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Meta-Radicalism: The Alternative Press by and for Activist Librarians^a

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Where have all the flowers (and political leaflets, social protest pamphlets, movement literature, and fugitive materials) gone?

—Richard Akeroyd and Russell Benedict¹

Inside the cavernous main reading room at the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue, away from the clamor of the surrounding streets, I began to open a dusty manila folder. I untied the surrounding string and looked down at the top item of the stack: the January 15, 1974 issue of *Top Secret*. This issue—and every other in the folder—appeared to be printed on photocopied notebook paper. Each publication had been bound by just one staple, which now rusted at every top left corner. Overall, the serial consisted of reproductions of a handwritten text, inscribed in a sprawling but legible hand. Although *Top Secret* represents the tedious and dedicated work of a massive archival project, compared to glossy contemporary publications it could easily be mistaken for something far less professional or important; perhaps even the ranting of a fanatic.

Top Secret was a publication written by and for an alliance of librarians who were activists, if not fanatics. This serial brought together news and information to be shared among librarians who were committed to a cause that others found too difficult, too time-consuming, or just too utterly crazy to tackle: collecting alternative publications.

The struggle to keep the alternative press present and visible in library collections has been happening in earnest since R. Crumb's baby buggy filled with *Zap* comics hit the streets of Haight-Ashbury. Since at least the sixties, radical librarians have argued about the importance of collecting, preserving and sharing materials produced outside the mainstream. Many have

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made this argument using the only outlet that was available to them—via the freedom of the alternative press.

ALTERNATIVES

As long as authors matter, ideas are urgent, and words want to run like wild horses, the world needs small, independent publishers.

—Celeste West ²

Literature about the alternative press almost always begins with an investigation of the word “alternative.” One particular exploration by Chris Dodge notes the rejection within the word. Dodge importantly asks, “Alternative to What?” and answers: “Alternative means real choice is involved; options, diversity. How much difference is there between *Time* and *Newsweek*? With nearly identical covers (Diana vs. Diana, Monica vs. Monica, ad nauseum), they might as well be called *Tweedledum* and *Tweedledee*.”³

Alternatives are DIY, or Do-It-Yourself. They are made by “organizations which are involved with changing, freeing, enabling . . . Their mission is communication, not commerce.”⁴ In recounting her experiences talking with independent publishers while putting together the index *Alternatives in Print*, Jackie Eubanks remembered the response of one small publisher in particular. When she asked about the price of his publication, he cried: “Charge? We don’t charge!” and then compromised: “Ok, you can put ‘Donation’ down as price. We wouldn’t want anybody who wanted it not to be able to get it.” Eubanks recorded that alternative publishers are “as committed to destroying profit” as large vendors are to making it.⁵

“*Alternative* will mean materials produced by non-standard, non-establishment groups or individuals. . . . oriented towards radical/independent politics and culture,” wrote James Danky in “The Acquisition of Alternative Materials.”⁶ Building on Danky’s definition, I will use “alternative” here as a broad term that covers many types of publications, all of which vary from mainstream models.⁷ While Danky writes that the term alternative “can be applied to ultra-conservative/right wing materials,” the publications that I center on are from the far left.⁸ Here I

will explore a small section of radical library publications, and locate them within the overall world of alternative publishing, as well as within librarianship.

My focus is serial publications that call for the inclusion of alternative materials in library collections. Narrower than a study of the alternative press overall, I am looking only at radical publications made by and for North American librarians. Further, I am studying two specific eras of publication: the radical “underground” press of the sixties and seventies, and zines produced since the nineties. Finally, I will examine whether librarians have collected and preserved the alternative library literature created by their peers, in an effort to understand the wider success or failings of librarians as collectors of alternative materials.

INSIDE ACTIVISTS AND META-RADICALS

If you want to be a bookstore clerk, go ahead and order exclusively from the national best-seller lists. If you want to be a librarian, make room in your budget for some small press items.
 –Dorothy Thews and Mary Alice Harvey⁹

For most libraries, alternative publications are not easy to collect. Toni Samek writes that “because of the profession’s heavy reliance on mainstream review media, publishers, and vendors . . . materials produced by the alternative press, and materials that reflect alienated social sectors, are often underrepresented in libraries.”¹⁰ Alternative publications—with small press runs, unusual publishing schedules, and antiquated (or un-automated) billing systems—have been historically difficult items to fit into library acquisition processes.

In 2001, Sanford Berman published an article titled “Inside Censorship,” where he argued that there are two forms of censorship that happen within libraries. The first, outside censorship, takes place when library materials are threatened or removed from a library collection due to protest from a library patron or group. The second, what Berman called librarianship’s “dirty little secret,” is *inside*, or self-censorship.¹¹

Inside censorship occurs when a librarian avoids adding materials to their collection—not because of any policy, but because they fear that the material will be challenged, cause

conflict, or because the items would be too difficult to acquire. Berman says that inside censorship restricts library collections through “seldom-acknowledged and hard-to-justify boundaries or exclusions.” These restrictions are based on format (comic books and graphic novels, for example, have only just begun to enter into library collections) as well as content (Berman argues that if libraries really followed the standards set forth by the American Library Association (ALA) in their Library Bill of Rights, there would be far more materials with sexual content in the nation’s libraries).¹² Alternative periodicals have long fallen victim to inside censorship: beyond difficulties with acquisition, these publications come in nonstandard formats and offer content that is vastly different from what is presented in the mainstream.

