Gender, Class, and Sexuality in Turn-of-the-Century Political and Punk Zines
A Collection of Ailecia Ruscin

Graduate Student Division
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In 2001, I donated over 750 zines that now make up the Ailecia Ruscin Zine Collection at the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University. The collection I present today, “Gender, Class, and Sexuality in Turn-of-the-Century Political and Punk Zines,” is a part of this larger collection. It represents zines I have not yet donated or cannot donate to the larger collection: zines written by personal friends and former zinester penpals, zines written in recent years, zines written by male-bodied people. These zines represent some of the favorites of my collection, a collection I’ve been steadily building since 1993 when I first started mail ordering zines directly from individual zine writers, zine distros, and small publishers. As a progressive, anti-racist, queer, feminist, small-town southern high school student in the late-1990s, I remember searching for pop culture that spoke to my experiences. Mainstream culture offered few representations that spoke to me, and so I turned to zines, non-commercial, underground, small-circulation publications, to hear other voices of marginalized American youth. In the pages of these zines, I found other girls who were questioning normative American values, girls who were discovering language for talking about class, girls who were redefining feminism by working out their ideas through writing. This collection is focused on turn-of-the-century political zines that examine gender, class, and sexuality within political punk subcultures.

In my own zine, alabama grrrl (1997-2001), the bulk of my writing focused on the personal and the political, from discussing my shifting class and sexual identities to talking about internal activist movement struggles. Many of the zines I’ve collected are also invested in these issues. For example, In 2 Way Freak Robin analyzes her experiences as a sex worker in the phone sex industry. In her first article “From Wage Slut to Phone Slut: How it Happened,” Robin, upon telling the reader she once made $60 selling used underwear on ebay, divulges, “this was when I realized that no matter
how I felt about my body, there would always be some profitable niche for every type of
girl whatsoever in the sex industry” (4). Connecting the issue of sex work to body image
issues, she continues, “As a fat girl I knew that stripping was out of the
question….Phone sex was the one line of sex work that I felt I could not only tolerate but
excel in” (6). To address potential backlash from anti-sex work feminists, she brings the
focus to class issues, “I have never felt the slightest bit of feminist guilt about my job
because of the simple fact… I am far less exploited here than I have been at any other
job I’ve had—I make a lot of money, I set my own schedule, and during domination calls
I get to take my aggression out on callers. At every other job I was expected to bust my
ass for menial pay; here I get to talk on the phone while sitting in my bed, and I make
way more than what I used to make. This is how I know that anti-sex work feminist are
never truly working class, nor do they share any honest goals, struggles, or even
sympathies with those of us who are” (8-9).

Continuing further in her analysis of class, Robin turns her attention to the punk
and anarchist subcultures she now disidentifies with writing, “Within anarchist/punk
communities there is a certain amount of deserved embarrassment (yes, I did just say
deserved) that goes along with the practice of benefiting from class privilege when you
are supposedly about destroying the class hierarchy; therefore, many people slum it by
doing stylish and trendy things like having really bad body odor, living in dirty houses
with lots of other people, dreading their white people hair, wearing old clothes, and
claiming to be working class when in actuality they often if not usually have a college
education, rich parents, and, most importantly, the privilege of being able to live this type
of lifestyle without totally freaking out about it” (34-35). This zine is an excellent
contribution to the overall collection because of its focus on both gender and class and
also it’s’ analysis of the internal class politics of the anarchist punk subculture. Her
description of punk subcultural life stands in direct opposition to the writings of Aaron
Cometbus, a writer who has almost reached cult status, through his zine Cometbus. One of the most known and heavily distributed punk zines, Cometbus is a hand-written publication now in its 26th year of publication which details the life of Aaron, a punk writing about his life of mundane jobs, squatting, living on the road, touring with bands, and otherwise living a punk rock dream life. Beautifully written, and full of insider punk references like how to recycle postage stamps with the use of rubbing alcohol to wipe postmarks from cancelled stamps, Cometbus, as heavily copied and distributed as it is, will continue to embellish punk life, and will later serve to represent much of our experiences in the punk underground. In 2002 excerpts from early Cometbus issues were anthologized in a 608-page book titled, Despite Everything: A Cometbus Omnibus (Last Gasp Publishing). In contrast, my copy of 2 Way Freak is marked number 26 out of 50, with a print run of 2; unless archived properly, it is possible that Robin’s critique of punk’s downwardly mobile tendencies will go unheard.

