

Queered collecting: Supporting the personal within the communal: A case study of QZAP (Queer Zines Archive Project, Milwaukee, WI)

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Abstract:

The Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP) was launched in November, 2003; it is currently housed in a residence in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA and has a collection of @2,000 zines. Created and coordinated by Milo Miller and Chris Wilde, the mission of QZAP is “to establish a ‘living history’ archive of past and present queer zines and to encourage current and emerging zine publishers to continue to create. In curating such a unique aspect of culture, we value a collectivist approach that respects the diversity of experiences that fall under the heading ‘queer.’” (“About QZAP”) As numerous scholars have stated, zines are self-published, do-it-yourself booklets, photocopied and hand-bound and shared primarily with other zinesters. Over time, this sharing process has generated some significant collections, many of them community based.

While there are academic and public libraries that collect zines, a community archive is an independent archive, characterized by the involvement of members of a community whose records are actually part of the community collection; they retain control over how the collection is developed, identified, and managed. In initiating the collection, and maintaining control, the community is actively involved in the discourse shaping the identity of that community and creating the potential of presence for that community beyond the mainstreamed culture. This ability to maintain independence is a critical element of the community archive, and the queer archive in particular.

Keywords: Queer, archives, librarianship, community, discourse

QZAP and the Digital Collection

The Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP) is currently housed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, an average sized city on Lake Michigan in the region known as the Midwest, about 90 minutes north of Chicago, Illinois. Milo Miller and Chris Wilde launched QZAP in November 2003. The mission of QZAP is “to establish a ‘living history’ archive of past and present queer zines and to encourage current and emerging zine publishers to continue to create. In curating such a unique aspect of culture, we value a collectivist approach that respects the diversity of experiences that fall under the heading ‘queer.’” (“About QZAP”) As numerous scholars have

stated, zines are self-published, do-it-yourself booklets, usually of variant sizes, photocopied and hand-bound (Poletti, p. 183). QZAP defines the zine as “a self-published, small circulation, non-commercial booklet or magazine, usually produced by one person or a few individuals. Zines are publications done for the love of doing them, not to make a profit or a living. Most zines are photocopied, but their production can range from handwritten or handmade booklets to offset-printed magazine-like publications (but with a print run of hundreds or a few thousand instead of hundreds of thousands).” (“About QZAP/Collection Policy”) Some scholars trace their history back to early American pamphlet literature, but others trace their beginnings from the science fiction “fanzines” that emerged as early as the 1920s and expanded in the 1960s.

There are libraries that collect zines – among them Barnard College (New York), the Golda Meir Special Collections at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, and the Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library at Duke University (North Carolina). But the QZAP community archive is independent, characterized by the involvement of members of a loosely identified group whose records are actually in the community collection; they retain control over how the collection is developed, identified, and managed. Community archives provide space for materials not generally collected by mainstream organizations (Caswell, p. 6). In initiating and maintaining control of the collection, the community is actively involved in the discourse shaping the identity of itself and creating the potential of presence for that community beyond the mainstreamed culture.



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The initial print collection was comprised of about three hundred individual documents identified for the archive; there are now more than 2,000 items, and the collection is growing. Currently, there are approximately five hundred zines already digitized, ranging from single page flyers to a one hundred twenty eight page zine. Not all digitized resources are catalogued. There are more than 1,300 yet to be converted. The collection covers a time period from 1973 to the present. Though housed in Milwaukee, the collection’s coverage is global, with documents from 15 countries in 12 different languages.

Since its inception, QZAP has been collectively run. The day-to-day 'work' - scanning, cataloging, and archiving - is shared equally among collective members, volunteers, and interns. For bigger decision making (fundraising, web-hosting, publication, etc.) the co-founders seek advice and guidance from parties outside the immediate working group. As a community archive it operates independent of any institutional limitations, but employs an open access philosophy to situate its collection within the broad reach of activists, scholars, practitioners, zinesters. Students and scholars who visit the archive for research are incorporated into the collective process, via weekly meetings and the sharing of (vegetarian) meals.

A significant advisory source is the Zine Librarians interest group, with a current membership of about 700, based on the size of the listserv. There is an annual Zine Librarians unconference that supports information exchange among the members, meeting at different points in the USA each year. This group, fluid in membership, has developed a code of ethics and is actively engaged in developing a union catalog for all zine collections. QZAP offers its own Collection Policy and has posted an interpretation of the Fair Use defense of the copyright laws of the United States.

