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Cold Press: Early Punk Fanzines in Canada's Capital

Les premiers fanzines punks dans la capitale canadienne

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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

Cold Press: Early Punk Fanzines in Canada's Capital

by

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Abstract: This paper combines a personal memoir with an historical and critical approach to punk fanzines produced in Ottawa, Canada between 1978 and 1985. Chronicles growth and offshoots of the “scene” in terms of “outside” influences and musical developments, as well as in response to growing interest in social and political activism. The author speculates as to the cultural positionality of zines in general, and suggests a reading of the specificities of early Ottawa zines in terms of issues of national identity.

Résumé : Cet article articule des souvenirs personnels à une approche historique et critique des fanzines punks réalisés à Ottawa, Canada, entre 1978 et 1985. Il retrace ainsi la naissance et les ramifications de cette « scène » en isolant ses influences « extérieures » et ses développements musicaux, tout en la considérant comme la conséquence d'un intérêt grandissant pour le militantisme social et politique. L'auteur s'interroge sur le positionnement culturel des fanzines en général et ébauche une lecture des spécificités des premiers fanzines d'Ottawa sous l'angle des questions relatives à l'identité nationale.

Key Words/Mots-clés: Zines, Ottawa, Canada, Quebec, Quebec City.

CONCERN *will be born. As time goes on we will receive the responses. CONCERN will reflect the attitudes of the people who read and contribute to CONCERN. This will not be like some Canadian and American mag where reader response is cut up and tossed out. The reader's responses make up the basis of this mag. With no responses from you from your home we are a closed minded, one sighted group of assholas producing blah-blah, blah junk like shit.*

No Cause For Concern?, Issue 1, 1982

When I moved back to Ottawa, the city where I grew up, a few years ago, I unearthed a couple of boxes full of ephemera from my mother's basement which I had stored from my "punk days" when I was involved in the small but vibrant and ever-changing scene here from about 1978 until I headed to London, Ontario in 1985 to go to university. I was fourteen when I first became involved in the scene, and punk, as I experienced it then, and its style and ethics, shaped more or less every part of my early adult life. Within this space I learned to play guitar and write music, I played in bands, helped to produce records and tapes, promote gigs, make posters and flyers and write articles. Thanks to the Ottawa punk scene I was introduced to radical politics, feminism, vegetarianism, animal rights, anti-corporate rhetoric, do-it-yourself of all kinds, environmentalism, civil disobedience, peace activism, communal living, alternative art and literature, and "alternative lifestyles" in general—not to mention the requisite sex 'n drugs 'n rock and roll.¹

My cache was full of gig flyers, buttons, posters, set lists, band promos, and a whole whack of fanzines going back to 1978. Leafing through the zines, I was struck by how intensely personal and objective the individual publications are, while at the same time, each also vividly reflects the vagaries and wind-changes of the Ottawa scene as it unfolded and reacted to a number of outside influences. Naturally, as participants, we all had unique and narrow windows on the scene, and each experience served writers as such. But while all were working more or less in the same stylistic and technical medium, I am still intrigued as to how each editor and contributor used the materials at hand with such individualized creativity. Truly, punk was not a defined set of rules and styles, nor a movement which we "joined," but a free space where we could grapple and play with whatever creative, personal and political problematics plagued or tantalized us. American studies

1. For more info on Ottawa and Canadian punk, past and present, see the following websites: www.punkottawa.com and www.punkhistorycanada.ca.

scholar Stephen Duncombe, who has surely written the most illuminating analysis of zines in his 1997 book, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, hits the nail on the head when he states that “Zines and underground culture constitute a free space where people can experiment with possibility.” (Duncombe, 1997: 176)

Looking back now, it is evident that by the late seventies the West was witnessing a genuine paradigm shift in terms of social and political organization and power structures, sprawled as it was as a sort of wreckage washed up on the shore of the various “revolutions” of the sixties. For me, assuming an ersatz anthropological stance, early punk zines from my hometown collectively represent a tattered little message in a bottle from the periphery of that cultural landscape: a time capsule perhaps, or a letter bomb, depending on your point of view. I find them fascinating because they show the crashing together of, at least at first, an incredibly tumultuous and influential subculture, with newly available mechanical reproduction technology in the form of the photocopier, resounding with the residual cultural memory of avant-garde, “deviant” and low styles, such as Dada, Pop Art, pulp, the ransom and suicide note, the manifesto, graffiti, cheesecake, kinky porn, collage, assemblage, and so on. Now, with the internet and desktop publishing, cut-paste-photocopy zines have become a nostalgic format, like traditional photography in the digital age. Then, they were a necessity—made using the only tools available under the circumstances for what seemed at the time like an irrepressible need for personal and collective expression and communication.