Librarians who battle against inside censorship are engaged in one form of what I call *inside activism*. Instead of championing libraries to the greater public, or advocating that libraries take a political stance or engage with activist causes in the wider world (both of which might be thought of as *outside activism*), these librarians are working on the social implications of collecting—from within the profession. Inside activists encourage fellow librarians to consider their professional praxis.

One of the most significant ways in which librarians have tried to convince their colleagues to collect the alternative press has been through the production of their own alternative papers and zines. By creating works that advocate for other publications, librarians have been involved in a form of advocacy that I deem *meta-radicalism*: in which librarians perform inside activism through print, producing alternative publications to advocate for the inclusion of alternative publications in libraries.

Many activist librarians have promoted the alternative press in mainstream publications like *Library Journal* or *Wilson Library Bulletin*—but these articles are not part of meta-radicalism. Rather, meta-radical publications are created in the alternative tradition, outside of the commercial mainstream. Meta-radicalism is contained in the underground papers that were created by librarians that document the importance of underground papers. Meta-radicalism is

found in zines by library workers that promote zine libraries. These are professional publications, but they exist outside of proper library worlds. Created for librarians by librarians, meta-radical papers are political works that revolt against hegemony, resist rote professional activity and fight against lifeless library collections. Meta-radical publications are inside activism by way of the self-published page.

THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES: NEW ISSUES

We can try to be fair but not unbiased. We either speak out and select or else keep quiet. Keeping quiet is just another way of supporting what is going on, which is a political stance.
 –Celeste West¹³

Alternative publications born in the sixties and seventies—those works that were “heaved up on shore during a decade of social and political turmoil, of changing societal and cultural norms”—influenced contemporary journalism and political life, as well as the roles of librarians and library publishing.¹⁴

With the advent of easier and more affordable forms of printing, underground newspapers flourished in the sixties. Laurence Leamer described this era as a turning point in which publications became liberated from the restrictions of “why *this* story can’t run here; *that* picture has to go there; or *that* story has to end here.”¹⁵ A small team could self-publish a paper that had formerly been controlled by restrictive systems of editors, printers, and advertisers. These publications were often created in the editors’ homes and sold hand-to-hand by their creators on the streets. Well-known titles like the *Berkeley Barb*, the *Los Angeles Free Press*, and the *East Village Other* were so accessible and inviting that readers were inspired to found their own presses; at least 100 independent papers were in circulation throughout the United States by 1967.¹⁶

Radicals started publishing their own papers not simply because it was something they could now afford to do, but because they felt that their perspectives were not being represented in established media.¹⁷ Across the country, papers were popping up that shared minority

viewpoints from the personal to the political. Gay and lesbian papers like *The Los Angeles Advocate*, and *Come Out!* emerged as LGBTQI communities became more visible and radicalized.¹⁸ Feminist presses began to collectivize and publish books, newspapers and magazines. Radical African American newspapers, such as such as *Black Panther* and *Muhammad Speaks*, circulated throughout the country.¹⁹ Librarians took note. They began to see that their holdings were not measuring up; not only did they lack alternative titles, but furthermore, their shelves were “nearly bereft of information on black, Hispanic, ethnic, and political publishers.”²⁰

The underground press was also in conflict with the assumed objectivity of the dominant mass media. Alternative publishers began to weave together their “personal lives, journalism and activism” in ways that crossed established boundaries of authority and neutrality.²¹ Librarians were also struggling over issues of objectivity in their profession.²² In the sixties and seventies, librarians began to question whether their detachment from political issues was hindering their ability to serve their communities. They became concerned that failure to take a stand on key issues (such as racism, sexism, and other oppressions) would keep patrons—especially those in minority groups—out of the library altogether.²³

Many librarians felt that the antidote to disconnected library collections was the alternative press. Battling the concept of “balanced” collections—in which acquisition of the mainstream left is equalized by inclusion of the mainstream right—the meta-radicals argued that alternative publications would bring the ideas of minority groups and new thought into library collections beyond the right/left binary. Advocates for alternatives fought diligently against the possibility that every library would hold duplicate collections of materials produced by conglomerate publishing houses. They agonized over the possibility that library holdings would be without connection to local culture, or without acknowledgement of each community’s unique socio-political identity. In the sixties and seventies, many librarians—including Valerie Wheat, Sanford Berman and Noel Peattie—sought ways to bring “libraries to the people!”²⁴

REVOLTING LIBRARIANS: THE FIRST WAVE, UNDERGROUND

We were showing what a good time you could have being an information freak.

