MAKING AS WORLD-MAKING: WHAT THE LESBIAN AVENGERS CAN TEACH ABOUT COMMUNAL COMPOSING, AGENCY, AND WORLD-BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

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In this dissertation, I develop a queer and cultural rhetorics framework for understanding how queer communities' communal composing practices allow them to enact the process of world-making. In particular, I argue that the practice of making *things* allows communities to create worlds for themselves that are empowering. I use the term "making" to intervene into rhet/comp's preoccupation with the term multimodality. The concept of multimodality does not necessarily engage in the communal act or practice of making, but rather focuses on items and compositions after they have been made, thereby invisibilizing the often social and cultural nature of making. I argue that engaging in the concept of making instead of/ in addition to multimodality opens up space to consider the ways in which queers (and other marginalized communities) have made things together to build community, to create a sense of critical agency amongst each other, to rhetorically intervene in a world that chooses to un-see and erase their lives, and therefore, their creations. Thus, this project builds out from current conversations in the field regarding multimodality, queer rhetorical practices, and feminist and activist rhetoric.

Through ethnographically informed qualitative interviews, I detail themes on making from former members of the Lesbian Avengers—an activist group prominent in the 1990s—to illuminate how the communal practice of making is a deliberate and complex rhetorical act of world-building, especially for marginalized communities. I conclude by discussing what lessons (academic) leaders can learn from activist organizations like the Avengers and how to apply those lessons in their administration.

For Lane, who makes my world.

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We Aren't So Different After All

About halfway into my dissertation research, I had an epiphany. It happened in part because of my conversations with the participants of this study, but it wasn't until my conversation with Sarah Schulman, my final interviewee, that I started to understand what this work would truly be about. She had been telling me about the ways in which people who have been historically marginalized have often been socialized to believe they were incapable of action, and their only power was in complaint. To assert to a historically marginalized person that they indeed had a responsibility to act, and therefore, some power to change their own circumstances could be emotionally painful. The emotional pain connected to action and the instinct to instead revert to inaction and complaint was something I saw often among myself and my graduate student peers in my graduate program in writing and rhetoric.

The Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures graduate program is relatively diverse; most of us embody minoritized positions in some capacity through gender, sexuality, race, class and ability. Throughout my coursework and in leadership positions, I was often surprised to find myself and my colleagues incredibly good at critiquing the scholarship with which we were engaging and the structure of our graduate program and department. What we were *not* very skilled at, however, was working to build beyond our critique. Malea Powell and Trixie Smith, two of my mentors, would often ask us in class how we planned to build upon the critiques we were making in class. When I was president of our graduate student organization WRAP (Writing, Rhetoric, and Praxis), I often organized events that had been requested by graduate students, only to be met with complaints about how the event was run. When I asked those who were unhappy to help co-create events that met their needs, I was often refused. I began to see a pattern of inaction in my program, and it always seemed to be connected to our supposed lack of power as graduate students, as historically marginalized people, as people who often had felt as if action was beyond them.

This conversation with Sarah helped me to see that theories and practices derived from direct-action groups like the Lesbian Avengers had much to teach academics like me. My original intention for this project was to examine a concept I call “making as world-making”: the idea that when a community makes things together, they also build relationships with each other, and those relationships impact how and what they make. In essence, to make things is to make worlds. While this dissertation research helped me to build this theory, it also helped me to complicate this theory through lessons like the one Sarah taught me.

A Turn Toward the Past

When so many contemporary queer activist organizations are currently engaging in political protests and activist works, it may seem odd to turn to an organization whose work was most prevalent nearly 30 years ago. Why turn to the past to study queer making as world-making? I argue this turn is a critical act of kinship, of learning from queer elders, listening to their stories, and working to apply their wisdom to contemporary politics. Additionally, orienting toward the past is part of the queer experience. Ahmed argues “in looking back we also look a different way; looking back involves facing— it even involves an open face. Looking back is what keeps open the possibility of going astray. The glance also means an openness to the future, as the imperfect translation of what is behind us” (178). Like Ahmed, multiple queer scholars have a particular preoccupation with the past, present and future of queerness and this study of the Lesbian Avengers thus is part of that scholarly conversation.