Duncombe calls members of American alternative culture “... creative misfits scattered across the country [who] use the culture that is zines to share, define and hold together a ‘culture’ of discontent: a virtual bohemia.” (Duncombe, 1997: 14) Indeed, if zines originally had a purpose, it was primarily to make connections, in the form of a hand-operated, pulp-and-ink world wide web to circulate ideas, make connections, and forge what international studies scholar Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities”—conceptual “scapes” where people of like minds can become affiliated. As such, it is easy to read these intensely personal documents as cultural indicators of the first order, as representative not just of a small localized faction of “fans,” but as part of an interface that processes personal, local, provincial, national, and international problematics through a particularly raw, primitive and uncensored filter. Ottawa, Canada was a tiny nodule in this conceptual map, but as a case study, it offers an intriguing insight not only on the state of the early Canadian punk scene, but, in my opinion, as a sort of negative foil to Western “mainstream” culture in general in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Canada is a huge country, and although Ottawa is only its fourth largest city, it remains the centre of activity for Canadian politics. During the period I'm addressing here, between 1978 and 1985, Ottawa was comprised of a largely middle class, WASP (that's white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant) population who ran on the gears of the civil service, which set the tone for the entire city. Poised on the cusp of Quebec, Canada's French province, at the time Ottawa also acutely felt the presence of French Canada, not only through the political debates on Parliament Hill regarding bilingualism and the province's independence, but via the large French population localized toward the Quebec side of the city, and across the Ontario/Quebec border. A stone's throw south is the U.S. border, a constant reminder of the behemoth whose popular culture permeates every crevice of Canada, our dear country being a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, and inhabited largely by people of relatively recent European descent. Like all of Canada, today Ottawa is becoming increasingly multicultural, although compared to other larger Canadian cities, particularly Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, at the time its face was remarkably pasty.

Perhaps more than many other countries, Canada's "identity" has notoriously remained the locus of a floating sense of anxiety since at least the nineteenth century, sandwiched as it is between England and the U.S. and with its internal struggles for cultural and proprietorial recognition between the English, French, Inuit and First Nations. Established, as it was, as a sort of "mine" for furs, fish and raw materials, Canadian communications scholar Jody Berland suggests that Canada's position as a cultural product is a major factor contributing to its delicate state of self-definition. She writes,

Canadians live with an endemic, popular and (until recently) officially sanctioned awareness and resentment of multinational corporate dominance that has pervaded their public culture for many decades. Since Canada's origin as a nation-state, this public culture has relied on political, legal and symbolic discourse that presented its culture, media and identity as fragile subjects of external domination and colonization... Aside from aboriginal cultures, Canada possesses no originary identity independent of such colonization. (Berlan, 1991, 317)

Only now, partly thanks to recent American views of Canada ushered in by popular sources, not least of those produced by Michael Moore, is this country performatively developing a sense of its subjectivity as a liberal, (until very recently) somewhat socialist-leaning and highly tolerant (if timid) nation. However, while this may sound relatively cosmopolitan, Ottawa remains a surprisingly conservative and isolated locale, and before cable, the internet, and other more recent forms of mass communication really hit in the later 1980s and '90s, Ottawa was something of a cultural

backwater as far as Western trends were concerned. Indeed in the late 1970s, when I first became conscious of music and “style” (however that may be defined), I remember noting, from a trip to England in 1981, that it took about two years for a fashion or new musical genre to “arrive” in Ottawa from its high point in Europe.

This was certainly the case with punk, in terms of music, dress, and other subcultural paraphernalia, like the fanzine. As such, lagging behind England and the US, by a year or two, something of a scene slowly started up in Ottawa in 1978, which centred on a venue called The Rotters’ Club; a grungy little dig run by a leather-clad British entrepreneur named Stewart. It catered to a small, curious clientele and showcased experimental and early mostly local punk bands, including the Red Squares, the Beaucrats, Insurrection, Vendetta and an uncatagorizeable sort of Hippy/Viking/D&D (Dungeons and Dragons) collective, who were either called D’Ah Acmes or the Rotten Kidz and who “made music” and did performance art in a troupe called Ragnarok. In terms of print culture, this collective was the first to put out anything resembling a zine in this city in 1978, a rather slick, professionally-printed mostly black and white comic-book format compendium entitled *D’Ah Acme Planet*, full of well drafted cartoons, rants, “how-to” columns for things like embroidery (!), and recipes on how to make granola from molten lava and rusty hardware, among other things.