—Celeste West ²⁵

“This is about fighting censorship, and the place to begin is with ourselves,” proclaimed Celeste West to the Alumni Association at the School of Library and Information Studies at Berkeley. “I see two main areas of self-censorship in libraries. One is putting up with hierarchical working conditions. The other is book selection.” When West gave this speech in 1982, she showed no idealized vision of library work. She told the group of librarians gathered for the California Library Association Convention: “You buy largely what the corporate media crank out.” West asked her audience to “speculate on the books never written and all the pages omitted because writers know commercial publishers are timid.” Then she asked them to donate “just one good staff person, or equivalent, and ten percent of their budget” to the cause of alternative publications.²⁶

Although continually critical of what she deemed the “literary-industrial complex,” this speech was unusual for West: more often, she protested in print rather than behind a podium. West wrote about the connections she saw between the “conglomeritis” of large publishing houses and the homogenization of libraries. She called for the independent press and do-it-yourself publishing to rescue diversity in print and also within library collections. Her activism inspired many of her fellow radical librarians to put pen to paper, and to acknowledge their work as inherently political. One call for entries written for her peers and published in *Synergy* in 1969 read:

Are you a mild-mannered librarian working for a great metropolitan library? Become Superlibrarian: change that old image, message all the media, taste the fruit of your labors. Don't try that old phone booth bit, simply step to the shelves for Sheik Nedzaoui, *Anaga-Ranga*, *Kama-Sutra*, Norman Douglas (pseudo. Pilaff Bey), *Liebesmittel*.²⁷

Early in her career at the Bay Area Reference Center (BARC) in the sixties, West was using underground papers as reference tools with library patrons; much of her time was spent “shaking down alternative magazines, fugitive reprints, and street sheets” to help answer questions.²⁸ These underground publications inspired much of the content of *Synergy*, which West edited until 1973. She also began her own pioneer feminist press and collaborated on monographs like *Revolting Librarians* and *Booklegger’s Guide to the Passionate Perils of Publishing*.²⁹ The last piece in the latter volume begins:

An “alternative” library publishing explosion has already happened in the last six years. *Synergy* lit a spark in the doldrums of library literature. *Booklegger* and *Emergency Librarian* carried on the flame. Now there are a number of more specialized publications aiming to fill the vacuum of what is not covered regularly, in depth, or with an awareness by the established library media: women’s publishing and resources, prison service, young adult service and issues, non-sexist children’s resources, ethnic service and publishing, and responsible, non-racist cataloging. In short, the library profession is beginning to come into the 20th century, and . . . the more radical members seek alternatives.³⁰

This reciprocal promotion of sister publications was a part of almost every meta-radical publications of the sixties and seventies. One could pick up *Sipapu* and find interviews with the publishers of *Booklegger*, or be notified about the next edition of *Alternatives in Print* by browsing the *SRRT Newsletter*.³¹

Celeste West could have been describing James Danky’s approach to library collecting when in 1972 she wrote: “Do ‘balance’ your collection with pro-racist, sexist, violence material (on ultramicro-fiche?), but as the ombudsmen of the mediascape, push the other, the human-hearted.”³² In the seventies, Danky was part of a league of librarians dedicated to collecting and cataloging everything from the ephemeral to the contemptible. As part of the “Collectors’ Network,” he helped lead publications of every conceivable color toward a home in a library collection. Working with a community of librarians across the United States, Danky and his cohorts collected, traded and reviewed alternative publications.

Top Secret was the publication of the Collectors’ Network. In it they shared news and discussed their goals. It documented the collaboration and the hard work of many of the

librarians who took part in the venture. The Collectors' Network was a union which achieved together more than each librarian could have accomplished alone, just as the issue of *Top Secret* that I saw as a frail and ephemeral scribbling at NYPL represents much more than can be observed inside manila folders today.

Although West and Danky were only two librarians working within a movement of professionals committed to cohesive collecting, their work highlights the larger goals shared among the meta-radicals. A third figure, described by Sanford Berman as “librarian, poet, raconteur, printer, editor, aesthete, social activist, philosopher, essayist, critic, publisher, and eccentric” also exemplifies the meta-radicals of the underground period: Noel Peattie was the publisher of *Sipapu*, a journal issued irregularly, and for many years, free of charge for librarians.³³ In *Sipapu*, Peattie excelled at interviews. Over the years he spoke with many alternative publishers—outside of librarianship (from papers like *Oracle*, and *Anvil*, and underground comix like the *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* and *Pudge—Girl Blimp*) as well as within (such as fellow meta-radicals Carole Leita, Nancy Shimmel, Jackie Eubanks and Elliot Shore). Peattie’s commitment to alternative materials is clear, even in his early writings. In 1970, he shared:

Nobody is doing exactly what we are doing, to our knowledge. We will describe important papers, as they are born, transmogrified, or killed off; and we do welcome articles of strong opinion. We also encourage, even at some risk, the subscription to controversial (including Movement) papers.

That ethnic and underground papers are controversial, and that librarians have lost their jobs by subscribing to them, there is no doubt. But that young people, especially Third World people, need them, is also true. You can always say “Let them subscribe at home, or buy them in the street; I have a job to protect;” and we cannot tell you to sacrifice your career. But consider, also, that the duty of a librarian is to increase the flow of information, not to impede it, and that self-censorship is the most dangerous form of censorship.³⁴

By the time that *Sipapu* came to an end in 1995, much had changed in the United States, including within alternative publishing. Peattie sustained his curiosity and enthusiasm for alternative print and freethinking content into the nineties, when he began to publish reviews of another kind of publication: zines.

THE NINETIES AND THEREAFTER: THE PERSONAL IS A POLITICAL ZINE

The Cold War may be over, Stalinist-state systems long dead, and multinational conglomerates rule the world, but the counterculture and resistance movement are still alive and kicking. They've just moved to another arena.