Queer is the term of choice of the originators of the archive, Miller and Wilde. In a study of queer archives in California, Wakimoto et al state that “The term queer is more inclusive than acronyms such as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) or LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/ questioning), which leave out such self-identifications as intersex, asexual, and fluid” (p. 294). However, “queer” also indicates an incorporation of the non-normative and presents an alternative world view in the documentation of culture. As the 1990 queer zine manifesto *Queers Read This* states, “Being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are. It means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred.” In this sense, queer is the expansion in visibility of a historically marginalized community. It generates inclusion, and minimizes categorization. For QZAP queer is “*all about people's expression of gender and sexuality. This is not exclusive by any means, but people who are queer (or ID as queer) may use descriptors like: queer, kweer, gay, lesbian, bi, bisexual, fag, faggot, dyke, trans, tranny, queen, king, princess, Nancy boy, Brucey Boy, nelly, femme, butch, bulldagger, bulldyke, polyamorous, pansexual, omnisexual, asexual, homo, Saphist, faerie, and of course Friend of Dorothy.*” (“About QZAP/Collection Policy”)

How queer functions within the collection is broadly applied. The archive incorporates every interpretation of “queer” functioning. Basically, if a zinester identifies themselves as “queer” their zine qualifies as content for the collection. And, what a queer identifies as significant content is significant enough for the collection. Cookbooks and cats mix with the personal and travel.

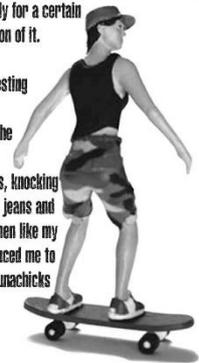
Findability: the Mission

QZAP incorporates many standardized library/archival practices. There is a collection policy, copyright policy, descriptive format, and a donation process. All support the core objective of the collection: “*the primary function of QZAP is to provide a free on-line searchable database of the collection with links allowing users to download electronic copies of zines. By providing access to the historical canon of queer zines we hope to make them more accessible to diverse communities and reach wider audiences.*”(“QZAP”) QZAP is one environment that promotes the possibility that members of marginalized communities may discover others “like them” – whether dyke, or fairy, or trans, or questioning. For decades the possibility of such discovery was limited to bars, baths, or brown paper wrappers in the mail. The essential passion of QZAP is to support each individuals’ engagement with self through the experience of community, made visible in the texts and graphics of the archive.

The technical foundation for the archive is two different hosted websites. The first is a blog platform running Debian linux and utilizing Joomla (joomla.org) as its content management system. This acts as the front end for visitors and is linked to the 2nd system, the actual archive itself. This second system runs on a virtual machine also running Debian linux and *Collective Access*. *Collective Access* is free open-source software for managing and publishing museum and archival collections. It provides a robust system for displaying digital objects, in this case scanned zines, and linked and faceted metadata about those objects. The format for the identification of records is “xZINECOREx.” xZINECOREx is an emerging metadata standard

realized that it wasn't just butch that I was looking for, but more specifically for a certain visual representation of it.

I was (and am) queering for the skaters and punk butch girls. The ones with dreadlocks, and mohawks, knocking around in shredded jeans and Doc Martens. Women like my friends who introduced me to Bikini Kill and the Lunachicks and made me read Dorothy Allison and Leslie Feinberg.



Gendercide #2: Milo.
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for the purpose of cataloging zines. The purpose is to standardize the approach so different libraries and archives that deal with zines will eventually be able to share information about their collections and move toward a union catalog of all zines.

Descriptive content of digitized zines for the database can be contributed from multiple sources, including the original content creators or QZAP collective members and interns, which enables the growth of the collection. While the archive collective supports the selection of “best” terms to identify each zine added to the collection, no specific vocabulary supplies a set of “preferred” terms. As an “anarchist” collective, members prefer to support each individual encounter with each individual document. There are no external authorities to describe the works. Keywords associated with each zine proliferate. As the collection grows, the retrieval domain also expands. This results in an increase in the variance of descriptors and so reduces the reliability of recall for any given search across the database. In other words, the larger the database, the harder it may be for an end-user to find what they are looking for. This affects the central objective of findability.