Queer scholars have a particular investment in the past as it pertains to queer time, the loss and failure existent in past times more hostile to queers (Love), the potentiality of the death drive (Edelman), the depression and connection queers continue to feel even as we experience "progress" of the future (Cvetkovich), and to the potentiality of utopia in futurity (Munoz). While Edelman argues queers should cling to the here and now, reject the futurity of the child, and embrace the death drive, Munoz argues that queerness "is not here yet," but rather "is the thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" and is "a doing for and toward the future" (*Cruising* 1). Still, one cannot necessarily engage with the potentiality of queer futurity and utopia without acknowledging, embracing, and learning from the queer past. Love argues

> Given that issues like gay shame and self-hatred are charged with the weight of difficult personal and collective histories, it is understandable that critics are eager to turn them to good use. But I am concerned that queer studies, in its haste to refunction such experiences, may not be adequately reckoning with their powerful legacies. Turning away from past degradation to a present or future affirmation means ignoring the past as past; it also makes it harder to see the persistence of the past in the present. (19)

An engagement with past queer activism— in this case in both the making and the unmaking practices of the Lesbian Avengers in the early 1990s— allows us to consider the ways in which the work of these activists informs our current activism. This engagement also helps us to think about what really has not changed much in the last thirty years. This study then, is born out a conjunction of scholarly work focused on queer connections to time— past, present, and future— and time's imbrication of pain, hope, jouissance, and failure for queers.

Scholarly and Personal Positionality

I am a writing and rhetoric scholar who uses queer and cultural rhetorics methodologies to study how collaborative composing practices of underrepresented communities allow them to create a collective sense of critical agency. I particularly attend to the ways in which these communities and individuals engage their own rhetorical agency in ways that are often not valued or sanctioned in various settings in order to empower themselves and their communities. My publications draw upon queer, cultural and feminist rhetorics to illuminate the subversive rhetorical strategies of queer communities and writing center scholars and practitioners.

But perhaps most important to this project is my own personal positionality and how my identity has shaped my work. I am a bisexual woman who is married to a cisgender man, and I recently gave birth to a baby boy. From an outside perspective, I look very much like a straight woman, and I absolutely benefit from the cult of heterosexuality in many cases, from federal tax breaks to the privilege of my and my family's relative safety. I came out as bisexual in my early 20s, but after I was already married to my husband. Because we are monogamous, in many ways my sexuality might mean nothing to most people. But it means a great deal to me.

I first realized my own bisexuality through queer rhetorics courses in graduate school. The readings and discussions in my courses illuminated to me aspects of my past romantic encounters with women that I had ignored and left unlabeled or categorized. I had been told I was bisexual by my own husband *for years but* did not consider the possibility until graduate school. Seeing queerness in myself helped to explain much *about* myself as a woman and a lover, but also as a thinker and creator. I wish more than anything that heteronormativity had not shielded this aspect of myself for so many years.

When I began my PhD, I knew that my dissertation, and my scholarly work in general, would be focused on queer theory and rhetorics— it has made the most sense to me as a scholar, and I am deeply invested in the work of my queer kin. I initially planned to focus on a community of bisexual women or activists but found myself most drawn to the work of lesbians. This pull might be due to my own friendships with lesbians, as well as to my membership in Sistrum Women's Chorus, which originated as a lesbian chorus and whose membership continues to be populated by many incredible lesbians I have come to love.

As a bisexual, straight-passing woman, engaging in queer rhetorics has not always been easy or readily accepted by my colleagues, straight and gay/lesbian alike. I have often considered perhaps moving my research away from queer and LGBT subjects to protect myself from the critique of others, but I also know that would simply be a cop-out. Queer scholarship matters more to me than any other work I have done, and I will continue to engage it with as much care and self-awareness I can muster in order to do it justice.

In terms of working with a lesbian organization for this dissertation, I want to acknowledge that there are many things about the lesbian (activist) experience that I can never understand experientially. I wrestled with a great deal of imposter syndrome as I wrote this dissertation. However, Maxine Wolfe told me in some of our correspondence that there were bisexual members of the Lesbian Avengers; their membership and sexuality were non-issues as long as they were invested in the cause. I too am invested in the Lesbian Avenger's cause in solidarity as a bisexual woman and in gratitude to the lesbian feminist activists who have been so integral to my own liberation as a bisexual woman.

Reasoning for this Dissertation

At its most dialed-down, what my work with the Lesbian Avengers has shown me is that the concept of making is larger, more complex, and more meaningful than it is often given credence in rhetoric and composition. The choice to make— to make things, but to also make an organization, a community, a department, a center, or a discipline— is a complex rhetorical choice. Any community— including other activist communities, but also academic communities— has much to learn from the rhetorical acts of making engaged by activists (and more specifically, I argue, from queer and LGBTQ activist organizations).