–Daniel C. Tsang³⁵

In contrast to the underground publications of the sixties, which were largely made in editions on presses, zines are usually made in small batches and assembled by hand. Alison Piepmeier discusses in *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* how zines have a relationship to the body of their creator. Citing Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, she writes:

While Anderson's newspaper reader has the awareness "that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others," zine writers and readers feel community because they know that *not* many others are replicating this act. The imagined community of the zine world is intimate rather than extensive, and linked to the body rather than simply to an imagined other.³⁶

Jenna Freedman agrees that her zine "reminds me that as I print, assemble, fold, staple, color in and rubberstamp each and every copy of my zine, that inevitably a little of myself—some tiny bit of DNA—goes out with each copy."³⁷ Today, in an age of screens, apps, and digital publications, zines are important to their creators precisely because they are not web-based, because they are not blogs. Zines are appealing because they are physical objects that show evidence of personal lives through smells, creases and other traces of DIY construction.

Whereas underground publications were sold hand-to-hand on the street like contraband, zines are more commonly sent through the mail with a personal note, or traded at public events and festivals. While underground papers relied on the more commercial printing technologies of offset and mimeograph presses, zines are most often created on photocopiers. Zines also tend to be smaller: instead of a tabloid- or newspaper-sized work, they are more akin to chapbooks or pamphlets, and often are made of a sheet of office paper folded in half and stapled.

The diversity of content within zines is vast. Like the undergrounds, zines include topics that the mainstream media glosses over, avoids or condemns. Julie Bartel describes that zines: “. . . can be about toasters, food, a favorite television show, thrift stores, anarchism, candy, bunnies, sexual abuse, architecture, war, gingerbread men, activism, retirement homes, comics, eating disorders, Barbie dolls—you name it.”³⁸

Zinesters commonly make their publications at their kitchen tables just as underground publishers did. But instead of working as a team and sending their publication off to a printer, zine-makers often find themselves constructing their publications alone, and then the works might be distributed to an intentionally small group of readers—perhaps just to friends or pen pals.³⁹ Information about a zine and its creator might be deliberately obfuscated; the date and location of its construction may not appear in its pages, and the author’s identity might only be acknowledged through pseudonym. Janice Radway describes:

[Zines] explore the delineation and porousness of boundaries, crossings, connections and comminglings. Zines are also deeply engaged in conversation with many different discourses appearing in the surrounding culture. Indeed they are so engaged with them that they cite, reference and even ventriloquize a multifarious range of discourses precisely to respond to all of them. Thus, they re-circulate cultural discourses at the very moment that they alter them by juxtaposing and combining them.⁴⁰

It may seem antithetical for librarians—who are stereotypically interested in order and organization—to be involved in the chaos of zine-making, but many librarians create zines. Sean Stewart writes: “Some mysterious link exists between zines and librarians. . . . Are librarians drawn to zines because they recognize in these bizarre, photocopied publications the passion for freedom of expression that they themselves so proudly stand for?”⁴¹

Within the set of zines produced by librarians are works that advocate for the inclusion of zines in libraries. Meta-radicals like Greig Means and Chris Dodge—librarians with and without an MLS—publish zines to promote zine collection and preservation.

RIOT LIBRARRRIAN: ZINES OR BUST

A zine about zine librarians, by zine librarians, for zine librarians... and the people who love them.

–Greig Means ⁴²

“At first I thought about forming an association not unlike the ALA, except exclusively for zine librarians,” wrote Greig Means in 2002. “But when I approached a coworker about joining the ZLA, she said, ‘What? The Zapatista Liberation Army?’ Not wanting to be confused with our freedom fighting comrades to the south, I thought it might be a better idea to do a zine librarian zine.”⁴³

Like the underground publishers of the sixties and seventies, zine librarians began to create alternative publications because they didn’t see their interests reflected in the professional literature, and to create community. *Zine Librarian Zine (ZLZ)* was started by a group of librarians who met at the Underground Publishing Conference in 2001. Penny Collins wrote that her desire for *ZLZ* was to: “function as a way for isolated zine librarians to communicate with each other, comparing systems, sharing information and offering advice.”⁴⁴ More than just a discussion of the inner-workings of each collection, *ZLZ* and other meta-radical publications help to remind librarians that they are “doing important work. [We’re] building communities, promoting free speech, and giving people the tools they need to change the world.”⁴⁵

In the same way that the meta-radicals of the sixties strove to fight against the monoculture of the mainstream, zine librarians advocate for the inclusion of materials that go outside the norm and “make serials management look like a piece of cake.”⁴⁶ Meta-radicals promote zines despite the “fact that the materials are often challenging to acquire and problematic to catalog.” Like earlier activists, the meta-radicals declare that these challenges are “no excuse for self-censorship.”⁴⁷

While the meta-radicals of the sixties and seventies were focused on convincing their peers that the alternative press was important, meta-zinesters focus more on DIY library

practices in their publications. Because cataloging and staffing are now seen as the main obstacles to collecting alternative literature (and perhaps because of the work already done by the meta-radicals in the sixties and seventies), the majority of meta-radical writing on zines focuses on *how* to get zines into your library, not *why*. Step-by-step guides abound, and zine librarians share advice and information via email discussion lists and (un)conferences in addition to within their publications.⁴⁸ Reaching outside of the limitations of establishment libraries, these meta-radicals form support networks of both accredited and “barefoot,” or non-degreed, librarians, and they also reinforce the importance of zine libraries in garden sheds as well as within traditional libraries.

