

# Our Zine Futures

## A Call for Accessible, Inclusive, and Diverse Zine Communities

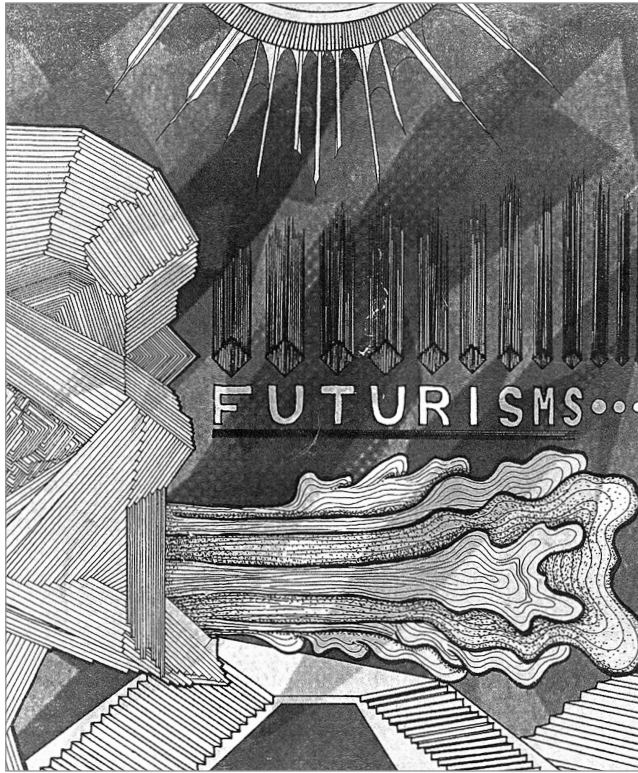
*Ann Matsushima Chiu (A'misa)*

Zines will always be; there's no way they cannot.

### A ZINE POSSIBLE

When the Portland Zine Symposium put out their annual zine in 2016–17, the topic was Zine Futurisms (figure 12.1). This topic was intended to examine “what zines mean for folks, how others think of zines, who has access to zines and zine making, and the individuals and communities whose futures are tied up in zines” (Portland Zine Symposium 2016). In this chapter, zinesters have begun to reimagine what zines mean to them, and what it means to engage with the future of zines. Through surveying the zine community, this chapter examines key areas of concern regarding the accessibility of zines and zine spaces, practicing inclusivity and radical safer spaces, and critically examining gatekeeping in the zine community.

How then do we begin to imagine the future of zines? Being involved in zines as a zine-maker, zine publisher, zine fest organizer, and zine librarian has enabled me to understand zines from multiple vantage points, but since one person's opinion is never enough, I decided to launch a survey to gather the opinions of other zinesters and zine librarians. This chapter will summarize and analyze the responses to the Future of Zines survey, which was taken voluntarily by eighty-seven people in May 2019. As themes of accessibility, inclusivity, and power emerged, the respondents also commented on zines' form and function, and the reasons behind contemporary zine-making. It is also important to note that this survey was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the coronavirus and the inability of zinesters to gather in



**FIGURE 12.1**  
**“Zine Futurisms,” vol. 1, Portland Zine Symposium, 2016.**  
 Permission by cover artist Anna Vo

person at local, regional, national, or international zine fests, a new area for future study within the “zine possible” is that of the virtual zine fest.

## THE ZINE PRESENT

With zine and DIY communities popping up in urban locales like Los Angeles (CA), Albuquerque (NM), Tijuana (Mexico), Tokyo (Japan), Kampala (Uganda), and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), the profile of who zinesters are is shifting and the content and types of the zines being produced mirrors a diversity of identities, experiences, and expressions. One such project is Zine Futures East Africa (EA), which features artwork and writing from the post-independence

years in Uganda and Tanzania. Sarita Mamseri, the founder of Bookstop Sanaa (in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania), talks about the ways in which “visual artists can look at the realities of what we are facing, and what we are living in our day to day lives in Tanzania and Uganda through this format of zines” (“Stories from East Africa” 2018).

