Collecting the Uncollectable: Zines in Archives
Presented by Celina Williams and Leila Prasertwaitaya
VCU Libraries’ Special Collections and Archives at James Branch Cabell Library

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We would like to thank ARLIS for including a zine panel, and giving us the opportunity to meet and discuss zines with these amazing co-presenters. Thank you to the audience for having an interest in zines and possibly even in starting a collection in your libraries. We hope this presentation is useful and continues to be expanded on by others.

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As many libraries explore digital curation, there are some media that inherently defy the movement. Zines are one of the few creations that their creators and fans want as physical objects—ephemera that can be held and experienced.

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With the number of fast and easy ways to write, post, and share photography, music reviews, childhood memories, recipes, poetry, and a plethora of topics, participants of the zine community are actively aware of their choice to not create a blog.

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In fact, many contemporary zine makers have an online presence in addition to creating printed zines and attending zine festivals. Some artists and writers consider zines their preferred format for more developed projects while others enjoy the informal nature of sharing thoughts and works in perpetual progress.

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Perhaps what’s most ironic is that zines add a unique reading experience in a high tech world where everyone feels exposed and vulnerable. Depending on their preference for anonymity, people who make zines can define their privacy and set boundaries between themselves and the reader more clearly.
Meanwhile, reading personal zines can feel like intruding on the secrets and memories that the zine maker may avoid disclosing in person. There’s something about zines that is at once informal yet intentional, private yet printed, and anonymous yet familiar.

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They can contain first-person accounts of historical events or personal experiences that are often shared within a culture. For example: September 11th, drug addiction, sexual abuse, immigration, and life in pocket communities or “scenes” that co-exist in many cities. These zines are the underground primary documents for groups of people that are not structured like traditionally archived organizations. There are no meeting minutes and scrapbooks that document their ideas and activities, but there may be zines.

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Similarly, archives in academic libraries, particularly those with special collections, may find themselves at odds with the shifting landscape of the library. Since zines and archives can’t exist entirely within the digital sphere, we’ve found that they’ve settled into an unlikely marriage at VCU Libraries’ Special Collections and Archives in the James Branch Cabell Library.

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Here’s an image of the Cabell Room housed within the Special Collections and Archives department. It’s a showpiece that functions a meeting space. Other times, it is a quiet environment for students to read, research, and feel like they’ve stepped into another era. The personal library of Mr. Cabell lines the walls, and there are even a few original furnishings from his home. This room is representative of the stodgy, intimidating atmosphere visitors expect in archives and academic libraries.

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Now here’s an image of that space occupied by zines and students during our first After Hours: Zine Night event. We like to think even James Branch Cabell—a science fiction and fantasy writer who battled charges of indecency in his novel *Jurgen* in the 1920s and won—would approve.

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In such a formal environment, you may be wondering….How did a zine collection end up here? And why do they belong in this space?
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Using our experience with an unprocessed collection housed in a single box that grew into 25 document boxes as well as our visits to other zine repositories, we’ll answer those questions and provide suggestions for how to start or develop your zine collection while fostering connections with students, zine makers, and even would-be zine makers and readers that could further your collections.

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All zine collections have to start from somewhere. The decision to start a collection from scratch or develop a zine collection after identifying a significant number of items as “zine” is usually followed by answering the question—“What is a zine?”

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Be prepared to tackle that question—a lot. As you develop and organize a collection, you’ll ask yourself that question as you come across titles that may challenge your idea of a zine but may still be a zine or as you decide where to house certain zines if you have collections that intersect. The good news is many contemporary zine makers are more prepared for the idea that their zines could end up in a library collection. Some will even seek out libraries to donate their zines to.

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Prior to 2008, the zine collection in our department consisted of a lonely clam-shell box shelved with the local and alternative publications. Slant, for example, is an independent Richmond periodical active between 1985 and 1993.

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Dr. M. Thomas Inge, the Blackwell Professor of the Humanities at Randolph-Macon College, helped found the VCU Comic Arts Collection in the 1970s. As a scholar of comics and popular culture, Dr. Inge began donating reference journals and other alternative publications to our department in the 1980s.

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Inge’s collection includes several fanzines that span the late 1950s to the 1990s. Although the fanzines are stored separately from the main zine collection, they are an integral part of VCU Libraries’ zine collection because they show the evolution of zine trends during different eras.
A majority of the fanzines are fantasy related, but there are also comic book and music fanzines. For example, cartoonist John Holmstrom’s *Punk*, which was a music fanzine primarily published in the late 1970s. We have a complete set of the original 15 issue run.

We also have zines housed in the comic arts and book art collections. With some comic book donations, we’ve received mini-comics, and within the book art collection, we’ve discovered zines that use fine printing techniques or atypical materials. Artnoose, the author of *Ker-bloom*, for example, describes her small, letter-pressed publication as a zine. The decision to keep zines with comics or with book art instead of with the zine collection is primarily a subject one. We look at print-runs, the distinction of the artist, accessibility for the patron, and uniformity within our collections.

