

# Each According to Their Ability: Zine Librarians Talking About Their Community

“No credentials are required to be a part of the action”

*Violet Fox, Kelly McElroy, Jude Vachon, and Kelly Wooten*

## Introduction

Zine librarianship, an informal subfield of librarianship that crosses boundaries of academic and public libraries, archives, and community spaces, has grown as a community since the creation of an email list in 2003.<sup>1</sup> Since then, zine librarians have developed an informational website, an active Facebook group with over 350 members, and hosted nine annual in-person unconferences.<sup>2</sup> As noted on the website, “No credentials are required to be a part of the action—if you care about sharing and preserving zines, we’re glad to have you!”<sup>3</sup> The zine librarian community was founded with an impulse towards social justice and inclusivity, valuing lived experiences and local expertise, and challenging traditional library practices.

Zine librarians from diverse backgrounds and institutions are united by the desire to bring the voices of marginalized populations and subcultures as documented in zines to readers, scholars, researchers, and into the historical

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1 The Zine Librarians Yahoo email list (<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/zinelibrarians/info>) had 565 members as of September 2016.

2 “Zine Librarians (un)Conferences,” [zinelibraries.info](http://zinelibraries.info/events/zine-librarian-unconferences/), accessed November 23, 2017, <http://zinelibraries.info/events/zine-librarian-unconferences/>.

3 “about the zine librarians interest group,” [zinelibraries.info](http://zinelibraries.info/about/), accessed September 12, 2017, <http://zinelibraries.info/about/>.

record. Zine librarians often need to find their way through all aspects of library practice, from collection development through cataloging, preservation, circulation, public outreach, and teaching, with varying levels of time to commit or support from our organizations. Zine collecting often falls outside of the usual workflows since zines don't conform to standard practices for acquisition, cataloging, and handling for preservation and circulation. People who champion zine collections in their libraries are usually doing this work in addition to their regular job responsibilities. The *Zine Librarians Code of Ethics* emerged from the need to clarify together and describe our current practices in these different areas, and to guide future development of zine libraries and collections by sharing this information with others.<sup>4</sup>

In our work with zines, we call on queer theory and feminist, radical, and critical pedagogy in addition to theory from library and archival science. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor's work on radical empathy in the archives resonates strongly with the principles outlined in our Code.<sup>5</sup> Though Caswell and Cifor focus on more traditional archival practices, they articulate how feminist theory and ethics support the case for close attention to the human connections, not just impersonal transactions of acquiring materials or conducting research. It's easy to substitute zines and zine librarians in for records and archivists here: "In a feminist ethics approach, archivists are seen as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility."<sup>6</sup> When we discuss how to respect intersectional identity in cataloging and genre terms, or how to protect authorial privacy while also providing access, our conversations are informed by theory and experience from libraryland and the zine scene, from academic theory (say, queer theory) and lived experience and practice (say, lived experience as queer people).

In this informal community, this navigation of theory and practice occurs without focus on credentials or formally recognized expertise. This chapter is a reflective conversation between four librarians who have worked with zines in a variety of spaces and called on a range of skills, communities, and bodies of theory in our work. In order to explore questions related to the relationship between theory and practice in zine librarianship, we conducted paired online chats and email conversations, which

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4 Heidy Berthoud et al., *Zine Librarians Code of Ethics* (Durham, NC: Zine Librarian Interest Group, 2015).

5 Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 82 (2016): 23–43, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557/14916>.

6 Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 23.

appear below, lightly edited and editorialized. The immediate, improvised, and interconnected work that zine librarians do is reflected in these conversations. Together, we sift through some of the elements that shape this community approach.

### **Bringing Theory Into Practice: Creation of the Zine Librarians Code of Ethics**

At the Zine Librarians (un)Conference held in Durham, North Carolina, in June 2014, attendees outlined and began drafting a document that became the *Zine Librarians Code of Ethics*, published online as plain text and as a zine (naturally) in November 2015. People interested in starting or growing zine collections often bring questions to the group via the email list or to us individually, so it seemed like a good time to learn what constituted our shared values and put them on paper. Each section was assigned to a subgroup to develop over the course of the year, and drafts were shared for public comment online before being finalized. Participation in the process was intended to be inclusive regardless of attendance at the unconference or other qualifications, and the result was meant to be written in an accessible, low-jargon style for a broad audience including zine librarians, creators, and others.