The founders of the Tijuana Zine Fest, Luisa Martinez and David Peña, explain how zines and self-publishing allow the artwork of Tijuana zinesters to cross the border, since many Tijuana zinesters cannot physically attend zine fests in the United States (Hernandez 2017). In her book *Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric*, the scholar Adela Licona writes about zines and zinesters who are “in the practice and productions of a value system that focuses on egalitarian social relationships, equity, and social justice” (Licona 2012). For Licona, “third space” means a space that exists between binaries, the space between two opposing forces, sites, identities, and so on. The authors who take part in third space narratives have marginalized identities that are defined and formed by “the in-between spaces that are created at virtual and material intersections.” It is at zine fests like the Tijuana Zine Fest that third-space zines can be found. These zinesters’ identities are shaped as they navigate border politics in the bordering lands of Mexico and the United States.

Zines situated in countercultural scenes of punk, DIY, and activist cultures have defined the “zine present.” Often it is the cultural dissonance and trauma that one experiences through war, incarceration, racism, or gender and sexuality discrimination that finds expression on the pages of zines. These experiences are often censored out of more mainstream publications and news.

## FRAMING ZINE FUTURES

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“Zine futures” are situated in the realm of futurology, otherwise known as future studies or future research, which forecasts the future based on current trends. Futurology attempts to make broad, sweeping predictions about world events and social trends, and similarly this chapter attempts to map the trajectory of current zine trends to tell the story of what is influencing the future of zines and where things might be headed. According to the future scholar Ossip Flechtheim, who coined the term *futurology*, the public more easily grasps and understands short-term forecasting because these types of

predictions tend to be concrete and specific. However, if the predictions are made too closely to current trends, then scholars risk their predictions becoming outdated just as quickly as they were made (Flechtheim 1972). In Alvin Toffler's book *Future Shock*, contemporary human beings are experiencing rapid amounts of change due to the acceleration of social processes, leaving the modern person in a state of flux (Toffler 1971). This rapid pace of change permeates all aspects of our society. And in turn, this accelerated rate of change leads to a fixation on incremental changes in order to keep up with fads, instead of focusing on changes that will have a lasting, transformative impact.

Can there be a focus on zine futures when the immediate process of zine-making consumes the maker in a jolting, messy, and analog series of tasks? Anna Vo describes the zine present as a space in which to construct identity: "Talk about a thing, process the thing, be critical about the thing, take a photo of the thing, make copies, put a staple in it, make a new thing. . ." (Vo 2016). Once a zine project is completed, there is no time to revel in it or reflect on it because one must quickly adapt and jump to the next impermanent situation and immediately begin to "make a new thing." The zine present is task-driven, but the zine process allows us to peer out from the moment-by-moment series of next steps to understand what is farther down the road for zines and their futures.

From the late 1990s to the present day, zine writers have been fixated on whether or not zines will exist in both the near and distant future, and have speculated on whether zines are dead or not. In 1999, John Marr commented on the shifting priorities of the zine world: "Just as the action in my mailbox isn't what it used to be, neither is that which can only be described by the ghastly term 'zine scene.' Zines may not be dead, but they're not especially lively these days either" (Marr 1999). Zinesters from the 1980s and early '90s who felt they were living in the heyday of zines began to commiserate over the fact that zines were not as popular, due in large part to the rise of the internet and digital media. Chris Yorke's controversial 2000 op ed "Zines Are Dead: Six Deadly Sins in Zinery" gained infamy over the years, and yet he himself revisited the issue twelve years later, claiming that zines weren't dead or irrelevant as he once stated, but perhaps they were "undead" (Yorke 2013). Some of these authors, then, view zine culture as the antiquated, ghostly remains of a once

thriving culture to be preserved, studied, and revived because “if you’re not growing, you must be dying” (Marr 1999). Yet if other zinesters are arguing that present-day zine culture is as vibrant now as it ever was, then perhaps we can move beyond the “zines are dead vs. zines are not dead” narrative entirely.

Talk to a seasoned zinester about whether zines are back from the dead, and they will probably roll their eyes at you. As one survey respondent (10) stated quite bluntly: “Zines are not some ‘dying art.’ It is so tiring that every article frames the story as a ‘resurrection.’ If an editor or journalist can just please move beyond that, that would be great.” Another survey respondent (67) stated: “We need less ‘zines aren’t dead’ articles and more articles that talk about the vibrancy of the current zine movement in all its diversity.” For those in zines, zines have never lost their charm or significance, and to claim that they have died is to erase the history and presence of zinesters who have kept producing thought-provoking, subversive content for years, and even decades. For those encountering zines for the first time, the need to resurrect the subcultural and fringe culture of zines as a part of popular or mainstream culture is far too enticing. There is an innate need to stake a claim to something old and vintage and repackaging it as something shiny and new. Moreover, year after year, writers will unearth the underground trove of zine culture again and again while claiming that zines are “making an unlikely comeback,” when in fact “zines never really went away” (Chinn 2019).

