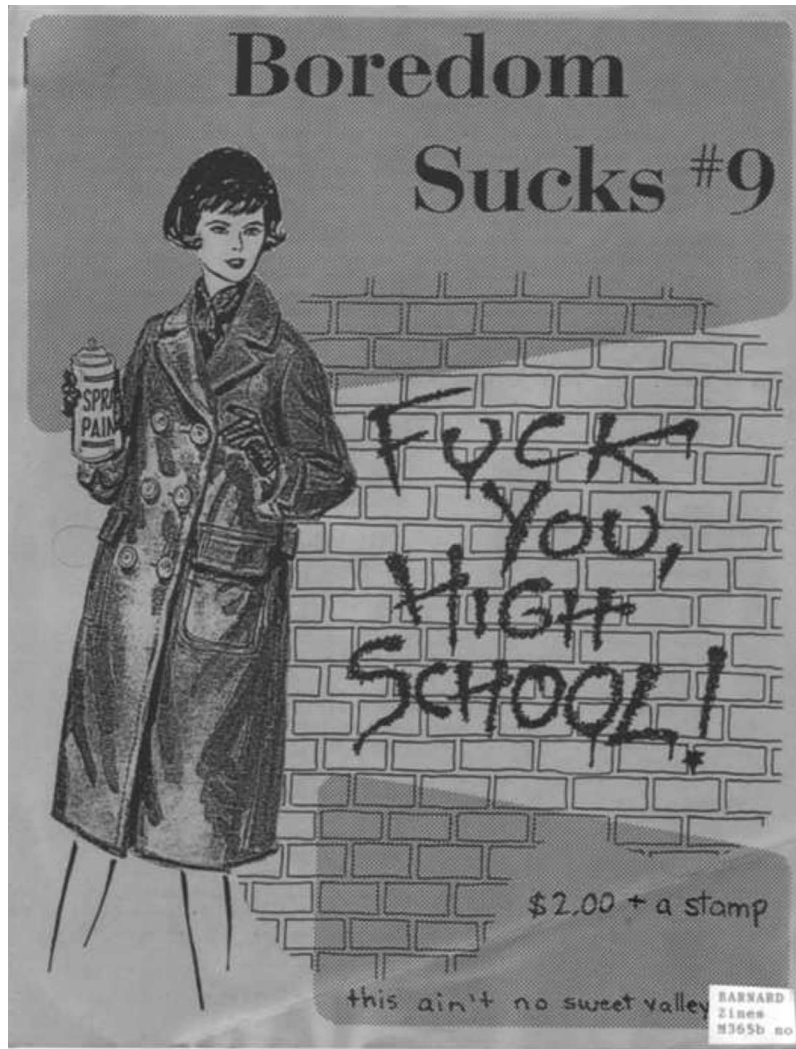
Figure 2 “Querida Raza,” by Bianca Ortiz, in *Evolution of a Race Riot*, ed. Mimi Nguyen, 27. © Bianca Ortiz 1997. Reprinted with permission.

homeless. *Race Riot* was in part a reaction to the content of another zine, as Nguyen writes: “And I’m thinking, this call for submissions (I mean, literally) is typical, this is an affirmation of existing and far too dominant white feminist/radical discourse that magisterially invites the person of color to participate, not in dialogue with other people of color, but with white women and men. (And thus white women and men once again assert their power.) And how much of our time and energy has gone toward whites who constantly demand our attention, our validation, our absolution, our presence as political fetish (monster, mammy, ‘third world’ revolutionary, token), whatever?” (Nguyen 1997, 4).

