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Zap! Pow! Out!: Twentieth Century Queer Comics

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Zap! Pow! Out!: Twentieth-Century Queer Comics

Some years ago I began collecting books in the area of what we would now recognize as ‘gay and lesbian studies’ and have today amassed a personal library numbering in the hundreds of books. The collection began organically—not as an effort to produce a collection per se, but to serve as a personal reference library supporting my academic writing and to compensate for haphazard and sometime overtly-homophobic library collections practices which caused many of the titles to be inaccessible to me. Reflecting my broader interests and academic training in visual culture and the history and theory of gender and sexuality, a large part of my library is devoted to gay and lesbian popular visual culture (film, photography, illustration, advertising, television, etc.) Probably its most unusual and interesting aspect is a group of books of and about queer comics.

These books are large-format paperback anthologies which republish gay and lesbian-themed cartoons, comics strips, and other forms of what scholars term “serial graphic media” or “sequential art.” Although the original comics circulated internationally and span the twentieth century the bulk are from an American context and, as might be expected, date after the 1960s. My collection traces shifts in the circulation of queer comics from hand-to-hand distribution of pornographic ‘8-pagers’ in the early twentieth century, the appearance of serial graphic erotica in the underground press at mid-century, the private printing of a few all-gay or all-lesbian comics books in the 1970s, and eventually the syndication of queer comic strips in regionally and nationally distributed newspapers and magazines. By the 1980s and 1990s there were a number of nationally syndicated queer comic strips (Alison Bechdel’s *Dykes to Watch Out For*; Eric

Orner's *The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green*; Robert Kirby's *Curbside*) which appeared in the gay and lesbian press.

The unprecedented media presence of gay and lesbian comics in the late twentieth century was paralleled by a burgeoning interest in the history of homosexuality, with both professional and amateur historians focusing on the presence and absence of gay and lesbian people and themes in popular visual culture. This interest led to the re-publication of earlier, out of print, and hard to find gay comics and related serial graphics. The transience and ephemerality of popular cultural media combined with a general under-valuation of gay and lesbian culture by gays and non-gays alike meant that many gay sub-cultural practices and expressions had passed without archival collection much less historical comment. Winston Leyland, owner of Leyland Publications/Gay Sunshine Press of San Francisco, took the lead in republishing a number of rare comic strips from the mid-1960s beginnings of the Gay Liberation Movement and those which appeared in many short-lived gay lifestyle periodicals, pornographic magazines, and newspapers in the 1970s. Other houses reprinted the mid-twentieth century serial graphics of Tom of Finland, Blade, and Dom Orejudos, which had been privately printed or published in 'physical culture' periodicals, making many of them available for the first time to a post-Stonewall gay and lesbian audience. Anthological reprints of queer comics comprise the larger part of this collection, but they are balanced by other, more scholarly and topical books on comics and graphic illustration, as well as the presence of homosexuality in other popular cultural forms such as film, television, fashion, and advertising.

My collection of books on queer comics probably does not account for more than a tenth of my library but contains some items which are especially meaningful for me. Comics are a grassroots medium which allowed often-isolated gay and lesbian people to forge a communal

and individual identity, mount both organized and everyday political resistance to an often-intolerant mainstream culture, and explore unconventional gender identities and sexual desires. Accordingly their themes carom from the mundane to the humorous to the political and, yes, to the unapologetically pornographic—often, as in real life, inextricably intertwined. Some exceptional items in my collection are:

- the complete anthologized *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*; reflecting 1970s feminist matriarchal ideologies; unusually features and ethnic, castrating lesbian who allows readers vicarious participation in a violent and bloody—yet humorous—revenge against homophobic patriarchy;

- the complete run of comic strips featuring the character Harry Chess from the strip *Harry Chess: That Man from A.U.N.T.I.E.*; first published in the Gay Liberation periodical *Drum*, then through the 1980s in gay porn and lifestyle magazines; arguably the first and certainly one of the longest running gay comic strips; put a queer spin on the late-1960s mock-Bond phenomenon that swept British and American television and B-grade films;

- a rare copy of Roz Warren's *Dyke Strippers*; an edited volume of interviews and art by lesbian comic strip artists from around the world;

- all 25 volumes of the *Meatmen* series published by Winston Leyland; although begun as a more diverse collection of comics it quickly found its erotic theme and remains the largest serial anthology of gay male pornographic comics to date;

- the complete reprints of Alison Bechdel's long-running strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*; combining humor, activism and a deep familiarity with feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and queer theory; the Oberlin-educated Bechdel never flinches from representing the lesbian community in all its fashions and foibles;

-a signed anthology of Rupert Kinnard's (a.k.a. 'Professor I. B. Gittendowne') long running syndicated strip *Cathartic Comics*, featuring the only African-American gay male superhero (The Brown Bomber) and his drag queen sidekick (Diva Touché Flambé); drawn by and African-American artist; the inscription is accompanied by a small drawing by Kinnard;

-I now realize that my book collection made important contributions to my own minority identity by allowing my communion with the lives and experiences of the characters and producers of historic gay and lesbian comics. My queer comics library had been a means to recover a history of 'my people' in a culture in which we are routinely discounted, suppressed, disavowed and erased. But it has also been a way for me to understand the myriad ways gays and lesbians have used visual forms of culture to negotiate, resist, and accommodate themselves to an often hostile larger culture—especially in the years following World War II. Queer comics represent a technique of counter-representation; a means to offer a different image of gay life experience in opposition to, but never in isolation from, those presented by political, religious and medical 'authorities' and as circulated in more conventional forms of popular visual culture such as film and television. As such, my collection of books on queer comics reflects my longtime interest in the relationship of seemingly small, everyday, individual forms of activism as part of the contribution of social justice movements to larger processes of historical change. I turn to it frequently when I need to hear a sympathetic authorial voice, delight in the historical resilience of creativity amidst suffocating repression, or just have a good therapeutic laugh out loud.

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