Zine futurists of the past speculated on whether the new wave of zines would primarily exist in the digital realm of e-zines, blogs, and digitized zines. While the internet is where zinesters share their work to find community, “paradoxically, zine culture may outlast other print media that have moved on to a digital format, as zines are material and continue to provide texture, color, and formatting that can only be experienced as part of an interaction with the hand-made object” (Weida 2012). Some said that blogs are like zines, yet the technical maintenance and the pressure to post frequently in order to maintain the audience engagement that blogs require is far more upkeep than print zines require (Freedman 2005). Digitizing zines would increase the access to and preservation of them, yet the self-published nature of zines leaves library workers in a lurch in terms of permission, copyright, privacy, and print culture (Wooten 2009).

## THE FUTURE OF ZINES STUDY

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The purpose of the Future of Zines survey was to identify trends and challenges in the zine and independent publishing community through the survey responses of eighty-seven individuals, many of whom identify as zinesters. Through the process of firsthand data analysis, the following questions were explored:

1. What zines and zine forms are being produced?
2. How are library workers engaging with zines and zine collections?
3. What are the areas of concern in the zine community, according to the survey's respondents?

The rest of this chapter is framed as a mini-study for two reasons. First, the study aims to document what zinesters and zine communities desire for the future based on the values of the Future of Zines survey respondents. Second, the predictions of the future of zines should belong to the opinions of zinesters themselves. Within this chapter, respondents' replies are anonymous and are labeled in chronological order according to when they completed the survey.

### Methodology

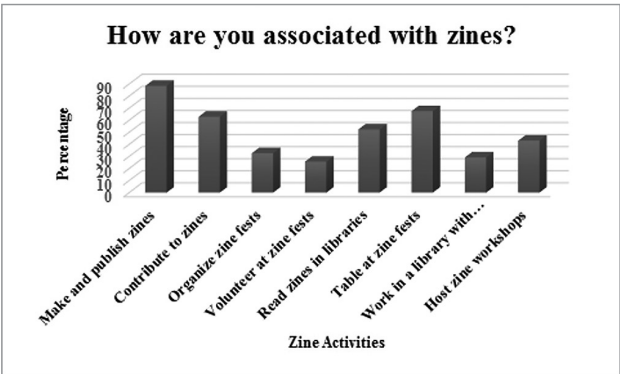
Using Google Forms, an electronic questionnaire was the main instrument of data collection, and was made to be easily shared and re-postable on social media. A quantitative method allows for the identification and categorization of emergent trends and patterns in the zine community. The twelve-question survey design was to be finished within ten minutes' time. Seven of the twelve questions were in short-answer format and were meant to capture initial responses from respondents, since this study was interested in an immediate, visceral response.

When creating the Future of Zines survey, one of the main strategies was to capture both novice and expert zine voices in various regions through the firsthand data. The types of questions were categorized as logistical (name, e-mail address, name of zine, further comments) and contextual (addressing zines and zine culture). The survey questions are in appendix A at the end of this chapter.

Participants

Initially, the survey respondents were friends and acquaintances in various online zine networks, with more than thirty individuals sharing the survey link to personal networks on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. A few days later, the American Library Association’s Zine Pavilion Twitter account (@zinepavilion) posted the survey. Through various postings on social media networks and specialty zine and library discussion list networks, a target number of fifty respondents was determined. A total of eighty-seven people ended up completing the survey in eight days.

Of the eighty-seven respondents to the survey, 98 percent of them completed the full twelve-question survey. Since one of the objectives of the survey was to poll active zinesters, it was important to understand how the various respondents described their connection to zines. Only five respondents claimed to have never made a zine before. Figure 12.2 shows the different zine activities the respondents were involved in.



**FIGURE 12.2**  
Answers to the question “How are you associated with zines? Check all that apply”

Data Analysis

In order to begin postulating what zinesters desire for the future of zines and zine communities, the author performed a word-frequency textual analysis of the eighty-seven respondents’ short answers using Voyant Tools and Wordart .com, which are open-source, web-based text reading and analysis environments. Based on the words used in the survey responses, the key areas of importance



for zinesters are: zines, fests, publish(ing), community, make, think, contribute, workshops, and library (figure 12.3). Additionally, the survey responses were coded according to the research questions on current trends in zines, current trends in libraries and librarianship, and concerns in the zine community. Quotations were collocated by theme.