**Kelly Wooten (KW):** So, turning to the *Code of Ethics*, what was your role in that process?

**Violet Fox (VF):** I was one of two people who wrote the “Acquisitions” section.

**KW:** I worked with Lisa Darms on “Use of zines.” That was an exciting process—we weren’t quite sure if we were writing a “best practices” or a “how to” or a “what not to do.” I think that still shows in the content, for better or worse, that mix of the intent.

*Like a classic DIY zine, the Code of Ethics does read like a how-to manual of sorts, but the underpinnings are built on our collective knowledge and values which draws on the combination of theory and experiences. The standards and best practices which come out of larger library and archives organizations are more institutional, and this document, while prescriptive, leaves lots of room for interpretation and individual decision-making.*

**VF:** What a broad topic you had! Did you find it challenging to narrow down, or did you know what you had in mind?

**KW:** Well, looking back at our draft, we had a more narrow focus: Whereas “access” is getting to read and look at online archives, or in places like

zine libraries, zine fairs, or special collections reading rooms, “use” means reproducing or quoting from zines.

*Use of primary sources in libraries is often discussed in the context of copyright and scholarly communications, and based in legal interpretations of copyright and fair use, falling into a rights-based framework which is critiqued by feminist scholarship.<sup>7</sup> A feminist ethics of care considers the people who created the zines and their wishes about reproducing their work in scholarly or other contexts, and an emphasis on obtaining (or exerting sufficient effort to obtain) permission from zine creators, even when fair use of material is clear.*

**VF:** Oh, that’s right. I think the “Acquisitions” section is very much informed by my experience and my own opinion about the “fairness” of various ways of purchasing/donation seeking. I tried really hard to base it on thinking about the creator and how they would see the process, not necessarily the library side of it. Which might’ve been easier since I’ve never had to purchase zines, and I don’t necessarily understand how it’s done in academic or public libraries. Yes, creativity was a large part of it, and trusting each other and our own experiences, when (at least as far as I’m aware) we didn’t have much to base it on. Other “code of ethics” that we looked at were a very different beast than ours ended up being.

**KW:** That’s a great point—I’m in a position where I acquire zines, and sometimes we buy things from third parties, which is the least-preferred method, but from a library acquisitions perspective is easiest. I think the positive response to the *Code of Ethics* from outside the Zine Librarian community has indicated to me that we did a pretty good job in the end.

*Acquiring zines is one way zine librarians can incorporate social justice values into our work. Purchasing zines directly from creators can support marginalized people (including people of color, queer and trans people, etc.) financially, can create personal connections and relationships between creators and librarians, and then ultimately helps diversify library collections.<sup>8</sup>*

**VF:** Yes. It’s surprised me a little who has said the most about the *Code of Ethics*—not necessarily people who are starting/continuing a library collection (which \*I think\* is who we had in mind as our primary audience).

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7 Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,” 23.

8 Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,” 27.

**KW:** Yes, I think that was our audience, but that we wanted it to be accessible for zine creators too so they could understand what we were thinking as librarians.

**VF:** I've heard more about it from academics and from people who are interested in the social justice side of library work as a way of centering the creator/user experience?

**KW:** Yes, archivists love it.

**VF:** I haven't heard much from zine creators, but I know that (for example) it was given out at the Milwaukee Zine Fest, and people seemed interested in the idea of it, at least.

**KW:** When I first approached zines in libraries it was from knowing what a pain they are for libraries as institutions. They are messy, hard to acquire (not really but for library practices), hard to catalog, etc...It's wonderful to see how so many different kinds of libraries have shifted to embrace them more.

**VF:** Yes. There are many more reference/instruction librarians in the zine librarian community, I think partly because zines represent "problems" to catalogers and acquisitions folks.

**KW:** Even though it looks messy on the surface, our collaborative work is underpinned by an impulse towards inclusion, diversity, trust of people's knowledge/expertise and lived experiences—things that to me, are inherently part of intersectional feminism.