Ottawa’s first official punk fanzine was put together by Dr. X, aka Peter Buchan, a 28 year old archival assistant working as a Retrieval Officer in the National Archives of Canada. Dr. X was privy to a photocopier there, a rather extraordinary and inaccessible machine to most of us then, and, on taxpayers’ time and stolen federal government paper, he printed on or about one hundred copies of *Contradiction: The Canada Day Issue*, on July 1, 1979. I distinctly remember what a novelty that zine was—I had never seen one before—and what a thrill it was to examine material written, drawn and collaged by punks about the local scene. For me it really brought things into focus, codified what we were doing, and afforded access to the opinions of people I only knew through a smoky, boozy Rotters’ club haze. I guess the good Doctor had heard of or seen a few zines filtering up from the States or brought over from Britain by local punks visiting the Old Country, and realized he had the resources to do it himself. I’m also guessing he had a few leftovers, as at the time the scene couldn’t have consisted of about fifty or sixty people at most.

Contradiction, it seems to me, pretty much sums up the state of punk at the time in the nation’s capital. It was a particularly artless affair, just a brief editorial and a series of pages, Xeroxed on

one side only, and including rants, collages, a pencil drawing of Johnny Rotten, recipes for “Punk Granola,” an “Interview with an Android,” and a review of a gig at the Rotters’ club featuring the Vancouver band DOA, today Canada’s most famous and longest-running punk band—still going strong over a quarter of a century later.² One page in *Contradiction* is notable for its ad for “A small group of dedicated people to organize, promote and run music benefits for those in need. PA system, financial backing and bands available.” (Buchan, 1979: 2) This was placed by an older American scenester who called himself Vigilance DeLiberté (we knew him as Greg, or Vig), a real force in terms of punk activism in Ottawa. Vig’s effort in this respect was to have noticeable impact later on, when a collective was put together in 1981 as a DIY (Do It Yourself) organization. This meant putting on shows, running “speaks” or illegal nightclubs, holding debates, becoming affiliated with RAR International (Rock Against Racism), and pulling the whole scruffy scene together for the next few years.

That said, although as an “alternative culture” we all came together relatively peacefully at gigs, going through the zines that followed *Contradiction* after 1978, I am struck at how acutely they reflect the conceptual fragmenting of the scene as various factions formed around diverse musical styles, political directives and gender issues. When *Contradiction* was published in 1978, the Ottawa scene had been cobbled about whatever would filter into the city in terms of musical imports, fashion, alternative press, news reports of the Sid and Nancy saga and the occasional appearance of a new wave or punk band on *Saturday Night Live*, if you had access to cable. Occasionally, an important band passing through this little government town on the way from one big city, like Montréal, to another, like Toronto, might appear, as did The Vibrators, a “first wave” British punk band who were inexplicably booked to play at the big rock venue Lansdowne Park here in 1978—at a time when no more than a handful of people could have known who they were. The Ramones blew everyone’s ears off (*quite* literally—it was the loudest concert I’ve ever attended) in 1980, and that same year 999 and the Incredible Shrinking Dickies played at the notorious hard rock watering hole La Chaudière across the river in Hull, Quebec. Also, the bigger Canadian punk bands from Vancouver, Hamilton or Toronto would occasionally make it into town, like the Viletones, DOA, Teenage Head, The Forgotten Rebels, and the Secrets, or the 222s from Montreal.³

2. See Keithley, Joey (2003), and the band website at www.suddendeath.com/doa.

3. For a listing of Canadian punk albums and singles, see Manley, Frank (1993).

The Rotters' Club "period," roughly 1978-79, had a very distinct flavour that *Contradiction* only partially captures. The primary influence was British punk, and much of the material culture that washed in came from young British immigrants or local kids bringing back loot from visits to relatives in England or, like my sister, on stints as nannies. American influence came in via television, immigrants like Vig, touring bands like the Ramones, and other sources. American punk had a sort of fiftiesque bad-boy street kid feel to it at the time; it was more about boredom and a glut of popular culture than hopeless futures and class and race relations, as it was in England. In fact, as I remember it, the strongest alternative and musical style influence from the US seemed to be residue from the Glam period in the early seventies, epitomized by The New York Dolls, Gary Glitter, Joan Jett, Iggy Pop, and of course, lots of Bowie, who was British but, as the lead character in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* says, was an American idiom.

