

## Zines & Tramp Literature

I laid the foundation for my personal book collection one day in the seventh grade. My burgeoning explorations of punk music had led me to the legendary East Bay scene of the 1980s and early '90s, an area whose music scene overlapped with a lively culture of self-published magazines, referred to as zines. After school that day, my dad drove me to our local Borders to pick up my copy of Aaron Cometbus's *Despite Everything: A Cometbus Omnibus*, an anthology of the first twenty years of the classic East Bay zine.

*Despite Everything* was not among the books kept in stock at my local Borders. It hadn't been on any of my school reading lists either. Having to special-order it was my first indication that my new interest was not one that everyone shared. Indeed, as I flipped through the massive two-pound volume, I was struck by the chaotic layouts, the high contrast, the handwritten text—all so different from any book I had ever encountered. I felt as though the door to an entirely new and secret world had been opened for me, but only a crack. I began a ravenous search for more zines, but I had so many questions: were zines still being published today? Did people in Chicago or Evanston, my hometown, write zines too? As zines are a decidedly off-the-grid form of communication, it was going to take some research. I eventually discovered Quimby's, an alternative bookstore in Chicago with an enormous zine selection. I also checked for the zines that would occasionally appear for sale at the counters of my favorite record stores or at the underground punk concerts I was just beginning to attend at that time. My appetite for self-publishing grew until I found myself soliciting zinesters all over the world for their publications, which I sold on consignment from the zine distribution, or distro, that I ran out of my bedroom.

Zines are fundamental to punk and many other subcultures. They are an inexpensive and accessible medium for anyone with something to say. Depending on the preference of the writer, a zine can include anything from personal essays or manifestos to record reviews and schedules for touring bands, or vegan recipes and how-to articles. Like the Cometbus anthology that served as my introduction to the genre, zines are brimming with raw creativity. Zinesters create them on their own time and with their own money, and value the medium as a means of unmediated communication and self-expression far more than as possible source of profit. Zines are a medium that binds a scene or subculture together or informs outsiders about a particular place.

As my collection grew throughout my years in high school, I began to notice a pattern: while many of the zines I came across were highly localized, the writers were not always natives of the places they described. Instead, many writers were travelers as well as punks, retelling their experiences with hitchhiking, freight-hopping, and other unconventional modes of travel. In my collection, one can find many pieces that function as singular impressions of cities, whether by locals or travelers. I became interested in

exploring this theme of travel as I further expanded my collection. My exploration led me increasingly in the direction of tramps and hobos, and I was surprised at the similarities I found in both form and content between punk publications and tramp literature dating back to the 1870s.

For both groups, the impulse to publish is rooted in the desire to connect people whose nomadic lifestyle often involves extensive travel on a low budget and places them firmly outside sedentary society. These raw and unfiltered travel accounts compensate for their underrepresentation in mainstream media and often serve a dual purpose as narratives and guides for others seeking a similar lifestyle. In both their content and the mode of distribution, punk zines and hobo narratives emphasize the creation of informal or alternative economies. As foreign as this concept may be in the world of commercial publishing, it is common for zine writers to trade their publications with each other regardless of any difference in cover price. Also, as I experienced in the process of acquiring my collection, many zinesters eagerly offer their work free of charge to anyone who seems interested, because these publications exist to communicate rather than to generate profit. Even the pieces in my collection that are not self-published come from small independent companies dedicated to the publication of stories that might otherwise go untold.

The historical tramp narratives in my collection share with the zines the aspects of independent and individual-scale modes of publication and distribution. The themes that bind these two types of narrative together are those of unconventional travel, frugality and creative appropriation of resources, and the perpetuation of a do-it-yourself ethos. One of my courses last spring quarter, “Flux Americana: Tramps and Tramping in American Literature,” confirmed the connection I had intuited between zines and tramp literature. We examined this literature chronologically from the postbellum years to the contemporary age, and the instructor, PhD student Paul Durica, helped me to understand the genre’s fluctuations over time as a series of cultural appropriations. While I can still appreciate the singularity of punk zines, it has been useful for me to understand them as part of a larger web of cultural narratives.

Looking back, I realize that my personal discovery of punk and zines came at the perfect time. As a middle-schooler who felt very much out of place, these were the beacons of weirdness that let me know I wasn’t alone in these feelings and allowed me to cultivate my knowledge of a world that felt like it was mine alone to explore. During my time at the University thus far, I have been exposed to other subcultural literatures of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. My continued curiosity about cultures just below the surface has expanded to include these other types of offbeat narratives, aided by my new ability to locate these texts historically. I now see my collection as the starting point for seeking out more texts that feature the intersection in urban spaces between hobo narratives and other radical histories.

## Annotated Bibliography

Anonymous. *Evasion*. Salem, OR.: CrimethInc., 2003. Good condition.

This is an anonymous account of freight-hopping, squatting, and living cheaply, and provides an intimate portrait of one person's appropriation of resources, sometimes illegally, in an effort to escape from a mainstream lifestyle he or she finds oppressive. This book is published by the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collective, an organization that encourages antiauthoritarian distribution of its books by publishing them with an "anti-copyright" notice.

Anonymous. *Manifesto*. No location, ca. 2004. Good condition.

I received this book in the mail in eighth grade, when I ran a mail-order zine distribution, or "distro," out of my bedroom. Like *Evasion*, it is an individual's celebration of the abandonment of a mainstream lifestyle.