Of course there are also the zines processed that pre-date the decision to treat the zines as its own collection and not as a genre of book art or comics. The overlaps present a challenge for the question “What is a zine?” The ultimate decision that we faced was whether to house the zines as a separate collection or to create a user friendly guide that would pinpoint the zines kept within other collections.

Archivists need to make the decision that is most appropriate to their needs and collection policies. For us, the quantity of contemporary zines in addition to a growing zine community supported by a local zine fest indicated that a permanent collection policy would be best.

Of course, not all libraries have collections that already include zines. Some may have the desire to build an original collection. Since we came about the zine collection at VCU through more than one avenue, we can only offer recommendations for how to start with nothing or next to nothing. It’s important to note that we have practiced the following suggestions as we’ve moved from a passive to a more active collection management policy.

First, examine the subjects that could be complemented by a zine collection. For example, you might have literature collections may be complemented by zines. Undergraduate and
graduate school students may produce zines. In addition to writers of all ages who experiment with the self-publishing format, some artists publish pages from their sketchbooks.

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If you have an active political community near you—for example, women’s rights activists, anarchists or participants in the Occupy Movement—zines produced by active members in those groups can add another layer to your collections.

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After identifying the areas that could benefit from a zine collection, outreach to groups that provide an avenue for zine distribution. These places may include zine fests, small community libraries, galleries, local book and coffee shops, and other businesses with ties to the local activist, music, and art communities.

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The moment that really marked the beginning of a more official zine collection was when VCU Libraries became the repository for the Richmond Zine Fest in 2008. Through one of the original organizers of the fest,

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we acquired several zines from her personal collection in addition to fliers, posters, and other ephemera.

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We’ve co-sponsored events and tabled at the zine fest, where we receive 70 to 80 zines from local and national zine makers and distributors annually. We keep a list of the donations received each year on record.

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At the 2010 Richmond Zine Fest, our table had a free zine collection brochure for attendees. When unfolded, the other side was a small poster featuring a cover gallery of examples from our collection. Through a tabling presence and a colorful brochure, we enticed zine readers to visit Special Collections and Archives in the weeks following the Zine Fest.

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We also collect zines from the Wingnut, a Richmond-based group of anarchists who are involved in local branches of Food Not Bombs and the Anarchist Black Cross, which are programs that help the homeless and the unfairly imprisoned.

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We’ve also communicate with the Flying Brick, a radical lending library that collects zines and hosts community organizing events.

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Another way to bring attention to your library’s zine collection is to hold events that educate and encourage people to produce zines. For example, our first Special Collections: After Hours event was a Zine Night in April 2011.

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It allowed students, faculty, and other interested people to experience the department in an informal, less intimidating way while also learning about a lesser known collection. Zine Night included a brief talk about the history of zines, an overview of the zine collection, and a zine reading. Participants were invited to browse our zine collection,

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and then they were asked to contribute pages for a Zine Night Zine. This event attracted people with various levels of exposure to zines. We like to think that a few would-be zine makers and soon-to-be donors are born at events like this.

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Lastly, depending on the acquisition procedures at your institution, you can order zines through zine distros, many of which are library friendly and are willing to work within your purchasing policy when asked. We were lucky enough to have two local and one formerly local zine distro in Click Clack, Approaching Apocalypse, and Parcell Press.

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We’ve also found the zines distributed by Things You Say, Stranger Danger, and Sweet Candy fit within the scope of our feminist and queer zine collections. Recently, we discovered two local riot grrrl zines from the 1990s through Division Leap, which sells a number of out-of-print or one-shot zines.
Last but not least, in the past we’ve purchased from Printed Matter, Microcosm, and Art Metropole. We’ve found that more and more zine makers are also choosing to self-distribute, usually through Etsy or their own websites. We like the idea of purchasing directly from the artists, which is why we’re fans of attending fests, but it’s not always possible depending on how your collection is funded.

Some zine repositories often donate duplicate zines to assist in the growth of other collections. We recently received a donation of 50 zines from the Barnard Zine Library. In 2011, we received a “grab bag” of zines from Brooklyn College Library. Because our zine collection was compiled from various collections and donors, our scope seems to cast a wide net. However, after examining the subjects and types of zines, we found that the vast majority fit within the departmental umbrella.

We collect art zines to support the book art collection. We collect mini-comics because of the comic arts collection. We collect locally produced zines because we keep Richmond-based alternative publications and collections that concern local events and communities.

We collect zines produced by and for women, African Americans, Hispanics, and members of the LGBT community because of our manuscript collections that support the Archives of the New Dominion. This three-year initiative funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission was a concerted effort to collect materials and papers from under documented communities.

The zine collection complements several collections in addition to supporting its own archive of a commitment to do-it-yourself culture which is reflective in the impulse to self-publish and distribute.