**VF:** Collaboration, accountability. Creativity. Not sure what the word for this is, maybe an offshoot of inclusiveness, but looking out for those who are new to the scene?

**KW:** and that even though we don't have a textbook of Zine Librarian Theory (maybe that's next?) that we do have shared values, some explicit, some implicit. Ethics of care!

**VF:** Yes!

**KW:** Welcoming-ness.

**VF:** Awareness of the limitations of our everyday work structures (like, for example, existing metadata schemes or purchasing processes) and willingness to work around them.

**KW:** Or to help improve those systems by pointing out their shortcomings.

## Welcoming People Into the Zine Community Through Feminist Pedagogy and Practice

As self-published works, zines demand attention and respect for individual stories, often showcasing political, personal, and radical content. One location for the ethics of care described above is through feminist pedagogy and practice when leading workshops or classes to help people make and use zines. Feminist pedagogy becomes a location for enacting (and tweaking, developing, revising) feminist theory through teaching and learning. Maria Accardi notes that common characteristics of feminist pedagogy include “envisioning the classroom as a collaborative, democratic, transformative site; consciousness raising about sexism and oppression; and the value of personal testimony and lived experience as valid ways of knowing.”<sup>9</sup>

**Kelly Wooten (KW):** I wanted to ask you about how you approached your for-credit zine class.

**Kelly McElroy (KM):** Because it was also a first year experience class, it was, in some ways, about acculturating students to a big institution while also being an introduction to zines so, a mix of counterculture and super norming culture. But one thing that was really powerful was that I emailed back and forth some with Maria Accardi, who shared some methods she has used with students to get them to come up with their own rubrics.

**KW:** I work with a lot of Writing 101 classes which is the 1st year class that everyone has to take and end up introducing zines in a lot of them—and Maria Accardi’s book & online course really influenced my work as well.<sup>10</sup> Tell me more about the student-generated rubrics.

**KM:** We essentially brainstormed characteristics that would be really excellent, high quality work for an assignment...and also characteristics that would be disappointing. It made for a useful second layer of assessment, too—my students got all fussy about things like layout that I didn’t expect them to pick up.

**KW:** I always feel like I have to tell people—trust me, this sounds silly, but it will be fun/fine. That is also useful about how students don’t necessarily want to take the lead and own their own authority in the classroom.

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9 Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 34–35.

10 Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy*, 34–35.

**KM:** It connects to the feminist stuff for me, because part of caring for students is to not force them into something they're not ready for. So, I have to tell you, I use your "how do you feel?" question on almost all of my minute papers now, and I always think of it as the Kelly Wooten question.

**KW:** Awww! I love it. Do you get good responses?

**KM:** A lot of the time, yes! Sometimes I wonder if it helps people be more honest on the other, more content-y questions, just because they see that reach for caring. Do you use it pretty regularly? I imagine your classrooms as this very loving and attuned place.

**KW:** I use it every time I ask for feedback at the end of a session, something you learned, a question you still have, and how you feel at the end of class...I try to frame every class that seems negative in my mind as a learning experience and try to keep a positive outlook. Some strategies work beautifully in some situations and others don't. It makes a huge difference if the students really want to be there. And if the instructor has created a community.

**KM:** and that is something that is true no matter what the topic is, right?

**KW:** I went to UNC recently (2 days post-election) for a Feminist Theory class to do a zine workshop, and it felt like a sleepover. We blasted Solange's new album and made angry feminist zine pages, and one student had brought cookies. The instructor had them go around at the beginning to say one word that described how they were feeling.

**KM:** One thing I get so frustrated with in academic libraries is this insistence on a very narrow realm of knowledge, like, if it wasn't published in an academic journal, what even is it?! Which, in some arenas, sure, but for understanding the work that libraries/librarians do is just totally ridiculous. Something I love about the zine librarian group is that because we're all teaching folks to find and use these awesome weird idiosyncratic publications...It seems like a type of praxis, about really honoring knowledge from many, many perspectives.

