Genre, Context, and Purpose in Contemporary Latin American Fanzines

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Accessibility
INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

My professional interest in fanzines, and their relationship to libraries, came about in a manner that was in some ways accidental and distinct from many other authors in this volume. It arose in the course of a specialized project to acquire distinctive graphic material as part of a topically restricted rare books endowment, one specifically pertaining to the topic of cats and dogs (Gómez 2018). I knew something about alternative publications, in part from the writings and outreach of Jenna Freedman at Barnard College, and about the burgeoning graphic art book scene in New York, and so I used social media to determine whether it would be possible to build a coordinated acquisition program that would be distinctive, valuable, and rational. My research yielded a mixed prognosis, but in the course of the search I developed connections to, and some familiarity with, fanzine production in Europe and Latin America. My work in fanzines, and the point of view of this chapter, started with graphic zines and worked backwards to understand their history and the efforts that had taken place to preserve and understand them. This chapter will concentrate on the scene in Latin America.

Before examining the “what” and the “how” of Latin American fanzines and comics, it is important to at least briefly touch on the question of “why.” In the current environment of library work and particularly in academic libraries, any collections program is likely to be assessed according to its relevance to institutional needs and particularly those of inclusion and equity, as well
as teaching and learning. Fanzines and art comics are certainly a niche that not all libraries would consider, but they do have strong potential relevance to the curricula in popular culture studies, studies of gender and ethnicity, studies of contemporary Latin America generally, and practical art curricula (printmaking, graphic culture). In addition to providing primary source perspectives on youth movements that may be difficult to find in the country of origin and are almost certainly not to be sourced internationally without significant effort, fanzines and comics are useful as interactive displays that would fit with library special collections departments’ increased mandate to inspire and visually engage diverse groups of media-saturated students and faculty (Knowlton 2014).

GENRE, SUBCULTURE, AND AUDIENCE

When considering fanzine collecting in Latin America, one might well ask how to define the boundaries and limits of the enterprise. Collecting small conventional periodicals and discrete special collections is already an activity that challenges the rational imagination of collection development policies as librarians have known them, and the questions can only get more vexing when dealing with unique publications that do not follow preconceived rules or genre boundaries. The answer is not an easy one, unfortunately, and very much depends on the motivation for collecting. This section briefly outlines the legacy of the fanzine genre as a countercultural youth culture manifestation, and also touches upon recent developments that place the fanzine in a more artistic and even commercial context.

Genre and descriptive vocabulary have played an important role in fanzine criticism over the past twenty years and can certainly help give definition to a collecting initiative and policy for those works. Classic among such efforts has been the book Notes from Underground by Stephen Duncombe, who covers the history of fanzines from the science fiction titles of the 1930s to punk rock music and culture in the 1970s, to a combination of these and other currents in the 1980s and 1990s (Duncombe 2008). Fanzines can relate to literary topics, to political activism and theory, to popular culture forms, and to design and illustration.

Some similar typologies can apply to Latin American creators, many of whom were heavily influenced by the United States and continue to be involved
with international conversations; however, one must also consider the distinctive historical circumstances of fanzines in some Latin American countries. Zines were created in reaction to repressive political structures or communal violence in countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Colombia, in a cultura política del postautoritarismo, or a cultural response to dictatorship (Cardemil and Ignacio 2009). Given the realities of political, economic, social, and cultural injustices, fanzines in Latin America cannot be seen as just expressions of taste or whim; they have served as a tool of cathartic release and organizational strength for marginalized youth communities (Rico and Julia 2018). One can quote Juan Posada recalling the 1980s in Medellín, Colombia: “It was living the present because tomorrow we were going to die, to express in four drawings in four chords that . . . we did not know if we were going to return when we left” (Trujillo Puentes 2017). In these examples, zines’ value derived from their very low budgets, an emphasis on personal autonomy, and mutual education and support among advocates and subcultural groups.

While there has not been a wholesale departure from this ethos, in the past decade there has also been greater aesthetic experimentation for its own sake, with a concomitant involvement of commercial entities. Carlos Reyes wrote in 2011 that in Chile “the flow of publications does not end, because every month, new fanzines, and even prozines (fanzines made by professionals) arise everywhere, making it almost impossible to catalog all the anarchic publications that form a living tissue that mutates and transforms [with the] pulse of its creators” (Reyes 2011). Many of the contemporary fanzine producers profiled by Inés Estrada in Mexico “also make music, write, organize events and, in some cases, produce low-budget films, independent radio or television. In summary, the practice of each guest expands to different media. This indicates that self-management strategies are not confined to the printed resource; rather, this is just another vehicle to give vent to their interests and jobs, and it is not always an end in itself” (Arriaga Celis and Estrada 2015, translation mine).