We also purchase some zine reference materials that contextualize self-publication and the history and types of zines.
So far, we haven’t reached a point where we’re oversaturated with zine donations. We rarely have to weed out zines that don’t fit our scope. Out of approximately 700 zines, we’ve only come across a handful that fall outside our collection scope. We believe that it is important to create a policy that is clear about how to handle zines we will not keep. Simply tossing them in the recycling bin also shows a lack of creativity. Since zines are not motivated by profit, reselling zines at the annual library book sale seems antithetical. Other suggestions include donating to community libraries that have zine collections, mailing to out-of-state libraries, or giving away zines as prizes at zine events.

Perhaps more important than how to treat the zines you don’t want is how to handle the zines you’re keeping. We had to consider how the zine collection would be stored and made accessible to the public, which is what led us to explore how other institutions keep their zines. We visited numerous websites and three libraries with notable zine collections as research. Prior to visiting Barnard Library, the New York Public Library, and Duke University,

we’d already placed individual issues into acid free folders. These folders were then stored in document boxes. At this time, they are arranged alphabetically by title, but after extensive research, we’ve begun discussing other possibilities for reorganizing the collection—perhaps by subject or genre to make pulling and “browsing” zines a little bit easier.

In May 2011, we visited New York City and zine collections at Barnard and the New York Public Library.

Barnard’s Zine Collection includes roughly 4000 zines, some of which are still being processed. We observed that their zines are given call numbers that start with “ZINES” followed by a Cutter number using the author’s name and title. Zines that have no author have a Cutter number by subject.
Their reading room space allowed for an entire wall where duplicate copies of zines are available for patrons. According to their website, the circulating zine collection totals 1400. Each of the titles is given a library record with a summary.

Duke University has a different yet fitting approach for organizing and accessing zines in archives. The collection at Duke also contains approximately 4,000 zine titles. They’ve kept their large zine donations like the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, and a few small, distinct ones, such as the Ladyfest Collection, as separate manuscript collections.

Their website lists 17 major, small, and related collections, which includes the Bingham Center Women’s Zine Collection where their small donations and purchases are added.

Not only did the manuscript collection format make pulling zines easier when you’re not looking for a specific title, but it also allowed us to experience the zines in a more personalized context.

The interaction between the zine maker and the reader of the zine was more apparent as we browsed the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection, which included envelopes and notes. This emphasized that zines aren’t only publications but also a form of correspondence.

Any approach to organizing a collection will have its own set of benefits and drawbacks, many of which aren’t easy to predict. Selecting the best method for us required that we examine how zines come to be a part of our collection and how they will be accessed within our current capabilities. If your zine collection receives a huge donation from a single donor, processing them as a manuscript collection may be in the best interest of the archivist and the patrons who will use it. However, if you’re receiving smaller donations from a number of sources or purchasing individual titles, treating them as serial publications may be best. We seem to have a hybrid organizational treatment that lies between Barnard’s and Duke’s.
For example, a zine making class from VCU’s Painting and Printmaking Department donated their materials, which includes individual and collaborative zines from the students and teacher as well as the course syllabus in the form of a zine. If the items were separated, they would lose their original context.

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Processing zines as individual titles instead of manuscript collections will allow for a greater presence of metadata, which can increase accessibility in some cases. It’s important to note that many zines have intentionally incomplete bibliographic elements. Many zine writers publish under pseudonyms or provide no name at all. Titles and dates can also be difficult to determine. This is less of a problem if you choose to not catalog your zines as individual titles.

Slide 60: GRRRL Zine Network,

Slide 61: Queer Zine Archive Project,

Slide 62: Zine Wiki,

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and even other zine library collections that have catalog records for zines are helpful resources for finding subjects and descriptions for more complicated titles. Similarly, wiki’s like the ones from the Zine Librarian (Un)conference can help the new zine librarian become familiar with the sticky ethical issues of zines bound by questions of copyright and privacy.

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Prior to and during our visit to New York Public Library in 2011, their list of zines on their webpage provided no additional information aside from the title. We were left unclear about how many and which issues of each zine were available, and there was no onsite listing provided with more detail.

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During a recent visit to their website we noticed that they now have more zine titles in their catalog with call numbers, descriptions, and records that note the latest issue.

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At this time, we have a guide listing each issue available in the department. In the future, this inventory will also be accessible through the catalog and a website for the zine collection, which is still in development.

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Let’s face it. Zines are chaotic, but what collections don’t seem a little overwhelming from the outside and even on the inside? It’s important to remember that within the chaos there’s a network of resources and knowledgeable people to help make sense of it all.

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Ultimately, the goal of academic and research institutions that collect zines should be to appreciate and treat zines as something more than a quaint and affordable “other.” Yes, sometimes we don’t know what to make of them or how to define them. They operate within a complicated and messy space, but that’s what makes them unique and worth preserving for the future. They are cheaply made and distributed, but they are worth something in their own merit.

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—something we can’t afford to leave uncollected.

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Thank you! Please contact us if you have any questions and comments. We love zines, and hearing about your zine collection projects would be a pleasure. Let’s keep the dialogue about zines in academia going, so we can get it right for people active in the various zine communities and our researchers.

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Note from the authors: We attempted to find and contact all of the people pictured and/or whose zines appeared in this presentation. If you would like to use images from this presentation for any purpose, please contact us. Thank you.