Much of this zine collection contains personal writings about gender, class and sexuality, due to space constraints, I will leave the rest of the descriptions of content to the annotated bibliography. But I also wanted to draw the selection committee’s attention to another important trend in my collection: zines which act both as self-help guides, as well as, a place in which activists within the punk underground work out ideas around transformative justice and how to deal with harm within their communities in ways that are oppositional the methods used by the criminal justice system. The Support zine talks about strategies for supporting sexual abuse survivors; the zine has been used around the country by collectives working to provide support in their communities. Similarly themed, Women’s Self Defense: Stories and Strategies of Survival, no. 2 contains over a dozen story submissions about things women do to survive assault, from choosing to do nothing, to naming names; within this zine many options are provided giving readers many ideas about what they could do should they find themselves a target of violence. In
order to spread the message of the importance of asking for consent, authors of Let’s Talk About Consent, Baby, present many different ideas around when, why and how to ask for consent. Instead of working from the perspective of healing or support, Let’s Talk About Consent, Baby, seeks to eradicate the problem of sexual assault by addressing the importance of asking for consent. In Our Own Response, authors compile information they gathered after 1 ½ years living on the road visiting with collectives to discover what they have done to deal with sexual assault within their own communities. Through their travels the authors held workshops to give collectives an opportunity to figure out how it would handle sexual assault within its’ own community should a situation like this arise. Rather than waiting until an incident, in which emotions are charged, the authors sought to prepare communities with ideas of how to write their own plan for responding to harm within their community. All of these zines are focused on the single task of organizing important information into one handy publication that can be cheaply duplicated and easily distributed. Though none of these zines were written in Lawrence, each can be found at the Solidarity! Zine library where the zines were used in a sexual assault study group for radicals interested in these issues of support, consent, and survival.

Finally, another important part of this collection is various zine “finding aids” such as distros and review zines. For example, included are a Pander Zine Distro mail order catalog from 2001 and an early girl zine distro, Schmegma Gumbo from Spring 1996. Distros are small-scale distribution services usually specializing in one particular type of zine. For example, Pander was always committed to distributing zines written by women and girls, while Learning to Leave a Paper Trail Distro, a distro still in existence but with an online mail order catalog, rather than a paper catalog, distributes personal zines (or per-zines) with a political edge. Pander was one of the larger and longest running zine distros; Ericka Bailie ran the distro out of her apartment from 1995-2005. Schmegma
Gumbo is one of the first distro catalogs I ever received; it became the first to carry my first zine, provo-CAT-ive. The zines Stephenie distributed represent most of the mid-1990’s riot grrrl zines that were in circulation during that time. Like Schmegma Gumbo, Subway Sisssy is another distro that focused on girl zines. Additionally, both are important places to look at how riot grrrls organized within the larger punk scene. Both distros include information, sometimes even personal phone numbers, for girls who were organizing riot grrrl conventions. Distro catalogs are useful materials for scholars seeking to understand the political economy of subcultures. Another type of “finding aid” included in the collection is review zines like Girl Scene City and Zine World: A Reader’s Guide to the Underground Press. The former was a project of Sarah Kennedy who wanted to compile a list of girl zines “cuz I just don’t think there are enough resources out there for us girls to use so we can network and communicate with each other and I want every girl who does a zine to have a space where she can get her zine heard about and for every girl who wants to order zines to have a space where she can find out about girl zines” (1). Instead of finding reviewers, she asks girls to send in descriptions of their zines that she prints directly in her zine, which acts as a directory for readers to order zines directly from individual writers. Zine World prints reviews written by volunteers and also is a resource for zine readers looking to order zines directly from writers. Approaching its’ twentieth year in publication, Zine World continues to serve as a backbone for the zine community, giving anyone who publishes small-run publications an opportunity to find an audience. These materials are a valuable addition to my collection, because they provide people with the materials used to distribute zines. Without these tools, zines would receive even less distribution and be less heard of. These tools are important for scholars seeking to understand how the zine and punk subcultures organized.
In this issue of *Cometbus*, Aaron recounts his experiences touring with the band, Green Day, before they signed a major record deal. He also talks about the difference between being poor and being broke, wishing to disrupt the downwardly mobile punk preference for chosen poverty. This zine is important to my collection because of the significance of Aaron Cometbus as one of the most known zinesters, and because it represents the many issues of *Cometbus* I have read with much enjoyment.


This is the final issue of my zine, *alabama grrrl*, in which I write about working at a temp job, queerness, herbal remedies for menstrual cramps, and the lack of radical queer organizing in Lawrence. This zine is important to my collection because it is the last issue I wrote of my own zine. It signals my departure from zine writing into graduate student writing and offers me a glimpse of my thoughts and ideas almost a decade ago.


In *Spokes of Hazard*, Cait discusses a summer-long bike trip from Portland, OR to Kansas City, MO. In this zine diary, the author talks about being deaf in the punk scene, gender politics when bike touring with others, and the frustrations of driving a car in traffic after spending the summer slowly riding her bike. This zine is important to my collection because I was visited on this bike tour and saw, personally, how happy the bike ride made Caitlin feel. It is also an important perspective on disability issues in punk.