Fanzines and comics, while distinct in many respects of authorship and publication, cannot easily be distinguished from each other in this scenario. This can be attributed to creative shifts among the producers and consumers of this literature, as well as to the sheer disruption caused by economic crises (as in Argentina) that paralyzed the mainstream comics scene and gave new energy to emergent media and dissemination strategies such as fanzines,
blogs, small publishers, and independent festivals (Sainz and Bidegaray 2017). With fanzines, artists can build a base of followers and attract the attention of small or large publishers (Oubiña Castro and Barreiro 2018). Such authors may or may not continue to express themselves in the focused and independent form of the fanzine once other platforms with fewer aesthetic and distribution limitations present themselves (Oubiña Castro and Barreiro 2018). As a result, there are comic-like f anzines and fanzine-like comics that may at times seem indistinguishable and which maintain varied degrees of outsider perspective in their content and visual style. Oubiña Castro and Barreiro describe a new generation of artists as media-savvy, ambitious, and determined to reach a large audience; rather boldly, they declare that “finally, the fanzine has reached adulthood” (Oubiña Castro and Barreiro 2018).

These more art-oriented f anzines use enhanced production and design techniques. Some writers have noted their “rediscovery as an artistic object and a cultural fetish” in which “the use of photocopy and screen printing as an aesthetic choice arises, rather than as the only acceptable means of printing due to its economic accessibility” (Oubiña Castro and Barreiro 2018). One critic has suggested that contemporary fanzine producers and illustrators find themselves involved in a sort of aesthetic compromise between an ethic of countercultural abjection and a sort of “aesthetic democratization” which pays more attention to readers’ visual reactions and embraces some degree of commercial production (Jiménez and Rodríguez 2017). The contemporary world of f anzines brings us into contact with “new creators with styles and very diverse aesthetic proposals, presenting many aesthetic clichés, but also original and authentic avant-garde styles” and “materials comparable in artistic quality to many other similar products that are reproduced and distributed under the seal of large publishers” (Jiménez and Rodríguez 2017).

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF FANZINE FAIRS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Part of the creative satisfaction, as well as the practical difficulty, of collecting Latin American f anzines derives from the inherently social role of the enterprise, and the need to monitor communal gatherings and social media.

Fanzine f airs deserve special mention, as they are crucial to the collecting enterprise. Their past may have been especially radical, as fanzine makers and
members of anarchist collectives appropriated the territory and inverted the defined uses of parks and plazas in cities such as Buenos Aires and Santiago for their fairs (Cardemil and Ignacio 2009). At the same time, these fairs’ present may be less and less obviously transgressive. Speaking from Peru, fanzine creator and collector Sara De La Torre commented that the sheer number and popularity of fairs (even virtual ones in pandemic conditions) belie the idea that they are marginalized entities outside of capitalism (De La Torre 2020).

There are ferias de libro autogestiva (independent book fairs, sometimes abbreviated as FLIA) and talleres de fanzine (workshops in which people learn how to create and assemble fanzines), and both of these are often combined with markets for artworks, stickers, printed clothing, and other goods and are accompanied by music concerts (Palmer 2009). Ferias can be events of significant size that are partially sponsored by local governments, libraries, university departments, cultural granting agencies, and even by more conventional book publishers. They can also be smaller events that are entirely organized by fanzine distributors and held in public parks, tattoo studios, or music venues. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect diverse alliances of highly independent creators to fit into a recurring and predictable structure. While some gatherings have maintained a consistent name for many years, others (such as the Zin Amigos festival in Mexico City in 2012–14) were highly influential but did not endure. Even in a medium so dominated by young people challenging authority, some have argued that there is a shift towards the possibility of change by working from within, “using the institutions of cultural promotion, cheating them, as if wanting to deconstruct them” (Jiménez and Rodríguez 2017). This kind of resistance to consistent organization can make it difficult to provide concrete advice about an acquisitions or outreach strategy for collecting fanzines. With this caveat, there is a very partial list of recently active fairs in the appendix at the end of this chapter.