Black, Jack. *You Can't Win*. 1926. Oakland, CA.: Nabat/AK Press, 2000. Very good condition.

The Nabat Books edition of this tramp autobiography contains an introduction by William S. Burroughs, nicely illustrating the Beat Generation's affinity for and appropriation of earlier tramping narratives. AK Press is an anarchist-run printing collective. Their Nabat Books series is an effort to call attention to the life stories of radicals and other non-traditional figures.

Burian, Al. *Burn Collector #13*. Atlanta, GA.: self-published, 2004. Very good condition.

Burian, Al. *Burn Collector #15*. Portland, OR.: self-published, 2011. Very good condition.

Burian, Al. *Burn Collector: Collected Stories From One Through Nine*. Atlanta, GA.: Stickfigure Distro, 2000. Very good condition.

I acquired this collection from the author when I visited his table at the Chicago Zine Fest in 2011.

Cometbus, Aaron. "A Call To Arms, or Against Mediocrity, Against Marginalization." N.p.: self-published, 2011. Very good condition.

Aaron Cometbus printed this manifesto calling for renewed vigor in alternative publishing on a single sheet of 8.5"x11" paper. He distributed it after his talk at the 2011 Chicago Zine Fest, where I personally received my copy from him.

Cometbus, Aaron. *Cometbus #38*. Berkeley, CA.: self-published, 1996. First printing. Good condition.

Cometbus, Aaron. *Cometbus #47*. Berkeley, CA.: n.p., n.d. Very good condition.

Cometbus, Aaron. *Cometbus #49*. San Francisco, n.p., n.d. Very good condition.

Cometbus, Aaron. *Cometbus #50*. San Francisco, 2006. Good condition.

Cometbus, Aaron. *Despite Everything: A Cometbus Omnibus*. San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2002. Poor condition.

This selection, edited by the author, draws from the first twenty years of *Cometbus* zine. This quite comprehensive first-person history of punk served as my first introduction to zine culture in middle school. I showed my very extensively bookmarked and dog-eared copy to the author at Chicago Zine Fest in 2011, which he said made his day.

Cometbus, Aaron. *Double Duce*. San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2003. Good condition.

Cometbus, Aaron. *I Wish There Was Something That I Could Quit*. San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2006. Good condition.

Cometbus, Aaron. *Mixed Reviews*. N.p.: self-published, 2005. Good condition.

CrimethInc. Workers' Collective. *Recipes For Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook: A Movable Feast*. Olympia, WA.: CrimethInc., 2006. Fair condition.

As a so-called anarchist cookbook, this volume is in part a satirical nod to the highly controversial 1971 book of the same name. Its contributors offer advice for free travel, radical organizing, and methods for appropriating materials and reclaiming public space.

Dactyl, Aaron. *Railroad Semantics #6*. N.p.: self-published, Spring 2012. Very good condition.

This zine provides an immersive experience of freight-hopping; Dactyl combines personal travelogues, photographs, tutorials, and historical research.

Guthrie, Woody. *Bound for Glory*. Boston, 1943. Good condition.

This is a paperback first-edition copy.

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. 1957. New York: Penguin Classics, 2006. Fair condition.

As is the case with many of my peers, *On the Road* was one of my first exposures to the Beat Generation and subcultures in general. However, Kerouac's novel does not take on its usual identity as a classic within the context of this collection. Rather, as a defining text of the Beat Generation, it serves as an example of appropriation of one subculture by a subsequent one.

Joyce, Jim. *Or Let It Sink #1*. Chicago: self-published, n.d. Good condition.

Joyce, Jim. *Or Let It Sink #2*. Chicago: self-published, n.d. Good condition.

Joyce, Jim. *Or Let It Sink III*. Chicago: self-published, n.d. Good condition.

London, Jack. *The Road: A Biography of Jack London's Life as a Hobo*. 1907. N.p.: ReadaClassic.com, 2010. Good condition.

In this memoir, London details his brief time as a tramp. This text exemplifies the tendency of tramping narratives to include advice or tutorials for others pursuing the same lifestyle.

Lyle, Erick. *On the Lower Frequencies: a Secret History of the City*. Berkeley, CA.: Soft Skull Press, 2008. Good condition.

This book is both an instructive text for urban punks and a personal account of the author's life of grassroots community organizing and resisting the forces of gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District.

Lyle, Erick. *Scam #5*. San Francisco, 2005. Good condition.

Lyle, Erick. *Scam #6: In the Streets of Buenos Aires*. San Francisco, 2008. Fine condition.

Lyle, Erick. *Scam #9: The Story of Black Flag's Classic First Album*. San Francisco, Fall 2012. Fine condition.

Reitman, Ben. *Sister of the Road: the Autobiography of Boxcar Bertha*. 1937. Oakland, CA.: Nabat/AK Press, 2002. Fair condition.

This text occupies an occasionally controversial position; while a work of fiction, it is presented as a nonfictional autobiography of a young female tramp. The Nabat Books reprint is the first edition to state this explicitly, although only in an afterword. Nevertheless, author Ben Reitman is notable as a key figure in the Chicago hobo community.

Vollman, William T. *Riding Toward Everywhere*. 2008. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009. Good condition.

Wrekk, Alex. *Stolen Sharpie Revolution: a DIY Zine Resource*. Third edition. Portland, OR.: Microcosm Publishing, 2005. Good condition.

This how-to manual for zinesters exemplifies the sense of accessibility that is central to zine culture.