Sexual assaults within radical communities have consistently plagued anarchist, especially those who look to transformative justice models of dealing with harm. In an attempt to limit the numbers of sexual assaults within radical communities, the Down There Health Collective (DTHC) uses the zine medium to compile interesting articles and information regarding consent. Excerpts from materials related to the Antioch College Sexual Offense Prevention Policy are included. This policy demanded, “Consent is required each and every time there is sexual activity.” And “Each new level of sexual activity requires consent” (5). This policy was heavily laughed about in the popular media, even deemed worthy enough of a Saturday Night Live comedy sketch. However, within the zine, the DTHC makes it clear that consent is no laughing matter. Consent is the key to safe communication within sex and the only way to prevent sexual assault. This zine compiles important information on consent; it has proven to be an invaluable resource for communities interested in fighting sexual assault. This zine is important to my collection because it offers an example of an "informational" zine, one that is intended to be widely circulated and used by collectives responding to sexual assault within their own communities.

With the rise in discussions of female masculinity, the Femme Affinity Group writes Femmes Unite! in an effort to re-radicalize notions of female femininity. Inside there are stories about feeling invisible as a femme in a town that privileges butches and transmen, an article about performing as a bio-queen (women who perform as drag queens), and other pro-femme manifestos. This zine is important to my collection because it offers a new perspective on gender presentation that pushes beyond cross-gendered performance.
local bands The Short Bus Kids and all-girl teen band Crap Corps. The interview with Crap Corps offers a rare glimpse into the minds of young female punks as they talk about being inspired by Bikini Kill and The Slits. Through these revelations, we can trace the influence of all-girl punk through a thirty year period of time, ending with Kansas City’s Crap Corps, which were consistently treated well by boys in their punk scene. This zine is important as it is one of few zines documenting the local Kansas City/Lawrence punk scene.


In another person’s zine collection, it is possible that mike’s *In Abadon* would get abandoned in a collection such as this. One might ask the question, what does a straight, white middle-class punk boy have to say about gender and class? And that is my point, that masculinity is gender and midd-class-ness is class. Throughout this road trip narrative, Mike keeps a log of all the many adventures while on tour with a band. This zine is mundane; its’ storytelling dry and humorless. It is the perfect zine with which to compare other zines; the primed wall ready for a second, coat of color. Other than detailed description of punk life, such as, “There were ten kids living together at the house at 92 east eleventh. There were kids in every single room, from the basement to the attic, all crammed together into one big house that was slowly falling apart” (12).

Beyond a description anyone could write on what a punk house might look like, there’s also insider descriptions interesting to anyone studying American punk. He writes about the Indianapolis hardcore fest, “continuous feedback and a frenzy of five hundred excited kids digging through the endless crates of records and merchandise. The sounds of laughter as we reunited with friends from back home and the pen-pals who we had never met before…..those days at the emerson theatre in indianapolis were so fucking inspirational and memorable and amazing, but it wasn’t because of the music or the records. I will never forget sleeping on the floor of a hotel room that someone else paid for, crammed into neat little rows next to fifteen others, or reading zines on the hot asphalt outside, or sitting in the grass with my best friends and sweating underneath the summer sun—and all of this so far from home” (13). This zine is important to my collection because of the descriptive way he talks about punk shows and houses. It offers a rare glimpse into the inside of punk subcultures.


I would be remiss if I did not note the visual culture of punk zines. One of the most recognized artists is Nate Powell, author of *Walkie Talkie*, a zine comic book about leaving the nest and growing up. This zine is important to my collection because of its’ focus on visual art, over storytelling, which most other zines are more focused on.


Another artist important to the zine and punk scenes, is Cristy Road who has illustrated her own zines and countless other people’s projects. In this book, Microcosm Publishing anthologizes her drawings into a book of postcards. Representing everything from punk to activist culture, Road’s androgynous drawings are important representations of the punk visual aesthetic. This zine is important to my collection because it documents a very specific kind of punk illustration style that is otherwise un-anthologized.


From the perspective of a working-class raised southern feminist, Robin is uniquely positioned to present her personal experiences working in the phone sex industry. Embedding her narrative within a framework which critiques class, Robin also seeks to share tips of the trade with other girls considering this line of work. Offering advice on what kinds of companies to work for and what kinds of pay and benefits to expect, through this zine, Robin is informally organizing the field of sex work so that workers are justly compensated and feel safe while on the job. This zine is an excellent contribution to the overall collection because of its focus on both gender and class and also its’ analysis of the internal politics of the anarchist punk subculture. This zine is important to my collection because of its’ sophisticated analysis of class issues in punk subcultures and because of its insider “third wave” feminist perspective on sex work.


This zine was written by a group of women organizing benefit shows to raise money for the Chicago Women’s Health Center, a sliding-scale women’s health care center with feminist principles and a confidential payment method wherein patients put any amount of money ($0-75) in an unmarked envelope to pay for their annual exam. In this zine, the authors talk about the importance of booking female musicians and suggest inviting other kinds of artists to join the line-up like spoken word poets, jugglers,
fire spinners, zinesters, etc. in an order to diversify shows. Watching out for girls at shows, the authors speak out about “pit gropers”—guys who take advantage of the chaos in the mosh pit to touch girls inappropriately in sexual ways. Through this zine, the authors offer many important ideas for making shows feel physically and psychically safe for women, as well as, a general how-to for booking and promoting shows. This zine is important to my collection because it is an example of how girls used zines to help organize their underground scene so that it was friendly to women.