**KW:** Unreliable sources!

### **Cataloging and Categorizing Zines**

Cataloging zines is, at its best, an exercise in radical empathy. As with cataloging traditional works, the cataloger is tasked with discovering the aboutness of the work as intended by its creator(s) and representing its essence (within the constraints of our standards and schemas) for the benefit

of the potential information user. Being conscious of the intention of the creator(s) and the wide variety of needs of information seekers is an essential part of the act of cataloging. The act of cataloging zines, with their often personal and emotional content, takes catalogers out of their everyday routine, throwing a stark light on the inadequacies that exist in standard classification schemas. When a cataloger approaches the task of cataloging a self-published work by a member of a marginalized group, power differentials are thrown into sharp relief—the vocabularies and classification structures that have been built primarily for those in traditional publishing and academia reveal their bias more readily. The consequences of the damage that can be done by imprecise or discriminatory metadata is often more apparent because of the personal nature of zines.

As Hope Olson recommends, zine catalogers frequently use “redemptive technology” to “mediate between standard records, such as [the Library of Congress]’s, and users’ needs.”<sup>11</sup> Techniques such as using creator-generated descriptions and keywords, and using alternative controlled vocabularies in addition to Library of Congress Subject Headings, allow the vocabulary of the zine creator and the vernacular of their peers to enhance findability by those within those groups. (For example, adding a keyword of “gender fluid” to the description of a zine’s author, as used within the zine, allows access to the zine via a term a user might search for but is not reflected in LCSH). Violet elaborates on vocabularies:

Marginalized communities may have specialized vocabularies or vocabulary that is in rapid flux, think, for example, of the slang created by communities of LGBTQ people (historically) who walked a fine line between visibility and invisibility while they try to avoid detection by police but also identify and communicate with each other. The entire idea of a large controlled vocabulary like LCSH is to flatten out those slang terms and give them a shape which is recognizable by the searcher. Because controlled vocabularies prize consistency and discoverability above all else, they are inherently biased towards the searcher, not the creator.

Bowker and Star emphasize the need to see the labor behind classification decisions and standardization schemes: “the trick is to question every apparently natural easiness in the world around us and look for the work involved in making it easy.”<sup>12</sup> Those in the zine cataloging community

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11 Hope Olson, “The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs,” *Signs* 26 no. 3 (2001): 661, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175535>.

12 Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 39.

strive to make that labor, and those decisions, more transparent. The *Zine Librarians Code of Ethics*' guidance to "consult with zine creators and communities" during the cataloging process is one way of ensuring catalog records accurately and fairly reflect the zine. Jude describes another way of making labor apparent:

When I choose subjects for zines, I use a tweaked version of Anchor Archive's box categories. I loved that the categories had notes next to them explaining and defining. I hung the subject list with definitions in the zine library space to help people find the right category for their interests but also for transparency and accountability. I wanted to expose my thinking and decisions. I also posted that list online after it was created and asked for feedback.

When cataloging choices need to be made between a concern for privacy for a zine creator and the desires of researchers to have complete information (as is the case when creating personal name authority records), the *Zine Librarians' Code of Ethics* directs the cataloger to "refrain from recording more personal information than is necessary or required to identify the person."<sup>13</sup> This reflects the moral stance of the ethics of care theory—protecting the zine creator, even to the detriment of the information seeker or the researcher, by not necessarily providing all the information available to the cataloger. Jude expands on this intentionality of focusing on ethical relationships:

It really speaks to the political and not neutral stance of zine librarianship and archiving for me. It's not just about creating access to information as products which institutions have total ownership over and only need to make decisions about for their customers (readers/researchers), which reeks of capitalism. It's about respecting people and communities that generate these documentations of their experience as well as the documents themselves. That actually often involves building relationships with zine communities, which is light years away from the idea of neutrality.

### **Theory + Practice = Liberation**

Another theory thread that we've identified as relevant to our work in zine librarianship is radical pedagogy. Kelly M. and Jude read bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*<sup>14</sup> and were particularly taken by the chapter titled

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13 Heidi Berthoud et al., *Zine Librarians Code of Ethics* (Durham, NC: Zine Librarian Interest Group, 2015), 17.

14 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

“Theory as Liberatory Practice.” It echoed our thinking that ideas can be exciting and powerful, especially when engaged with in accessible ways and in combination with action. We had experienced this in our work with zines.

**Kelly McElroy (KM):** I want to start this w/a list of quotations from, like, the first 15 pages of *Teaching to Transgress* (I could have gone farther, but I had so many things underlined just in the first few pages):

“To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure.”