**FIGURE 12.3**  
**Top ninety-five words in the Future of Zines survey submissions**

## SURVEY RESULTS

As long as there is oppression or attempts at keeping certain groups out of the mainstream culture, there will be a young person somewhere making a zine.

—Survey respondent 72

Zinesters are eclectic, diverse, distinct, and independent individuals who have varying opinions and interests. The survey responses revealed that zinesters are curious and interested in a whole myriad of zine projects. And the zinesters did not hold back when asked about the challenges, concerns, and areas that need to be addressed in the zine world. Their responses reveal the challenges present in zine communities. Additionally, a smaller percentage of the respondents were library workers, who were interested in a Zine Union Catalog and in zines as instructional tools. The “zine future” will be the trends that emerge as a consequence of all these respondents’ views.



## Trends in Zines

The format of a zine is fluid. It can exist in many different forms, shapes, sizes, or materials, and different methods can be used to print it. Zines can be photocopied, laser-jet printed, silk-screened, hand-drawn, and so on. Many people are attracted to this open and highly flexible format. When asked, “What type of zine would you be most excited about if you found it at the next zine fest?” zinesters expressed various preferences for zine types and projects, but it was newsletters, free comics newspapers, and perzines that piqued their interest the most.

Gaining traction in the zine scene is the newsletter. Whether monthly or quarterly, the newsletter is a low-barrier creative enterprise that is an economical option. It utilizes the same snail-mail correspondence that once galvanized zine commerce and trading, with the purpose of updating friends and colleagues on zinesters’ monthly happenings. In December 2017, Juli Jump Rope, a zinester and organizer of the Grid Zine Fest in Salt Lake City, was inspired to start a “monthly print-only newsletter,” the *Homebody Herald*. This started a chain reaction of other newsletters, such as Kelsey Smith’s *Hortense Jones Occasional* (Olympia, WA) and Sugene Yang-Kelly’s *Newsletter Bandwagon* (Portland, OR), among others. Juli Jump Rope describes her newsletter as “a one-page cut n’ paste newsletter created by me, with updates about my totally normal life. . . . If this kind of slow-motion communication appeals to you, you might enjoy this newsletter” (Jump Rope, n.d.).

Another form of current interest to zinesters is the quarterly comics paper, printed on cheaply produced, non-archival paper called newsprint. One example is the *Intruder*, which was a free quarterly publication founded in 2012 by Seattle comic artists and distributed in local cafes and comic book shops (Smith 2016). Editor Marc Palm writes on the *Intruder* website that the comics paper was “never going to please a mainstream audience; the paper has grown into something with an edge to it. It’s dark. It’s weird. It’s awkward and funny. Our fans know what they like and we know our fans” (Palm, n.d.). Tim Good-year and Ian Sundahl, the Portland-based underground comics co-publishers of *Vision Quest*, borrowed the *Intruder*’s model, wherein each featured artist pitches in \$40 and in return receives a few bundles of the paper to distribute. *Vision Quest* gathers twenty-five to thirty-five comic artists per quarterly issue, and can be offered to the public free of charge because of the financial buy-in of its contributors.

Another popular type of zine that has been in vogue for decades and has recently gained an entire zine fest dedicated to its form is the perzine (short for “personal zine”). The Dear Diary Zine Fest in East Bay, California, centers on “zine[s] written about your personal experience . . . like something you are going through/went through or a more general expression of things that are on your mind” (Dear Diary Zine Fest 2019). Perzines allow you to voice your thoughts and opinions and offer a private glimpse into your life. Many survey respondents make and want to read perzines because of their unique ability to empower people with marginalized identities to tell their stories.