By the early '80s the scene had grown, and the DIY collective that Vig had drawn together was to become the nexus. We called it No Pigs, for obvious reasons ("pigs" being "cops" in English slang), but the official name was "Youth Culture Promotions" (YCP)—deliberately squeaky clean to procure rentals from hesitant hall owners. Originally it was simply an underground club where we could drink and "do music" out of a communal house downtown. As many of us were underage (and the legal age had just been raised a year to 19), this was a good thing, and I remember these parties/events as an absolute blast of noise, bolstered by booze, light drug use, and the occasional fight. That said, there was always a very strong sense of community and an unspoken understanding not to go too far over the top, what we were doing was important to preserve. They were a lot of fun, and it's a miracle the house wasn't raided more often than it was. After the Rotters' club closed in 1979, there were no regular punk venues and YCP filled in the gap by renting spaces to hold gigs, which were usually called "Beavers" riffing not only on prurient connotations, but on Canada's rather unfortunate national symbol. To name a few, these included the Vinyl Beaver, the Saturday Night Beaver and the Leave it to Beaver, which were used to showcase local bands and raise funds for various projects or causes. YCP had about twenty or so floating core members, and in order to participate we had to learn concert-production skills, like doing sound, setting up lights, dealing with contracts and promotion, etc. Incidentally, this paid off for a number of people who later became band promoters, sound engineers or producers, or continued to work in the music or performance industry in some format.

The scene had started to branch out significantly by then, and there were the “traditional” punks who adhered to the original British formula—still following the early U.K. bands like The Sex Pistols, The Buzzcocks, The Clash, etc.; Rude Boys into Ska, skinheads, who looked hot off the boat from London’s bowery, but spoke like lumberjacks; the artsy/techie/dancy New Wavers who followed the Velvet Underground/Devo/Gary Newman line; and Rockabilies, who were part of the big revival going on then around bands like the Bopcats and the Stray Cats. In the first few years of the decade there still couldn’t have been more than about two or three hundred of us, in our teens and early twenties, circulating in this parallel universe. Although it might be worth asking exactly what it was that we, as mostly privileged white kids from relatively stable homes, had to rebel about, it was enough to keep the flag a-flying.

One thing that continues to intrigue me about fanzines from the early period, and which probably remains constant to this day, is how often (besides recipes for granola) the subject comes up as to “what punk is.” Punk zines, and Ottawa’s being no exception, it seems to me, were characteristically self-reflexive, and there are few issues that don’t deal to some degree with “attitudes toward punk,” “punk ethics,” or “who took the fun out of punk?” etc. Just one of numerous examples in the materials I am covering here appears in an editorial in *Voyeur!* magazine in 1982, which looks to be a survey of local Ottawans, in response to the question “What do you think of punk?” Responses range from indifferent to intensely hostile, my favourite (fictitious or not) being from a Duty Sergeant from the Ottawa police force, who replies: “Punk rockers are just like snakes. When I see punk rockers I want to shoot them. They are fucking idiots with their weird hair and ears (pierced).” (Barrat & Jones, 1982: 1)

Being an inquisitive sort, even at the time, I have always vaguely wondered myself what it was, exactly, that had provided such a glaring backdrop for my youth. As such, I was quite astonished to be inadvertently introduced to subcultural studies in a university course, which made me feel as if I had stumbled upon the Rosetta Stone. The first light that went on for me reading subcultural theory was, as theorist Phil Cohen puts it, how subcultures form for youth to develop “alternative sources of self esteem.” (as quoted in Hebdige, 1987: 76) Of course! (I thought). Punk developed as a space for us, a bunch of—as Duncombe (1997: 181) puts it—“fellow losers,” to develop a sense of self worth that our lousy society and hostile parent’s denied us! How succinctly put! And most famously, Cohen’s assessment that the “latent function” of subculture is this: “to express and resolve, albeit ‘magically,’ the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in

the parent culture.” (Cohen, 1997: 94) Eureka! We were *clearly* expressing our parents/cultures/country’s *durm und strang* in our clothes and hair and music! Why hadn’t we figured it out before? Why had not a single zine article rooted out this most fundamental of facts? Why was it that the Restless Virgins had never written a song to tease this from the matted skein of punk rhetoric?