Even as social media platforms evolve and change rapidly, librarians and collectors of fanzines in Latin America must use them as a form of outreach and research. While fanzines themselves remain resolutely physical in form, artists and writers (often reluctantly) depend on common social media platforms to publicize their diffusion events and draw attention to their work. In many cases, keeping to the communal ethos of zine-sharing, authors place the partial or full text of their zines on Issuu.com, a virtual publishing platform. This allows a virtual global audience as well as a local participatory one, which
is a great help to spectators and appreciators in North America. However, these surrogates rely on transitory and proprietary access and raise the persistent question of how and whether fanzine authors can remain in control of the dissemination of their work and in dialogue with those reading it (Berlini et al. 2017). Regardless of what is casually digitized, it is fair to say that fanzines are most authentic and definitive in the printed form: “Artists want to take their works to paper” (Oubiña Castro and Barreiro 2018).

See figure 4.1 through figure 4.4 for a sample of promotional material for zine fairs in Caracas and Lima.

ACQUISITIONS LOGISTICS

The process of acquiring and then ensuring the discoverability and preservation of fanzines and ephemera has long required creative interventions to fit into the structures and workflows of a typical academic or public library, and in many ways fit into the capacities of special collections. Those considering

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**FIGURE 4.1**
Illustration of “Don Santiago Palabras,” a promotional avatar of the second FLIA Caracas, 2016
Designed by Manuel “Maní” Cruces

**FIGURE 4.2**
Poster for the second FLIA Caracas (Caracas, Venezuela, 2016)
Designed by “Ozonokillers” Alvaro Lopez
embarking on even a limited acquisitions program should consider the added degree of difficulty and cost associated with fanzines from other countries and in multiple languages.

Whereas unorthodox funding allowances may be able to work for fanzine-gathering trips in a local area or even within one’s region or country, this becomes complicated internationally (Collingwood and Kassir 2018). Even with proper payment, these materials are only sold in short runs at book fairs, so that a library or its representative must travel to many locations with little previous notice of availability. Established book vendors, which have been a standard source for acquiring printed materials from Latin America for libraries in the United States and Canada, may or may not be familiar with the kinds of events and venues where alternative publications are produced and distributed. And without explicit evidence to the contrary, they may not perceive a market robust enough to justify the enterprise. At the same time, assembled and curated lots of historic fanzines are being widely commodified in the rare book market and made easily available to libraries with the

FIGURE 4.3
Poster for the 2020 LEEME festival (Lima, Peru)
Designed by Eduardo Yaguas

FIGURE 4.4
Poster for the FLIA Caracas (Caracas, Venezuela, September 2014)
Designed by Manuel ‘Maní’ Cruces
requisite budget from specialized dealers. There are also potential ethical concerns, as explored in documentation by the Barnard Zine Library and professional associations, which are especially acute in the case of documents that may arise from national and personal trauma (Berthoud et al. 2015). Do we alter the production and selling of fanzines by buying up collections of material at large markups? Do we diminish the likelihood of the contextual relevance, documentation, and equitable treatment of these works’ authors?

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to comment on archival appraisal and descriptive practices that may come into play, selectors often find themselves needing to communicate between the authors of fanzines and the librarians or archivists who will be ensuring their discoverability and preservation. This may mean trying to understand whether a publication is a single or is part of a series, and inquiring whether there is information which can be gathered that would be useful in establishing an authority record. Alternatively, librarians must also be able to initiate informed conversations with fanzine writers about how their work will be located and processed in a formal library setting. An example of this could include the topic of see-references (Collingwood and Kassir 2018). Even the most sensitive curatorial approach cannot fully escape the inherent distortion of trying to fit fanzines into conventional classifications and workflows. One creator likens fanzines to a sort of “anarchives” whose inclusion in archives often brings descriptive distortions: “For example, a person makes a fanzine and wants to register it with an ISSN code, for which they will have to go to the library, as it is not a conventional format; they will have to answer many questions, and alter the real information in relation to the printing technique, etc.” (De La Torre 2020).

**DIGITIZATION, WEB ARCHIVING, AND COLLABORATIVE COLLECTING**

Given the challenges to North American libraries in attempting to collect fanzines from Latin America on a large scale, it is reasonable to ask about the potential role of digitization. The short answer is that significant numbers of fanzines do reach some form of digital expression on social media, but the paper form is more important than ever, given the increased variety and capabilities of current-day printing techniques. Even as fanzine producers may embrace some level of media publicity, the very materiality of the artifact—a
personal physical expression that can be sold and traded—continues to be important. From the perspective of the fanzine writers examined by Trujillo Puentes in Colombia, editors and outside curators, however enlightened, are often unwelcome intermediaries who filter the communication between the fanzine writer and the final recipients. Fanzines are governed above all by the freedom of the format (Trujillo Puentes 2017).