### **Zines in Libraries and Librarianship**

About 29 percent of respondents reported being a library worker, as well as working with zines in libraries. Some helped organize zine workshops for youth; managed zine libraries in community info shops, public libraries, special collections, archives, and academic libraries; used zines to teach information literacy, cataloging, and alternative media; or hosted zine programming and outreach events. One respondent (18) described using zines as a way to practice “equitable metadata,” and another respondent (31) shared how librarians at their college “have incorporated zines into their cataloging labs as examples of resources outside mainstream publication.” Several respondents (3, 28, 80) expressed concern over the need for a real online cataloging system for zines, while others (7, 18) described their excitement about a Zine Union Catalog (ZUC), the ZineCat project. One of the challenges with a ZUC is reconciling all the various ways that different institutions and repositories catalog their zines. The goal of the ZUC is not to become a digital archive of zines, but rather to point users to the holding institutions’ zine records through linked metadata (Freedman et al. 2017).

One respondent (44) wrote about teaching information literacy using zines, another (11) wrote about using zines as a semester-long project for undergraduates, and several respondents (40, 52, 63, 70, 77) wrote about using zines in the archives to engage students with research topics. While many of the respondents were library workers in public libraries, there is an ongoing trend for academic librarians and archivists to use zines in their information literacy instruction. The zines become an aid to practice keyword searching and serve as the basis for discussing alternative forms of media. In Chiu’s “Engaging the Future of Zine Librarianship,” public zine librarian Cathy Camper emphasized

how “zines are a format that allow for critical thinking and dialogue; a format that encourages innovation and resistance” (Chiu 2017). Camper uses zines as a way to engage middle school students into socially conscious conversations about race, class, sexuality, and gender.

### Concerns in the Zine Community

The publishing industry is incredibly gate-keep-y [*sic*], inaccessible, and it tokenizes marginalized creators.

—Survey respondent 69

The quote above addresses all three of the most common areas of concern from survey respondents, and many respondents identified with at least one of these issues. The apparent ableism and lack of accessibility at zine events, the lack of diverse representation of zinesters of color and other marginalized identities, and the issue of gatekeeping in zine communities have all become challenges for the future of zine communities to address and tackle. The future of zines can be most clearly felt in these growing concerns.

A number of respondents mentioned the issue of gatekeeping and the exclusionary culture that the mainstream publishing world creates. As one respondent (41) put it, the power of zines “build[s] community and empower[s] people to bypass gatekeepers of cultural production.” This capacity to bypass those who monitor information is one reason why zines, with their unedited and unfiltered voices, are becoming powerful in this age of technology and government suppression. Another respondent (2) commented that the reason zines are powerful is “because books are hard to publish. If you only read books or just the news, then you are upholding the patriarchy.”

In more than thirty separate comments, the issue of accessibility arose. Zines as a form were praised for being a low-entry barrier, cheap and affordable to produce, and an approachable art form for all ages; but simultaneously the culture was critiqued for not being accessible for those with disabilities and illnesses, and for those who are trans, non-binary, or gender-nonconforming. Many zine fests now provide accessibility event guides to visitors, noting ADA-accessible entrances and restrooms and providing captioning for online programs. Within the accessibility conversation are suggestions to provide all-gender restroom facilities for trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming visitors at zine events.

Many zine spaces have become fragrance- and scent-free to be accessible for those with scent sensitivities and scent-exacerbated illnesses such as migraines, seizures, asthma, and nausea. As the disability and transformative justice worker Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes:

This was a particular, specific kind of access work, as part of the work involved my talking about fragrance and chemical access in a way that centered Black and brown people—to be specific, getting people to think of chemical access as not some weird shit that only particularly annoying white vegans cared about, but reframing it as something that Black and brown people have, due to everything from cleaning houses and working with pesticides to living in polluted cities, from having asthma to cancer. (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018)

Additionally, accessibility is also about how safe one feels in one's zine community, with a respondent (41) commenting that zine communities “need more in-person community that brings makers and readers together. [This includes] holding unsafe members of the community accountable for abuse, assault, bigotry, etc.” Zine communities have begun to institute safer spaces policies at zine events and fests, in order to protect individuals from oppressive actions and to create harassment-free spaces for zine-makers and audiences.

Many respondents made comments about the importance of featuring marginalized peoples' voices, such as the respondent (52) who said, “I really get into any zines where people of color are sharing their experiences in the world because it makes me feel not so alone.” Several respondents advocated recruiting zinesters of color to organize zine collections, archives, and zine fests. One respondent (7) notes, “At the NYC Feminist Zinefest, we will have lots of tablers of color, but the zinefest attendees may be disproportionately white.” Similarly, another respondent (53) argued, “When people start tokenizing each other, they always pick the most privileged tokens.” Is it possible to reach out to communities of color in ways that are not tokenizing to zinesters of color or LGBTQ zinesters? While the zine world has become more diverse and inclusive in recent years, a couple of respondents (54, 72, 86) commented on the “zine community being as alienating, cliquish, and oppressive as the mainstream culture.”