I intended to write a dissertation that argues that when people make things, they make worlds, and rhetoric and composition scholars could benefit from applying this theory to writing and rhetoric, but more specifically to queer and multimodal work. This argument is perhaps the dissertation's foundation, but the more specific argument is that this theory can teach rhetoric and composition scholars and activists alike a great deal about how a discipline, department, and organization can be made, remade, and unmade through seemingly small acts of communal making.

I discuss how I developed a queer and cultural rhetorics framework for understanding how queer communities' communal composing practices allow them to enact the process of world-making. The practice of making *things* allows communities to create worlds for themselves that are empowering, and vice versa.[1] I use the term "making" to intervene into rhet/comp's preoccupation with multimodality. For instance, queer rhetorics scholars often

[1] In many ways, the argument about communities' communal composing practices fits in with Etienne Wenger's description of communities of practice. Sprinkled throughout this dissertation are nods to Wenger's work. However, I limit my engagement with Wenger in favor of a cultural rhetorics orientation to culture and community building, knowing that Wenger was a foundational part of a cultural rhetorics orientation towards communities of practice.

engage in multimodal work or study the ways working in multiple modes can offer more space for queer bodies to represent themselves and their specific knowledges. Rarely do these scholars do both at the same time, and often these discussions do not include the communal and cultural nature of those making processes. The concept of making allows for scholars to broaden their understanding of what "counts" as multimodal and to think about how we often make (in) community.

In this dissertation, I discuss findings from my work with the Lesbian Avengers on their experiences of making — like pamphlets, flyers, protest signs, and rituals like fire-eating or the Dyke March— and how those acts of making impacted their practice of community building, or world-making. I then discuss how the lessons these Avengers taught me about lesbian direct-action organizing can be applied in academic and activist communities, and in this case, to an English or rhetoric and composition department, a writing classroom, a writing center, and queer activist organizations. I also provide some take-aways for teachers, administrators, and activists to consider for their own academic spaces.

This dissertation is made up of five chapters. In the remainder of this first chapter, I review the scholarly conversation around queer and multimodal rhetorics and composition, its connection to feminist and lesbian scholarship, and how cultural rhetorics intervenes in filling some of the gaps these frameworks provide, followed by a short background on the Lesbian Avengers and their connections to this theoretical framework. In my second chapter, I provide a description of my methodological priorities and methods for the study. The third and fourth chapters describe the results from my interviews and archival research about the Lesbian Avengers' making and unmaking practices. Finally, I discuss conclusions and implications for this study for activists and academics alike.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I explain my thought process for developing a cultural and queer rhetorics methodological approach for this study. In particular, this literature review provides background and critique of feminist and queer approaches to multimodality, which allows me to show how a cultural rhetorics orientation to making can help to intervene in queer multimodal scholarship that sometimes elides the culture and stories of those who queerly make.
In this literature review, I explain what might be missing from rhetoric and composition's current concept of queer rhetorics, especially in terms of its engagement with multimodality.

This literature review may look distinctly different from a typical queer dissertation. In particular, I perhaps do not engage with queer scholarship as deeply as other dissertation projects engaged with queer work. Much of my investigation of queer rhetorics is often focused on its connections to multimodality, rather than in its theoretical underpinnings. Additionally, a focus on queer rhetorics proved less useful when working with the Lesbian Avengers specifically because they identified as specifically lesbian, rather than queer. A few participants also argued queer theory was only helpful for white male gay scholars. Thus, my decision to instead spend more time with cultural rhetorics work stems from my intention of arguing for more cultural rhetorics-based research and composing practices in queer and multimodal rhetorics, and to find a frame that might fit better for the Lesbian Avengers with whom I worked.

In the following section, I will first discuss what the concept of multimodality allows and provides of queer rhetorics, then describe its shortcomings, and conclude with a discussion of what I believe a cultural rhetorics approach can do for our concept of queer multimodality. I want to be clear that I do not intend to conflate multimodality with queer composing and rhetorics; rather, I consider the ways in which multimodality serves queer rhetorics, and how it sometimes may not. When discussing what cultural rhetorics can add to multimodality (specifically when it is engaged in queer rhetorics), I am offering some suggestions that can be engaged alongside and in addition to the foundational queer rhetorics scholarship that has shaped the discipline. In that section, I outline and define the concept of *making as world-making* as a key concept in this dissertation. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to what the Lesbian Avengers as an activist group contributes to this concept.

What Does the Concept of Multimodality do for Queer Rhetorics?