There are participants in fanzine and underground comics culture in Latin America who have tried to collect and distribute images and descriptions of selected titles, though these are not systematic compilations or digital collections. In some instances, born-print anthologies of fanzines might be digitized with permission, for greater diffusion to other parts of the world (Utescher 2011). There are also less fixed compilations or continuing blogs/journals that profile fanzines, such as Fanzinotecas (www.propone.net/fanzinoteka.com), a long-running blog and portal relating to fanzine issues in Ecuador; Fanzineologia (www.fanzineologia.net), a web portal for international fanzine discussions; Zinebiosis (https://zinebiosis.com), a record of a traveling fanzine display and collecting project operated by Sara De La Torre; Ficciorama (https://issuu.com/ficciorama) in Colombia; and Las Espigadoras (www.rataliaespigadora.com/fanzinoteca) in Chile.

Fanzine collections of any sort must balance the order needed to make artifacts accessible with the autonomy prized by the authors (Trujillo Puentes 2017). In Latin America, it is important to note the distinction between a true archive project, which provides for organization and preservation, and a fanzinoteca, which is a physical place that provides free access to a zine collection. The two projects can be allied, but exist in essential tension with each other (De La Torre 2020).

Partnerships between fanzine producers/collectors in Latin America and libraries in North America would have to fit the strategic priorities of all parties, including the costs of curating the materials, fostering equitable relationships and agreements with authors, maintaining collections on-site locally in Latin America, and maintaining an infrastructure for metadata and hosting. As one fanzine collector said, “I would love to digitize the fanzinoteca that I have if I knew more about the subject of copyright, and if I also had the time to do so. It is a job that would not be paid” (De La Torre 2020). Although municipal and national libraries in Latin America long considered fanzines to be impractical or out of their scope, the strongly felt obligation to local
memory and the impetus to cross disciplinary boundaries have motivated some of these libraries to get involved in collecting and preserving fanzines. Among these libraries are the Museo Universitario del Chopo in Mexico City (www.chopo.unam.mx/fanzinoteca/fanzinoteca.html), the Biblioteca de Santiago (Chile) (www.bibliotecasantiago.cl/2-uncategorised/59-cumbre-del-fanzines), the Biblioteca Nacional de la Republica Argentina’s Centro de Historieta y Humor Grafico Argentino (www.bn.gov.ar/biblioteca/centros/historieta), and reports of a new collecting initiative at the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia.

While fanzines are radically distinct from more conventional circulating collections, it is valuable to consider how networks of libraries in the United States are increasingly developing cooperative collection-building efforts that would enable them to combine resources strategically, collecting area studies materials both more deeply across the community and with a greater emphasis on primary source materials (Thacker et al. 2019). Current developments in web archiving from U.S. institutions such as the Library of Congress, the Center for Research Libraries, and some individual universities and consortia suggest that it might be possible to share the work involved in preserving what can be readily digitized (Garrett 2019). At the same time, however, optimism for such digital initiatives exists alongside concerns about dwindling institutional commitments by U.S. academic libraries to acquire materials (including fanzines) from Latin America that are available only in small print runs and may require special processing (Seminar 2011).

**CONCLUSION**

Fanzines and underground comics are publications that can be very important means of studying emerging popular culture and graphic arts in Latin America. They are vital primary documents that can provide library researchers with an unmediated view of the aspirations and practices of young people who are engaging in political activism, setting up tents in parks, and teaching one another skills in printmaking, binding, and artistic production. Fanzines are a medium that is inherently paper-based and financially accessible to both producers and consumers, although uneasily allied with emerging technology in some respects. Those contemplating international fanzine collections will need to navigate significant logistical challenges and cost commitments and,
more important, ask themselves why they want such a collection and how it would advance the interests of their stakeholders as well as those of the creators themselves. For a genre that is generally anti-institutional and cheap, does it make sense to treat fanzines as a static, heavily secured, and costly special collection? (Rannou 2018).