Often even within institutional libraries, zine librarian positions are unpaid, or added voluntarily on top of regular duties—making zine librarianship just as much a labor of love as zine-making. The activism of meta-zinesters tends to be narrower in scope than the first wave of meta-radicals from the sixties and seventies, which promoted alternative media in many formats. Most meta-radical zine publications promote zine collecting in particular, and not the larger field of alternative materials. Although zine librarians often are interested in the larger significance of collecting the alternative press as a whole, because the work of collecting is often voluntary and additional to their other responsibilities, many zine librarians intentionally constrain the scope of their advocacy and their collections in order to make their work more manageable (and in order to obtain approval for their work within their institutions).⁴⁹

Meta-radical zinesters see their work as intensely important, if not always appreciated. Ellen Knutson, a volunteer zine librarian at the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center believes: “If in some small way the UCIMC library makes a difference in giving access to information that is otherwise unavailable to people then I feel like it is all worthwhile.”⁵⁰ The meta-zinesters who create, contribute to, and advocate for zine collections understand Travis Fristoe’s sentiments about why he participates in zine librarianship:

I continue to volunteer at the Civic Media Center's zine library because it keeps me thinking about the important questions. What do any of our written efforts matter? What is worth archiving? What do zines mean to those outside our immediate circle? . . . Why have I donated my Friday afternoons for the last 5 years to our zine collection? . . . Because we must record the human, the personal and the political voices that are largely silent and silenced in our society. Because if we don't document these attempts at history and culture, who the hell will? ⁵¹

RECEPTION, VIA COLLECTION

"Why, Mr. Peattie, we'd be fired if we bought those things!"

—Noel Peattie ⁵²

In the fall of 1969 and the spring of 1970, S.J. Leon studied the collections of Philadelphia libraries. His survey used a list of titles produced by the Social Responsibilities Round Table of ALA to compare collections throughout the city. Leon concluded that, "the puritanical heritage we read about in our social and cultural histories still lives in Philadelphia area libraries."⁵³ More importantly, Leon mentions the restrictions of his survey:

One of the limits of such a study as this is the absence of expansive statements to explain the responses. Are the four libraries that do not have the two plays by Le Roi Jones making evaluative judgments on the merits of these plays? Are they even aware of them? Are they reacting partially to the author's reputation as a militant in Newark's recent ghetto wars? Or are they reacting, perhaps to his anti-Semitic diatribes disguised as poems? All these factors are separable, but only in the minds of knowledgeable collection builders.⁵⁴

Leon warns that "sheer statistics have their crudities, and vital half truths are often hidden underneath, between, and around them. Figures don't lie: they merely make half statements much of the time, and much depends on how they are presented."⁵⁵ In other words, library records alone ultimately can't tell us *why* an item was added or omitted.

Yet we lack significant data elsewhere. Any opposition to the alternative press' presence in libraries is as underground as the publications themselves. There is little rebuttal to the work of the meta-radicals—other than complaints about how difficult it can be to acquire and manage alternative publications. Inside censorship has been present and powerful enough to keep alternative materials out of libraries without lengthy discussion or debate. For the most part, librarians have either been too timid or indifferent to speak out against alternative collections.

With an acknowledgement of the limitations of statistics and data alone, perhaps the best way to measure the effectiveness of the meta-radicals is by examining library records—to see what titles were added to library collections, and maintained. Meta-radicals spoke to their fellow librarians. Thus, if their peers were convinced of the importance of alternative publications to libraries, they would have added alternative materials to their holdings.

As I write this, at the end of 2010, over 8,000 libraries collect *Library Journal*. Roughly 130 libraries that share their cataloging records with OCLC via Worldcat report holdings for *Synergy*. Just ten have *Top Secret*. Because these publications are all serials, these holdings might be dramatically incomplete—each of these libraries may have just a handful of issues, not a comprehensive array of each title.⁵⁶

There are even fewer zines in library collections. The three issues of *Zine Librarian Zine* are held at about sixteen libraries. My own *The Borough is My Library: A Metropolitan Library Workers Zine* is available at only three libraries, despite the fact that it is advertised as free of charge for zine collections.⁵⁷

Despite the fact that there are undoubtedly more copies of all of these publications being read by librarians than what appears in Worldcat,⁵⁸ we are presented with a dire picture of library collecting when we see how sparingly alternative library literature has been preserved in permanent collections. These numbers raise many questions: Were alternative publications unappealing to librarians? Was the avoidance of these materials intentional? Have librarians been reading radical publications, but keeping them in their home closets instead of in their collections?⁵⁹ And most importantly, if librarians have neglected to collect the alternative publications produced by their own colleagues, how could they claim they did not likewise neglect the wider range of alternative publications?

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE LIBRARY...

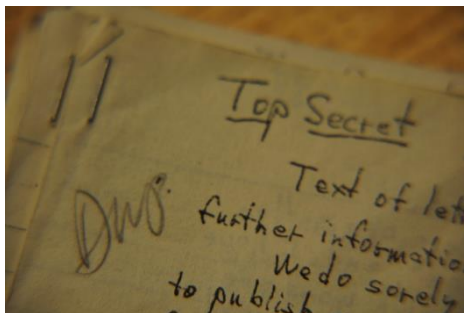
If we don't act in our professional capacities as conservators, guardians of this civilization, we are not librarians. Period.