Further, I learned, at least in the earlier days before punk “style” became formulaic, it acted as what the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes as a “carnavalesque” space, where rules were to be gleefully broken. For many of us, “punk” clearly functioned as a safe enclave to act out our fantasies, and cathartically, through experimental sex, drugs, alcohol, pogoing, thrashing, stage-diving, self-harm, mad music making, vandalism and occasional violence, to work off *jouissance* and angst, and clearly as a place to stake claim for, if not to form, an alternative identity beyond the confines of what were, at the time, stiflingly conservative options. Early fanzines, like *Contradiction* and *D’Ah Acme Planet* are padded, between band interviews and record reviews, with splenetic rants, fantasy scenarios, the requisite calls for anarchy, and endless paragraphs of self reflection. Like punk music and lyrics, I can’t help but look at zines, from this purview, as a form of therapy through self-expression, or roughly what Freud called the “talking cure,” though, in this case, “yelling” or “ranting” cure might be more appropriate.

Following Cohen’s and Hebdige’s lead, then, what were we, as small-town punks in Canada’s chilly capital, collectively trying to magically resolve in terms of contradictions in the “parent” culture? Surely our problematics differed measurably from those in Britain, where class struggles, immigration clashes and unemployment were endemic, or the US where (as period material implies) “boredom reigned,” hippy culture had played itself out, disco and stadium rock ruled the airwaves, racism and religious fundamentalism bubbled beneath the surface, and all was covered by a proscribed bland, conservative Caucasian veneer. Of course, any speculation in this regard will have to remain speculation, but at least for my own peace of mind, I like to ruminate as to what, if any, contradictions or fissures in our modest social universe we might have been trying to “express” by our unique bricolage of various punk idioms.

In his 1979 study, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, British cultural theorist Dick Hebdige describes English subcultural formations involving skinheads, punks, mods, etc, in terms of a “phantom history of race relations since the War.” (Hebdige, 1987: 45) To him, punk was largely

a reaction formation to “black” music and style. “To use a term from semiotics,” he writes, “we could say that punk includes reggae as a ‘present absence’—a black hole around which punk composes itself.” “This” he continues, “can be extended metaphorically to wider issues of race and race relations.” (*Ibid.*: 68) Although hardly cutting edge by contemporary critical standards, I more or less buy this theory. But although Reggae was highly popular in Canada at the time we are discussing here, Brits were of course experiencing a remarkably different set of circumstances, and Reggae and other African-Euro, or African North-American musical styles clearly were not a “present absence” for Ottawa punks, anyway. Nor would I say that the French-English situation, percolating on Parliament Hill and just over the Quebec border held sway, as the tightly-knit scene here seemed to erase differences of language and culture, and there was always a relatively free and easy interaction between francos and anglos in the underground.⁴

I do believe that if there was a “present absence” that Ottawa punk, if not all Canadian punk, formed itself around, then it was of the Brits and the Americans in general, and no matter who you were, you tended to lean in one direction or the other in terms of style, dress, musical preferences and even modes of speech. If this was more than merely emulation or personal preference, then this “black hole” was symptomatic, perhaps, of our need as Canadian subjects to magically resolve the identity “crisis” many of our parents clearly felt as new Canadians, and the “parent” culture’s need to situate itself *as* a culture, and as a nation at least psychologically, if not politically, independent from Britain and the U.S. Because there was so much waffling—and anxiety regarding this waffling—between British and American styles of punk within the scene as I experienced it here, I believe that at least some of what we were, quite unconsciously, “working out” in those early years, had to do with Canada’s own “self-esteem,” its identity or selfhood as a nation, and its own need to extricate itself from the “parental” binaries of the U.S. and Britain. This, not to mention the internal pressures, especially Quebec-side, surrounding the French-English/WASP-Roman Catholic dialectic. Sadly to say, as the situation is much today, despite punk’s appropriation of the Mohawk and other indicators of First Nations culture, this group hardly, to my memory, made a dent in the white Canadian imaginary.

4. See the following website for discussion of the Quebec City scene, and its interaction with the Ottawa scene. Note especially the album *Blender Mix*, which was a collaborative compilation album between the two cities: www.satanbelanger.net.

This may all sound rather over determined, as it may well be, although when taking such a semi-sociological approach, it is most obliging of the early scene to have left such a vivid trail of zines to tantalize us with cryptic discourses, or what Hebdige calls “memos from the front line.” (Hebdige, 1987: 111) Clearly the index of inquiry regarding Canadian “identity” seems to leak through, not just in *Contradiction*’s cover section, asking “What is Canada Day?”, but in the titles and writings of a number of zines, such as *CUX*, an acronym for Capital Underground Xenophobia, produced anonymously in 1981. In terms of the circulation of cultural products, in this case music, in his article *The Thingishness of Things*, Canadian music scholar Will Straw points out how so much alternative music-related media filtered in from a number of sources outside Canada, to be (at least, when he wrote this in 1998) reconfigured by Canadian consumers. He writes about