## DISCUSSION

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As stated earlier, it is simpler to make concrete predictions about the future of zines, perhaps in terms of format, form, and type, such as the rise of Risograph-printed comics or zines featuring memes and digital culture. It is much more difficult to challenge the privilege and oppression that exist in both mainstream and independent publishing. One respondent (86) summed up the tensions in the zine community: “Just because you have an idealized idea of what the community is, [that] doesn’t mean it isn’t plagued with trans misogyny, misogyny, white supremacy, ableism, anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, settler colonialism, etc.” If we are really invested in creating an inclusive, accessible, and diverse community, then we must all lean in and tackle the plaguing issues of zine communities. How do we do this? What needs to be done to keep zine communities accessible and inclusive for all?

The future of zines is not a prediction of the newest trend on the horizon. Nor is it a statement that zines are back from the dead, resurrected, or making a comeback. “Zine futures” is a challenge to zinesters everywhere to confront, challenge, and work to change the oppressive systems and divisions that zinesters exist in, even within their idealized zine, punk, and DIY communities. As one respondent (70) wrote succinctly, “Zine making is treated as a spectacle rather than a means of survival and of personal expression.” For many respondents, their survival lies in their ability to make zines. Their stories, and thus their identities, cultures, and experiences, would be unknown without independent publishing.

The Future of Zines survey had its limitations. In terms of the method of data collection, the survey was shared on various Facebook networks of which I was a member. These groups had West Coast representation, primarily the Pacific Northwest. To offset this limitation, the survey was tagged to zine fest organizers in the Midwest, Southwest, and East Coast of the continental United States. Future zine surveys should include data about a respondent’s city, race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, as well as how many years one has been making zines. These demographic questions would allow the researchers to map intersectional patterns by gender, race, sexuality, and region.

While the short-answer format allowed for the mapping of textual patterns and themes, a more thorough examination with a mixed methodology, including qualitative interviewing, would allow for a deeper examination of the themes. Finally, the survey was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic,

when stay-at-home orders caused many zine fests and libraries to offer only virtual programming, thereby adding to the zine futures conversation in significant ways that were not captured in the survey's results.

## CONCLUSION

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There are virtually no zines without a zine community.

—Survey respondent 65

In gathering the opinions of eighty-seven self-selected zinesters and trying to understand both the zine present and zine futures from their responses, this chapter has become a call to challenge the elitist, racist, gatekeeping, patriarchal, capitalist, and other oppressive forces found in society, even within countercultural and underground networks such as that of zines. Zinesters with marginalized identities need zines for their survival, but if the zine community becomes unsafe for them, they may move on to another form of expression. Without a vibrant, diverse community, there will be no vibrant and diverse zines.

If ever there was a question that can make or break zines, it is whether the zine community will create a future of mutual aid and community support. One respondent (54) described this support as a process where “we need to learn how to process and decide what to do when people make mistakes that harm others.” If the whole point of making zines is to form community with other human beings, then we must be accountable to each other. We must encourage each other to be better, to create safer spaces, to be accessible and welcoming for marginalized and underrepresented communities, and to continually challenge the gatekeepers of power and privilege in zines. Zines are the platform for the underrepresented voice, so the future of zines must continue to be so. Therefore, we must continue to encourage this type of dialogue among zinesters and step into the uncomfortable unknown.

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# Appendix

## *The Future of Zines Survey Questions*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

Name of zine(s) \_\_\_\_\_

How are you associated with zines? Check all that apply:

- ☐ make and publish zines
- ☐ contribute to zines
- ☐ organize zine fests
- ☐ volunteer at zine fests
- ☐ read zines in libraries
- ☐ table zines at fests and shows
- ☐ work in a library with zines
- ☐ host zine workshops
- ☐ other \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you make zines?

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What is the most interesting zine project you have encountered in the last two years? Why?

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What type of zine would you be most excited about if you found it at the next zine fest you go to?

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If you are also a library worker, how have you used zines in your library work or librarianship?

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Why are zines necessary and important?

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Will zines be around in the next ten to twenty-five years? Why or why not?

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What do you think needs more attention in the zine community?

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Any other comments?

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