—Celeste West ⁶⁰

As I stood inside the New York Public Library and browsed through *Top Secret*, I had the distinct feeling that I had seen the publication before, but I wasn't sure that was possible. I flipped through the stack of issues for a closer look. At the top of one cover page were three letters. Scrawled in pencil, they barely form a word. It would have been easy to overlook this scribble—to think it was some notation of classification. When I finally realized what I was looking at, I was astonished. I knew that few others, upon finding this scrawl, would have an idea of who had written this note, or about its larger significance.

I worked at the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) with James Danky in the early 2000's as I made my way through library school. Russell Benedict once wrote a job description for a student assistant to aid with his Contemporary Issues Collection, which read: "he or she must expect to encounter the absurd, the irrational, the thrilling, and the shocking."⁶¹ This would have been an accurate description of the materials that we received daily in the Newspapers and Periodicals collection.⁶²

Despite the fact that by the time I was at the WHS, the Collectors' Network had been defunct for many years, Danky still maintained a network of his own. He would send items related to the political and religious right to Chip Berlet; Native American publications to the Sequoia Research Center at the University of Arkansas-Little Rock; and boxes of miscellaneous publications to Chris Dodge.⁶³ The issues Danky sent along were materials that didn't suit the collection, or those that we had already acquired. Each day in room 225, I would work alongside Danky, sorting the mail. If Jim encountered a duplicate item, he would grab his pen from his shirt pocket and quickly jot three letters at its top—"Dup."



These were the same three letters that I found scrawled in pencil at the top of *Top Secret* in the reading room of the New York Public Library, in what looks just like the handwriting that I had seen daily for three years.

When I later asked Jim if he remembered sending any duplicate issues to the New York Public Library, he told me that they hadn't ever been on his distribution lists.⁶⁴ Although Danky did not send these particular issues—so far as he can recollect—to NYPL, one of his comrades did. Even without the formal Collectors' Network, Danky's persistent work to preserve, share and forward made it so that I was able to see these materials. Here we have another act of meta-radicalism—from one generation to another. A gift shared from hand to hand—but with a few decades in between the sharing, unlike on the streets of San Francisco in the sixties.

While reading these issues of *Top Secret* has been very important to my own research, it is not difficult to imagine how this creative collecting will have implications for other scholars of print culture. The knowledge that, while he was at the WHS, Danky was avidly seeking Native American newspapers, labor publications, prisoners' magazines, publications of the religious right and all kinds of otherwise uncollected tracts is a reassuring thought for future researchers. While some might doubt the need to save and preserve many of the publications that line the shelves in Madison, Danky realizes that each item is awaiting its historian. "For most of the stuff that is acquired," Danky admitted in an interview in 1992, "the utility won't occur in my lifetime." But he also points out, "If you want to look at contemporary life in America, this is the place to come."⁶⁵

Today, librarians wouldn't be likely to speak negatively about collecting alternative publications. Librarians generally remain silent about the implications of conglomeritis and mainstream collections. This silence is enough to make comprehensive alternative print preservation a difficult goal. There is little movement away from the standard procedures of purchasing materials from a continuously narrower list of corporate library vendors.⁶⁶ The prevalence of small and ever more restricted budgets, the overwhelming array of professional responsibilities and shrinking staffs also make today's librarian sadly limited—mentally and fiscally—from extended contemplation of collection development.

Despite the challenges, meta-radical publications continue in print. *Unabashed Librarian*, *Counterpoise*, and *Progressive Librarian* continue the traditions of the revolting librarians that began in the sixties. Librarians like Kelly ShortandQueer and Jenna Freedman continue to cut, fold and staple so that I still find printed publications in my mailbox. Each year I issue my own zine. As I construct my own work, I keep the vision of the revolting librarians close to heart, and I imagine meta-activists to come.

In 1977, James Danky asserted, "The social upheavals of the last decade cannot be understood from the pages of the *New York Times* alone."⁶⁷ I contend that the history of librarianship cannot be conveyed merely through the study of *Library Journal*.

¹ Richard Akeroyd and Russell Benedict, "A Directory of Ephemera Collections in a National Underground Network," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 48 (November 1973): 236-37.

² Celeste West, "Roll Yr Own: A Guide for New Publishers, Self-Publishers, and Authors," in *Booklegger's Guide to the Passionate Perils of Publishing*, ed. Celeste West and Valerie Wheat (San Francisco: Booklegger Press, 1978), 21.

³ Chris Dodge, "Alternative to What?" *Counterpoise* 2, no. 2 (1998): 11.

⁴ Jackie Eubanks, "A.I.P. Adventures," *Booklegger Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1973): 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁶ James Philip Danky, "The Acquisition of Alternative Materials," in *Alternative Materials in Libraries, 1982/1983*, ed. James Philip Danky and Elliott Shore (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983), 13.