... the ways in which countries like Canada receive and assimilate avowedly oppositional and transgressive cultural artifacts whose origins are elsewhere. None of the genres which have marked postwar music may be said to be distinctly Canadian. This means that all our musical artifacts which bear the marks of oppositionality will be within forms whose historically privileged or more pure moments transpired elsewhere—from rock and roll through punk and hip-hop. This has shaped the status of the political within Canadian musical culture, as it has in dozens of other countries around the world. (Straw, 1999: 5)

Straw points, quite usefully for our purposes here, to a punk connoisseur’s knowledge of where to find this material, and to those with privileged access to it:

Objects with subcultural aura, like punk or speed garage records, enter Canada, as they enter most other countries, through channels which are connoisseurist and cosmopolitan in character. They are brought to Canada by individuals intimately bound up with the circulation of information on an international level; they presume cultural capital of the most basic kind, such as that which tells you where to find British music magazines in Montréal or Toronto, or what an imported record is and where to find it. Their principle audiences, within Canada, are marked by an interest in the cosmopolitan and the scarce. (*Idem*)

Most importantly, Straw brings into the mix ideas of conjuncture and specificity, similar to what Hebdige discusses in *Subculture*, pointing out how these products are reinterpreted according to the locale and bent of the user—*i.e.*, at each conjuncture, a new set of receptive responses reconfigures each product, and requires us to analyze it in terms of the specificities of each “distinctive ‘moment’.” (Hebdige, 1987: 84) Straw continues that the “circumstances of origin mark these

artifacts in ways which serve to authenticate them, but these circumstances have little controlling influence on the uses to which these artifacts are put in Canada or the meanings which come to circulate around them.” (Straw, 1999: 5-6) Clearly, for punk to exist in Canada, like almost any other form of “culture,” it was to be reified by its very reliance on “stuff” from “somewhere else.” In terms of reception, then, it is also key to note that as punks we, as predominantly white citizens of European or American descent, welcomed certain products from these countries, as more or less representative of our heritage, and perhaps as a way to extend and strengthen cultural bonds as much as to situate them in terms of their effects on our own collective subjectivity.

Straw also points to the paucity of Canadian subcultural directives to hold any sway or clout in an international field, pointing out that “At no point has a specifically or exclusively Canadian subculture figured in the classical writings of subcultural theory; in no instance that I can think of has a distinctly Canadian subcultural formation been copied or adapted elsewhere in the world.” (Straw, 1999: 5) True enough, Canada is not exactly a wellspring for alternative movements or styles, or many other forms of cultural activity, for that matter. It was, however, in the early ‘80s especially, remarkably impressionable when it came to outside influences. If the late ‘70s saw a British Punk and late US Glam “thing” presiding over the tiny punk scene, where the focus was crazed creativity and Saturnalian excess, the early ‘80s saw wave after wave of influence of genres emanating from either of the “originary” countries, which caused, to my view, numerous chain reactions.

The first of these waves, as I remember it, arrived in mid-winter, 1981 via a man we came to know as Dave DC (Dave Champion)—fresh from Washington DC, buddies with Black Flag and Minor Threat *et al.*, he introduced the Ottawa scene to early American hardcore. The term “hardcore,” according to Canadian punk mythology, was actually coined by DOA on their *Hardcore 81* tour, but, of course, it came to signify a mostly LA and Washington DC-based phenomenon. At the time, I think most of us thought hardcore was a good thing: it oozed what subcultural theorist Sarah Thornton calls subcultural capital, or “cool,” and pretty much instantly made anything in the British punk camp look fey, pretentious and hopelessly passé. (Thornton, 1997: 200-210) Suddenly it was uncool to play anything on stage at any speed other than breakneck; Crazy Colour, bondage gear and the Pistols were dead; and most of all, after a few glorious years of relative gender equality in terms of musical access and voice, once again, it was all about the boys. Indeed, in retrospect I can’t help but look at the hardcore invasion on the scene in Ottawa, and on

punk in general, as a full-bodied re-assertion of the masculine principle, like an extension of the United States army sending in the troops: things had clearly gotten out of hand, and it was time for some old fashioned American discipline. Of course, there were many versions and phases of hardcore, some more benign than others, but to me the hardcore hard-ass decidedly heterosexual boyz always looked like off-duty soldiers: buzz cuts, plaid hunting shirts, army boots and all. Magic resolution anyone?