q2 The dialogue in zines and between zinesters is an important aspect of zine culture. However, Nguyen and her contributors did not make this zine to teach their white fellow punks and zinesters, but those who read it are certainly educated—and the content is in their own vernacular, with examples from their own communities. More important, the punk people of color community now has zines like this one (which includes a second issue, *Race Riot* [2000]), where people of color can build community and assert their existence with more confidence. I was fortunate to find copies of *Race Riot* at my local independent bookstore (Bluestockings in New York City) nearly ten years after its publication. According to WorldCat, it is held at Barnard and at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Similar to punks, as a demographic, teenagers do not necessarily rate very high in the hierarchy of oppressed groups. But considering the number of teens who use libraries, they are even less proportionally represented as authors on library shelves than women, people of color, queers, and poor people. Therefore, imagine how empowering it might be to a young person to see a title like “Fuck You, High School!” (Martin 1995; see fig. 3) on the shelf of the library or in its catalog. This issue of longtime zine publisher Lauren Jade Martin’s personal zine, *Boredom Sucks*, takes on issues including popularity, gym class, suicide, harassment, the Canadian television series *Degrassi*, graduation, and the prom. Fellow zinesters, many of whom are people of color, contribute essays, journal entries, photographs, and comics. Martin also provides a bibliography of high school zines titled “Revolution High School Style Now!” Our two copies of the “Fuck You, High School!” issue of *Boredom Sucks* came from personal collections donated by two different zinesters, Sara Jaffe and Yumi Lee. It is not listed in WorldCat as being held elsewhere.

I mention the provenance of the zines described above and the libraries that house them to emphasize that, while some zines are readily available for purchase or perusal at a library, they are generally, especially the older



**Figure 3** Cover of “Fuck You, High School!” issue 9 of *Boredom Sucks*. By Tesla Coil (pseudonym). © Lauren Jade Martin 1995. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

ones, hard to come by, particularly if you do not happen to live in Portland, Oregon; New York; Madison, Wisconsin; or Baltimore, cities where the three zines I’ve described above are accessible.<sup>7</sup> By selecting and preserving

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that there are several other substantial collections that predate Barnard’s,

zines, libraries capture these ephemeral materials, providing scholars and pleasure readers access to them. It was important to me in developing Barnard's collection that the zines be cataloged in CLIO, and therefore included in WorldCat, so that readers and scholars would encounter them just as they would any other print, electronic, or media holdings as they searched the catalog and also so that they would be available via interlibrary loan, as zines from our circulating collection are. I wanted zines to expand the discourse of women's studies materials available in our academic community and to a greater extent, in the world.

*Barnard Library*  
*Barnard College*

### References

- Cagan, Sasha. 1996. "Sisterhood WOULD Have Been Powerful: Notes on Class and Contemporary Feminism." *Cupsized* (New York), no. 5:11–13. <http://www.barnard.edu/library/zines/cupsized.htm>.
- Freedman, Jenna. 2003. "Women's Studies Zines at Barnard College: Pilot Project; Slight Revision of Initial Proposal Submitted to Carol Falcione, Dean." Barnard Library. <http://www.barnard.edu/library/zines/proposal.htm>.
- Gauthier, Isabelle, and Lisa Vinebaum. 1995. "How to Bring on a Period Using Emmenagogues." In their *Hot Pantz: Do It Yourself Gynecology: Herbal Remedies*, trans. Rachel Guay, Martine Pedretti, Tanya Waters, and Jennifer Petrela, 18–21. Montreal: Maison de Souris.
- Martin, Lauren Jade, ed. 1995. "Fuck You, High School." Special issue of *Boredom Sucks*, no. 9.
- Nguyen, Mimi. 1997. "Introduction." *Evolution of a Race Riot*, B 4. <http://www.worsethanqueer.com/slander/081901.html>.

---

notably at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina; Salt Lake City; and San Francisco. Neither Duke nor the Salt Lake City Public Library catalogs its zine holdings in WorldCat. The San Francisco Public Library is just beginning to do so, though its collection is one of the oldest.



## QUERIES TO THE AUTHOR

1. AU: On the JO's recommendation, the order of the two tenets has been reversed to match the order in the original.

2. AU: In the sentence that begins "However, Nguyen ...," in the part after the dash, I added "the content is" between "and" and "in their own vernacular"—does that seem appropriate? The original sentence appeared to be missing something. If what I have added is not what you meant, please revise the sentence to clarify its meaning.

I