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- ⁷ Narrower terms that could be used to describe publications that fall within the umbrella of “alternative” might include descriptors of: the way that these publications are produced (self-published, small press); their format (broadsides, pamphlets, newsletters); or their content (ethnic press, punk zines, literary mags). Each of these labels could be thought to form a separate branch within the “alternative” tree—which encompasses many variances in form and content, but all grow from the shared roots of the free press.
- ⁸ James Philip Danky, “The Acquisition of Alternative Materials,” in *Alternative Materials in Libraries*, ed. James Philip Danky and Elliott Shore (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983), 13.
- ⁹ Dorothy Thews and Mary Alice Harvey, “Libraries and the Small Press,” in *Alternative Library Literature, 1984/1985: A Biennial Anthology*, ed. James Philip Danky and Sanford Berman, (Pheonix: Oryx Press, 1986), 86.
- ¹⁰ Toni Samek, “Unbought and Unbossed: Booklegger Press, the First Women-Owned American Library Publisher,” in *Women in Print: Essays on the Print Culture of American Women from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. James Philip Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 128.
- ¹¹ Sanford Berman, ““Inside” Censorship,” *Progressive Librarian* no. 18 (2001): 48-63.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Celeste West, as in Milton Wolf, “A Conversation with Celeste West,” *Technicalities* 2, no. 4 (1982): 6.
- ¹⁴ James Philip Danky and Denis Kitchen, eds. *Underground Classics: The Transformation of Comics into Comix* (New York: Abrams, 2009), 17.
- ¹⁵ Laurence Leamer, *The Paper Revolutionaries: The Rise of the Underground Press* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972): 34.
- ¹⁶ Donna Lloyd Ellis, “The Underground Press in America: 1955-1970,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 5, no.1 (1971): 105.
- ¹⁷ Or radicals created their own papers because their perspectives were being ignored even by alternative publishers. John McMillan documents in his book, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*, that the domination of white men over the underground press was what inspired LGBTQI folks, women, and people of color to abandon underground presses and to create their own papers that operated without deference to white male “leaders.” Similarly, the boys club of the underground comix movement in San Francisco was what inspired female graphic artist Trina Robbins to promote and publish women’s alternative comics.
- ¹⁸ James Philip Danky, “The Oppositional Press,” in *The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America*, ed. David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Michael Schudson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 269-285.
- ¹⁹ Jacqueline Rhodes, “The Black Press and Radical Print Culture,” in *Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America*, ed. David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Michael Schudson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 286-303.
- ²⁰ James Philip Danky, introduction to *Alternative Materials in Libraries*, ed. James Philip Danky and Elliott Shore (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1982), vii.
- ²¹ Leamer, *Paper Revolutionaries*, 14.
- ²² Toni Samek, *Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in American Librarianship, 1967-1974* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001).
- ²³ Samek, *Unbought and Unbossed*.
- ²⁴ Sanford Berman, “Libraries to the People,” in *Revolting Librarians*, ed. Celeste West and Elizabeth Katz (San Francisco: Booklegger Press, 1972), 51-57.
- ²⁵ Wolf, *A Conversation*, 4.

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- ²⁶ Celeste West, "The Secret Garden of Censorship: Ourselves," *Alternative Library Literature, 1982/1983: A Biennial Anthology*, eds. James Philip Danky and Sanford Berman (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1984), 101-104.
- ²⁷ Celeste West, "Naked Lunch," *Synergy* no. 22/23 (October/November 1969): 21.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ For more information about Celeste West and *Synergy*, see:
- Toni Samek, "Unbought and Unbossed: Booklegger Press, the First Women-Owned American Library Publisher," in *Women in Print: Essays on the Print Culture of American Women from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. James Philip Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 126-155.
- Toni Samek, "*Synergy*, Social Responsibility and the Sixties: Pivotal Points in the Evolution of American Outreach Library Service," in *Libraries to the People: Histories of Outreach*, eds. Robert S. Freedman and David M. Hovde (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 203-218.
- She Was a Booklegger: Remembering Celeste West*, ed. Toni Samek, K.R. Roberto and Moyra Long (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010).
- ³⁰ Valerie Wheat, "The Library Free Press," in *Booklegger's Guide to the Passionate Perils of Publishing*, ed. Celeste West and Valerie Wheat (San Francisco: Booklegger Press, 1978), 69.
- ³¹ In "The Library Free Press," Wheat listed: *Booklegger Magazine, Collectors' Network News, Emergency Librarian, Hennepin County Library Cataloging Bulletin, Inside/Outside, Librarians for Social Justice, Rocking Chair, SRRT Newsletter, Sipapu, Synergy, Title Varies, Unabashed Librarian, Voice of Youth Advocates, Women in Libraries, Women Library Workers, and Young Adult Alternative Newsletter*.
- The fact that so many alternative library publications identified, promoted and reviewed other alternative library publications is what made my work on this project possible. Mention of alternative library publications would also happen when meta-radicals published in mainstream library publications: Danky and Berman each published reviews of alternative library literature in *Wilson Library Bulletin* and *Library Journal* in the sixties and seventies, for example.
- ³² Celeste West, introduction to *Revolting Librarians*, ed. Celeste West and Elizabeth Katz (San Francisco: Booklegger Press, 1972), n. pag.
- ³³ Sanford Berman, foreword to *A Passage for Dissent: The Best of Sipapu, 1970-1988*, ed. Noel Peattie (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1989), ix.
- ³⁴ Noel Peattie, "1:2," in *A Passage for Dissent: The Best of Sipapu, 1970-1988*, ed. Noel Peattie (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1989), 9-10.
- ³⁵ Daniel C. Tsang, "The Alternative Media: Open Sources on What's Real," *The International Journal on Grey Literature* 1 no. 2 (2000): 61.
- ³⁶ Alison Piepmier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 229.
- ³⁷ Jenna Freedman, "Pinko vs. Punk: A Generational Comparison of Alternative Press Publications and Zines," in *The Generation X Librarian: Essays on Leadership, Technology, Pop Culture, Social Responsibility and Professional Identity*, ed. Martin K. Wallace, Rebecca Tolley-Stokes and Erik Sean Estep (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 154.
- ³⁸ Julie Bartel, *From A to Zine, Building a Winning Zine Collection in Your Library*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 2004): 2.
- ³⁹ Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, (New York: Verso, 1997): 101.