As a core mission of library and information science systems is to increase both reliability and recall of results in a given database, it should support such “findability”. The goal is to produce the most complete set of possible responses that most closely address the information need of the end user. Traditionally, this has been attempted through controlled vocabularies. The most widely recognized controlled vocabulary in the US is the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), attached to records to drive such findability. As Adler (2015) observes, controlled vocabularies:

“are designed to ensure uniformity and universality within and across library catalogs or other information retrieval systems so that *locating information is predictable and precise*. Subject headings are strings of words that are created and maintained by a group of authorities, such as LC, to help users find materials on a given topic. Generally based on standard and contemporary American English–language usage, headings are intended to reflect current literature.” (p. 486; italics are mine)

Feminist scholar Hope Olson (2002) has argued that they also assume a unified, homogenous public (p.102). This foundational assumption cuts across most cultures. The concept of “queer” challenges these underlying principles. As Drabinski (2013) notes “if social categories and names are understood as embedded in contingencies of space, time, and discourse, then bias is inextricable from the process of classification and cataloguing” (p. 108). While numerous practitioners engage in the “correction” of the biased catalog – with librarian Sanford Berman leading the charge over many years – that strategy can only be marginally effective. The queered perspective cannot align with the mainstream world view, or it would no longer be queer. It would have been appropriated.

Another approach is to leave the master his house¹, and develop a separate domain.

¹ Activist Audre Lorde: “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.” (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/>)

New Tools

With funding from a mini-grant from the Association of Library and Information Science Education, a team tested that strategy. Milo Miller, Chris Wilde, and myself worked with Sarah Cooke as she reviewed and developed a sample “Lesbian taxonomy” drawn from the QZAP archive. The ten “lesbian zines” were identified as texts authored by queer zinesters that explored lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and queer women’s ideas and experiences in the body of the work. In effect, the language within the zines, subject tags already in use on the QZAP archive, and terms drawn from lists of zine subject headings that created and used by zine archivists and librarians across North America informed the sample taxonomy (Cooke, 2018).

<p>GAY RT BISEXUAL COME OUT FAG LESBIAN PANSEXUAL QUEER</p> <p>GENDERFUCK RT BOI DRAG DRAG KINGS GENDER IDENTITY</p> <p>GENDERQUEER UF GENDER NON-CONFORMITY</p> <p>GENDER IDENTITY RT BOI CIS MEN CIS WOMEN GENDERQUEER FEMININE FEMME MASCULINE NON-BINARY TRANS MEN TRANS WOMEN WIMMIN WOMEN WOMXN WOMYN</p>	<p>MONOGAMY RT ROMENTIC POLYAMORY SEX</p> <p>NON-BINARY RT GENDERFUCK GENDER IDENTITY GENDERQUEER</p> <p>NUDITY RT BREASTS COCK CUNT GENITALIA PENIS PUSSY VAGINA</p> <p>PACKING RT BINDING COCK GENDERFUCK PENIS</p> <p>PANSEXUAL RT BISEXUAL GAY LESBIAN QUEER</p>	<p>QUEER RT BISEXUAL GAY LESBIAN PANSEXUAL QUEER WOMEN</p> <p>QUEER BASHING RT HOMOPHOBIA TRANSPHOBIA VIOLENCE</p> <p>QUEER POLITICS RT FEMINISM</p> <p>QUEER WOMEN RT LESBIAN</p> <p>ROMANTIC RT GIRLFRIEND LOVE</p> <p>SAFER SEX RT SEX EDUCATION SEXUAL HEALTH STDS STIS</p>
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Table 1: Terms in relationship drawn from zines, descriptive terms assigned to zines, and zine subject headings

As even this small sample of terms indicate, the two domains, mainstream and queer, are not hospitable. The queer community has appropriated terms once used as derogatory comments, accommodated misspelling as a strategy of resistance, and incorporated what are generally characterized as vulgarities into shared language. This incorporation of alternative language begins to embody an alternative reality. This choice of the alternative is the power response of the queer community to the history, and practice, of marginalization and disregard.

The resilience of the alternative may lie in a broader and deeper vocabulary, drawn from a more expansive collection of queer zines than the ten titles used for the pilot project. By exploring and relating the scope of the language of self identification as evidenced in the QZAP, the queer community can begin to enhance its own discovery by developing its own authoritative domain, more responsive to the expansion, contraction, and transformation of communal discourse. The expanded domain, in support of findability, also enhances the power of the community to speak for itself, to determine its own exchange of individual and communal identity, and improve the possibility of findability.

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