On the other side of the coin, or possibly in reaction to it, was the rise of Peace Punk, which was a considerable faction in Ottawa, where, by the early 1980s, peace and anti-nuclear activism was particularly robust in the capital city. This saw the development of a number of radical collectives in which punks were involved, most notably the Garbanzo Tribe, who were hardcore vegans and animal rights activists, and the Black Dove affinity group, originally based around a punk band, but later a more strictly activist faction embroiled in the anti-war effort. A number of punks were also involved with the infamous Peace Camp, a particularly unsightly shanty town set up on Parliament Hill in 1982 to protest the testing of the American air-launched cruise missile on Canadian soil. If hardcore took the fun out of punk, then social activism would turn it into hard work for a good cause. Peace Punk was also the platform of a very sturdy form of what I call “folk feminism,” almost certainly, at least in part, a reaction formation against the über-masculine climate hardcore had ushered in. This is where a number of the girls headed: all-female bands sprung up, there developed an interest in woman-centred mysticism like goddess-worship and Wicca, lesbian experimentation (before it was *de rigueur*), and a strong focus on activism and civil disobedience regarding issues of gender equality, reproductive rights, and lots of culture jamming regarding public images of women that were deemed offensive.

Zines, of course, popped up to give voice to various factions. The most impressive and longest-running of these was *No Cause for Concern?*, which ran nine issues from '82 to '84. *No Cause for Concern?* was the most hardcore-friendly of the zines, very in-tune with the local scene, with an increasingly slick and intricate layout and more or less standard features, like a regular magazine. Hardly surprising that the editor, Janine Frenken, went on to become a graphic designer. This zine frequently contained an editorial, descriptions of the images and—gasp—even a table of contents. *NCFC?* was the most music and scene-conscious of the fanzines, intensely focussed on recent gig reviews, band geneses and changeovers, a zine listing, a truly funny pre-Letterman, Letterman-style Top Ten from five or ten local scenesters per issues, tape and vinyl reviews, and the *Canadian*

Scene Report which kept us all sporadically abreast of happenings in Halifax, Vancouver, Montreal, Toronto, Quebec and wherever else the editor got a letter from.⁵

Another early zine, though decidedly slicker, was *Voyeur!* published by French scenester Didier Barrat with help from Bob Jones. At three dollars a pop (zine prices at the time ranged from about 25 cents to one dollar), *Voyeur!* obviously had ambitions to be a “real” magazine, and may have been on its way if it hadn’t been packed in after the second issue. In contrast to *NCFC?* was *Urgle-Orp*, put out, simply, by “Nicole” beginning in 1982 and by 1985, when it may have folded, lived at least until issue #10. *Urgle-Orp* reflected the Peace Punk stance *par excellence*, combining band reviews, interviews, articles on reproductive and animal rights, and vegan recipes (including one for a “granola-like substance” called Urgl-Orp!). *Urgl-Orp* also developed a regular zine listing, two or three pages long, in the tradition of *Factsheet Five*. Rock Against Racism, an anti-racist non-profit organization which started in the UK in the 1970s, also had a chapter in Ottawa since 1979, thanks to Vigilance DeLiberté, and, although RAR never really caught on here as it did in Britain, a small number of punk benefits raised money for political causes under its auspices. Not surprisingly, the locally-produced RAR zine, called *RAR RAG* only saw two issues, which came out in 1981 and not again until 1984.

Although *RAR RAG* mixed music with social imperatives, it was clear that in a number of zines, music was beginning to take a back seat to activism, as in *Who Really Cares*, a “garbonzine,” put out in 1984 by the Peace Punks who were listening to the new super-political and what seemed like madly radical British bands like Crass and Rudimentary Peni. By 1982 a number of zines began to appear, often purely political in nature, such as *Combine*, which ran for at least three issues. This change of focus is outlined in the following editorial, written by editors Eliza Cochrane and Melanie Kaye, in its second issue:

It’s a lot different from issue #1 because it doesn’t have much about music in it. The reason for this is that there are enough fanzines telling you if the DOA concert was good or bad, so we’re going to try to deal with something different. In this fanzine you’ll hopefully learn something or have something to think about when you’re finished reading. (Cochrane & Kaye, 1983: 1)

Other punk-related activist zines included the strictly political *Outauais Outrage*; *Run for Cover!* (“Silly tales about bombs”); and *Reality Now*, which reflected the radical nature of much of the

5. See Janine Frenken, *No Cause For Concern?* Website at www.nocauseforconcern.com. Also, many thanks to Janine for all her time, help and knowledge in putting this paper together.