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- 40 Janice Radway, "Girls, Zines, and the Miscellaneous Production of Subjectivity in an Age of Increasing Circulation" (transcript of keynote speech, presented at the annual colloquium of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, December 1, 2000), 11.
- 41 Sean Stewart, "Zines and Librarians: Zines and Librarians: The Phenomenon Explained," in *Zine Librarian Zine #2: Advice for A Young Zine Librarian* (Portland, OR, 2003), 32.
- 42 Greig Means, Introduction to *Zine Librarian Zine*, (Portland, OR, 2002), n.pag.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Penny Collins, "Misfit Theatre Zine Library: Greetings from New Zealand," in *Zine Librarian Zine #2: Advice for A Young Zine Librarian* (Portland, OR, 2003), 26.
- 45 Greig Means, "Independent Publishing Resource Center: It's Been a Good Year at the IPRC," in *Zine Librarian Zine #2: Advice for A Young Zine Librarian* (Portland, OR, 2003), 45.
- 46 Travis Fristoe, "Civic Media Center," in *Zine Librarian Zine* (Portland, OR: 2002), n. pag.
- 47 Brooke Young, "Salt Lake City Public Library: The Public Library Slant," in *Zine Librarian Zine #2: Advice for A Young Zine Librarian* (Portland, OR, 2003), 4-5.
- 48 See the Zine Librarians email list (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/zinelibrarians/>) founded by librarian Jenna Freedman and the Zine Librarians (un)Conference (<http://mkezluc.wikispaces.com/>)
- 49 Out of personal experience I can attest that this is the case: at the Brooklyn College Library I have created a zine collection instead of an alternative press collection in order to make my own (voluntary) work more manageable for myself. Even though I believe there are many currently published non-zine alternative serials that should be collected in libraries (and I worry over what items are not being collected), I had to choose some constraint for my own collection, and essentially, my own labors.
- 50 Ellen Knutson, "Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center: Zine Librarianship: Labor of Love or a Long Slow Descent into Madness," in *Zine Librarian Zine #2: Advice for A Young Zine Librarian* (Portland, OR, 2003), 7.
- 51 Fristoe, *Civic*, n. pag.
- 52 Noel Peattie, as in Mary Lee Bundy and Frederick J. Stielow, eds. *Activism in American Librarianship: 1962-1973* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 48.
- 53 S. J. Leon, "Book Selection in Philadelphia," *Library Journal*, April 1, 1973, 1081-1089.
- 54 Ibid., 1087.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 In general, if a researcher is interested to see publications but does not have access to this limited number of libraries, they could place an interlibrary loan (ILL) request. Yet commonly, requests for full issues of print serials through ILL will not be granted—requests for specific articles are more common (my own ILL dept was exasperated by my requests for full print runs). The alternative press is also well-known for being poorly indexed, so identifying a specific article to request via ILL might still pose barriers—even in an age of digitization.
- 57 It must be noted that these counts might not reflect the true number of collected items—plenty of copies might currently be available in independent libraries or those that do not participate in the OCLC catalog.
- 58 As one example, I have certainly distributed more than three copies of my own zine to my colleagues.
- 59 After presenting this paper at the "Libraries in the History of Print Culture" conference, a fellow librarian kindly donated her personal collection of *Booklegger*, *Women Library Workers* and *WLW Journal* to me for this project—from the bottom of her closet.
- 60 Wolf, *A Conversation*, 6.

⁶¹ Akeroyd, *Directory of Ephemera*, 236.

⁶² WHS has one of the largest serials collections in the United States, or just over 9,000 subscriptions when Danky retired in 2007. For more information, see Julie Rigby, “Research File: Documents in Search of Scholars,” *Lingua Franca* Summer/October 1992, 74-75.

⁶³ James Philip Danky, email message to author, August 28, 2010.

⁶⁴ James Philip Danky, interview by author, Madison, WI, June 4, 2010.

⁶⁵ Rigby, *Research File*, 75.

⁶⁶ Today librarians are often focused on digital acquisitions management, and are even struggling to maintain perpetual access to online works that they have paid for—perhaps another result of conglomeritis and dependence on commercial vendors.

⁶⁷ James Danky as in Patricia J. Case, “Collections of Contemporary Alternative Materials in Libraries: A Directory,” in *Alternative Materials in Libraries*, ed. James Philip Danky and Elliott Shore (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1982), 122.