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Appendix

Independent Fanzine and Comics Fairs in Latin America (a Partial List)

Argentina
- Aluzine
- Buenos Aires Fanzine Fest
- Comicópolis, https://esla.facebook.com/ComicopolisArgentina
- Ctrl P (Cordoba), www.facebook.com/Controlpee
- Dibujados, www.facebook.com/dibujadxsfanpage
- Feria de Arte y Publicaciones Tatá Timbó, www.facebook.com/tata.timbo.9
- Feria Fanzines FADU, www.facebook.com/Proyecto-Fanzine-FADU-116182895663870/
- Feria Migra (Buenos Aires), www.instagram.com/feriamigra/?hl=es-la
- Feria Paraguay de Arte Impreso (Buenos Aires), www.feriaparaguay.com.ar
- Festival Fanzín del Rojas, www.facebook.com/festivalfanzin
- FLIAs (in various cities)
- Parque Gráfico—Feira de Arte Impressa (Buenos Aires)

Bolivia
- La Fiera, www.facebook.com/lafierabolivia
- Viñetas con Altura (La Paz), www.vinetasconaltura.com

Brazil
- Bienal de Quadrinhos de Curitiba, www.facebook.com/bienaldequad<br>rinhos
- Dente (Brasilia), www.facebook.com/feira.dente
- Des Gráfica (São Paulo)
- Feira Plana (São Paulo), www.feiraplana.org/festival
• FIQ or Festival Internacional de Quadrinhos, www.facebook.com/FIQBH
• MIOLO(S) (Sao Paulo), www.facebook.com/Lote42
• Motim (Brasilia), www.facebook.com/edicoesmotim
• Parada Gráfica (Porto Alegre), www.facebook.com/aparadagrafica
• Parque Gráfico (Florianópolis), www.facebook.com/ParqueGrafico
• Parque Gráfico—Feira de Arte Impressa (Florianopolis), www.facebook.com/ParqueGrafico
• POC CON (Sao Paulo), www.facebook.com/PocComicCon
• Ugra Zine Fest (Sao Paulo), https://ugrapress.wordpress.com/ugra-zinefest

Chile
• Feria Artes Gráfikas (Santiago), www.santiagoilustrado.cl/2018/07/feria-de-ilustradores-convocatoria.html
• Feria del Libro Valpo (Valparaiso), www.facebook.com/FILVACHILE
• Feria Rara en la Plaza de Bolsillo (Santiago), www.facebook.com/events/147085982779167
• Feria Rara #1—Diseño Independiente (Santiago) www.facebook.com/events/192250138046097
• Festival Acero (Valparaiso), http://acero.festival.cl
• FIC (Santiago)
• 4to Aniversario Safari: Festival de Ilustración y Diseño, www.facebook.com/events/149214959206890
• Furia del Libro (Santiago), www.facebook.com/FuriaDelLibro
• Impresionante Feria de Publicaciones y Arte Impreso (Santiago), www.facebook.com/feriaimpresionante
• Primavera de Oficios (Santiago), www.instagram.com/primaveraoficios

Colombia
• Bogota Fanzine Fest, www.facebook.com/bogotafanzinefest
• Entreviñetas (Medellín), www.entrevinetas.org
• Dientes (Medellín)
• FLIA Bogotá (Feria del Libro Independiente)
• FLIA Bucaramanga
• FLIA Cali
• FLIA Villavicencio
• Garaje (Medellín)
• La Otra (Medellín)
• Subterránea (Cali)
• Vagabunda (Medellín)

Ecuador
• Arqueologia del Comic Ecuatoriano (various cities), http://arqueologia.propone.net
• Fanzinogamia Festival Internacional de Autopublicaciones Graficas y Fanzines (Quito)
• FeriaArrancagrassa (Quito)
• Furia Fanzine Fast (Guayaquil)
• Guayaquil Zine Fest, www.facebook.com/guayaquilfanzinefest
• La Cachina (Quito)
• Supercopia (Quito)

Mexico
• Festival Matazanos (CDMX)
• Material Art Fair (CDMX), www.facebook.com/materialfair
• Rrepliça (CDMX), www.facebook.com/rrrepliçaorg
• Tijuana Zine Fest (Tijuana), http://tijuana(zine)fest.com/reg2019

Peru
• Festival Carboncito (Lima), www.facebook.com/festivalcarboncito
• Festival LEEME (Lima), www.facebook.com/festivalleeme
• Tijuana-Lima (Lima), www.facebook.com/events/2001896100137168

Puerto Rico
• Tintero, www.facebook.com/tinteropr

Uruguay
• Microutopias i Feria de Arte Impreso (Montevideo), www.facebook.com/events/1971827796418569

Venezuela
• FLIA Caracas, liacaracas.blogspot.com
• FLIA Merida, www.facebook.com/pg/fliameridandina