activism going on at the time. With the bombing in Toronto in 1982 of Litton Industries (who were subsidising the production of the guidance system for the cruise missile), by the Vancouver Five, one of whom was in the west coast band The Subhumans, and Xeroxes from the original *Anarchist Cookbook* filtering in at local punk gigs, it is no surprise to find instructions in *Reality Now* for “What to do if the RCMP calls on you.” (Black Drove Affinity Group, 1984: 2) The credits for issue number one give thanks to Garry, Mark and Mimi, and “No fucking thanx to the reason this mag had to be printed.” (*Ibid.*: 1)

In complete contrast to the increasingly activist zines was a tiny effort put out by local Steve Korver, now a writer in Amsterdam, called *Joe's Banana Clinic*. According to Steve, he only put out 2.5 issues (the last one was more of a flyer) in about 1983. I am partial to *Joe's* because it contains so much of the familiar ephemera of Ottawa during that period, and so much, in terms of text, collage and drawings is packed into its tiny 4 ½ by 8 ½ inch perzine format. There were likely dozens of other perzines and other species of zines that came out between 1978 and 1985 that I haven't listed here, because, as with any collection, mine was directed by my own preferences, finances, and the opportunities I had for acquiring particular issues. Also, much of the information I have gathered here and attempted to contextualize relies on memories over twenty years old, and much of it may be off the mark. I don't let that bother me, however. Zines, it seems to me, were never about “facts” or even about “truth,” but about creating your own “realities,” fantasies and ethical boundaries, and gluing together whatever stuff you found lying around that interested you.

In the last chapter of his book, Stephen Duncombe is ultimately disappointed with zines for their failure to effect genuine “change,” but he concedes that “Zines, in their content, form, and organization, constitute an alternative ideal of how human relations, creation, and consumption could be organized.” (Duncombe, 1997: 196) Indeed, zines do, through constant, relentless critique of the existing “system,” suggest a utopian alternative to current lifestyles, reflected, in part, by punk's many ways of “being in the world.” But further he goes on to state that zines’ “strength lies not in what they say they will do, but in what they actually are. They are politics by example.” (*Idem*)

I agree with Duncombe, as it applies to Ottawa punk zines, at least. Zines are truly politics by example; and early zines and early punk culture in general, with its emphasis on DIY, community, certain forms of co-operation and resistance to just about everything “mainstream” looks to me today rather like a last ditch yelp before we became hopelessly inundated with corporate-inflected culture of all kinds. I don’t fully agree with Duncombe, however, that “First and foremost, zines are a tool for consciousness raising.” (Duncombe, 1997: 181) Consciousness-raising is important as far as that trajectory goes, and very much so with certain zines, but the more I remember about the people who put out these publications, how they were produced and disseminated, and how they functioned in the tiny scene in which I was involved, the more I am convinced that zines were really, similar to the earliest Sci Fi fanzines which came out in the 1920’s and 30’s, about forging a sense of community and establishing one’s place there, as well as an “identity” for the editor, for the reader, for the scene, and inadvertently or not, for the national subject.

Unlike other publications, like books, which address the anonymous individual, or magazines, which seek to inform but also to entice and sell, punk zines were always written by insiders for insiders. They were often collective volunteer projects in terms of editing, contributions and distribution, and for the most part they invited feedback (although not always what you would call “warmly”). Belying the frequent “fuck you” attitude, they allowed their producers, (who, not incidentally, often lived at the periphery of the city or beyond or where otherwise house-bound), to declare their own existence, participation and stance, while at the same time helping to reify the local movement through concrete forms of representation. Zines were about conjuring up, connecting to and being part of the scene. Maybe all this was better said by Dave Aardvark circa 1982-3 in his zine *Self-Affliction*, “The Nation’s Capital’s Only, One Issue, Punkzine”:

So you’re reading this lousy magazine and you’re thinking “what the hell is this?” Well, it’s sort of a joke but everyone needs a joke now and then besides you might learn something and even ENJOY it. So read. OK, so maybe the pictures aren’t new and you’ve seen them before but who can afford photographers to capture overseas bands on NO BUDGET AT ALL? And maybe you don’t give a toss about what I think about certain albums and singles. But you can buy them and see if your taste compares with mine. Anyway, I hope you feel it’s worth your quarter. You can always use the back of the pages to doodle on or just use it for kindling. I FELT LIKE MAKING A PUNKZINE SO I DID!! Who cares what you think. By the way, I’d like to apologize if you think I took any of your ideas. Feel free to take mine. (Aardvark, circa 1982-3)

I think that just about sums it up.

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Une sélection de 12 couvertures de fanzines par Julia Pine

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