“I wanted to become a critical thinker. Yet that longing was often seen as a threat to authority.”

“...any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone’s presence is acknowledged.”

“Excitement is generated through collective effort.”

“...education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor.”<sup>15</sup>

All of these feel super resonant with zine culture, zine libraries, and zine teaching to me. It makes me remember my buddy reading *Brainscan #21*<sup>16</sup> and in the process of reading it, realizing that her ex had been emotionally abusing her. It makes me remember talking with a guy at a party about how reading *Filling the Void*<sup>17</sup> helped him think about his drinking in a way that helped him take better care of himself. How big do ideas have to be to be considered theory, because understanding yourself and the world around you seems pretty big? Especially when it can help you change. Praxis, right?

**Jude Vachon (JV):** Yessss to all this. What is and isn’t theory is such an important question, I think. Who creates it? I think hooks is right that there’s a general understanding that academics do the theory-making and non-academics the practice, and each should stick to that type of labor. Such a separation, and it limits each group. I see theory being developed in zine culture, including in zine librarianship—and also practiced. There just isn’t such a separation of ideas from people’s lives. It’s exciting!

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15 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 3, 5, 8, 14.

16 Alex Wrekk, *Brainscan #21*, 2007.

17 Cindy Crabb, ed, *Filling the Void: Interviews About Quitting Drinking and Using* (Athens, OH: Doris Publishing, 2010).

**KM:** Wow, this helps clarify something for me. I see the “academics do the theory-making, non-academics do the praxis” coming out in #critlib, too—perception from public librarians that academic librarians are ivory tower intellectuals, perception from academic librarians that public librarians are totally resistant to theory. Some of this is true, on both sides, of course, but it doesn’t allow people to explore and learn and try the things that are relevant for them. But like you say, the non-separation in zineland is exciting—it brings people together, it brings theory and practice together!

**JV:** Those two zines and issues that you mentioned above (and there are so so many others, we know—zines about gender identity and struggles around that, misogyny, labor issues, disabilities, race, ...) relate for me to hooks’ chapter on Theory as Liberation. She talks about seeking out theory to help her to deal with her pain, and about theory as a healing force. I see this so clearly as one of the main things that zines do for people who make them and people who read them. They’re a space to articulate struggles, develop ideas about how to deal with them and to share that work with others.

**KM:** Theory as a healing force, yes!

**JV:** In zine librarianship, I see us have conversations about ideas in emails, on the phone, at our annual unconference, that relate to our work in concrete ways. That relate to things we do or want to do. I talk with you all the time about power sharing and group processes, and we talk about concepts like feminist or anti-oppressive meeting processes and our attempts to practice them. Kelly Wooten was learning about feminist pedagogy and brought the idea of self-care into our unconference—and that awesome self-massage tool that we all ended up loving!

**KM.:** I remember at the unconference in Milwaukee, someone suggested that we introduce ourselves with our pronouns, and for a lot of the people in the room it was their first time doing that. Now that has become more common, but what is that if not putting queer theory (theory rooted in people’s lived experiences) into practice?

**JV:** Yes! Grounding queer theory in a specific, concrete action.

## **Conclusion**

The web of mutual affective responsibility within the zine librarian community provides comfortable points of connection between theory and practice and a way to engage with both of these as important components of

our and others' liberatory work and learning. Our responsibilities to zine creators, to users, to the zines themselves, and to one another demand that we proceed with care and thoughtfulness. Although zine librarians may not be explicit or even aware of the application of theory, we use small tools and big ideas drawing from queer, feminist, radical pedagogy and other bodies of theory.

All library and archives work benefits/would benefit from application of thinking in these fields, not just zine librarianship. It may be that the zines themselves, since many zines' content is itself feminist and/or queer or otherwise radical, serve as a reminder to learn from and integrate these ideas into our work, more than other materials. Or maybe more mainstream publications simply don't need as much consideration since they already receive the attention. Library and archival procedures were developed with them in mind.

The voices in zines need our careful and thoughtful amplification. We must listen with much respect in order to do this. We need to keep learning together what our mutual affective responsibility for zines and their makers looks like.

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