Multimodality—composing processes that extend the boundaries of the traditional linear lines of alphabetic text and linear logic—can work to dismantle traditional white, straight, and male discourse. Just as Cixous called women to engage in *ecriture feminine* to dismantle phallogocentric discourse through a writing of themselves (875), so too can multimodality disrupt notions of heteronormative, hypermasculine discourse. For example, Wysocki asks,

> How might the straight lines of type we have inherited on page after page after page of books articulate to other kinds of lines, assembly lines and lines of canned products in supermarkets and lines of desks in classrooms? How might these various lines work together to accustom us to standardization, repetitions, and other processes that support industrial forms of production? (114)

Here, Wysocki articulates the potentials of "new media" for disrupting linear logics that perpetuate neo-liberal concepts of production, concepts that permeate directly into the heteronormative family unit (Edelman, Foucault). Straight lines of text can equate to the factory model of family-building, where the production of more capitalist bodies through birth are used "to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative" (Foucault

37). A disruption of such lines of production through multimodal composing can create space for queerer modes of knowledge-making, and provides women and femmes with options beyond simply acting as baby-factories. Thus, multimodal composing may allow scholars to contend with their bodies in ways traditional linear, alphabetic text may not always.

Embodiment

Beyond the disruption of heteronormative, capitalist forms of production, multimodal composing can also foreground embodied practices of being and knowing typically valued in queer and feminist thought. For example, in *Sister Outsider*, Lorde calls for women to embrace the erotic within them, suggesting the erotic "is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings" (54). The erotic, articulated by Lorde, strikes me as a deeply embodied feeling that exists beyond the plane of hypersexuality as it is often described, especially in terms of the female body. Instead, to Lorde, to claim the erotic is to claim one's own embodied feeling of sensuality and power embedded in femaleness[2]. Such feelings of eroticism cannot only be felt though an embodiment of one's own sexuality through sexual acts, but also through many different embodied acts of making. She writes

> Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea. (56-7)

[2] I briefly want to point out that this point in *Sister Outsider* encroaches on TERF (Trans Exclusive Radical Feminist) territory, because her argument sometimes relies on a kind of female essence that only biological women can experience. However, this piece was written in 1984, and I believe it can be co-opted and discussed through a queer lens that recognizes the erotic as a power source for people of all genders and sexualities.

What Lorde describes here is the way in which multimodality— composing that extends beyond the creation of linear, alphabetic prose— is an embodied practice that functions erotically. This concept is not just a feminist concept, but one that is queer, that relies on our deep feelings of our bodies as (a)sexual and (a)gendered.

This sense of the erotic translates to multiple works surrounding identity and embodiment from both a queer and feminist lens. For instance, an example of an attendance to queer multimodal composing as embodied is Rhodes and Alexander's "Multimedia[ted] [E]visceration and Installation Rhetoric," a description and discussion of their installation at the 2008 Watson Conference. The installation, using shadows and images of bodies projected across the screen in a semi-dark room, implicates the viewer as a participant as their own shadow is projected on the screen as they read questions like "Where is my body? How can I imagine my body? Where are my desires?" Rhodes and Alexander contend "multimedia might return us to embodied experiences of language, discourse, and composition—and thus to a critical sense of how composition studies has eschewed such awareness. The realization that rhetoric is an embodied art seems central to an understanding of how rhetoric functions." Rhodes and Alexander focus on finding ways to make clearer the connections between embodiment and rhetoric, specifically with their intention of focusing on bodies marked as sexed and sexualized. They write "Our inspiration for the installation emerged out of our developing critique of how bodies, particularly sexed and sexual bodies, are infrequently foregrounded in composition (or in the act of composition)." This piece works to involve bodies, and therefore Lorde's sense of the erotic, into the study of rhetoric through multimodality and digital media.

As I see Rhodes and Alexander take up embodiment through Lorde's use of the erotic in queer rhetorics, I see technofeminists do the same in their discussions of the female body connected to machines. In particular, Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto” provides a critique of second-wave feminism’s preoccupation with the naturalness of women and takes issue with the common statements that women are the creators and perpetuators of daily life, and that such contentions are connected to their “natural” “goddessness.” At face value, one might suggest that Haraway’s argument works in opposition to Lorde’s contentions that women embrace their innately bound eroticism, and perhaps that is the case. However, just as Lorde calls for women to seek pleasure in enacting many different modes of multimodal composing (building a bookshelf, writing a poem, etc.), Haraway calls women to recognize their inherent connection to technology, critiquing our common conception of the separateness of humans and machines; such a belief in this dualism allows for the concept of the feminine/woman as natural goddess. Instead Haraway provides a critique that suggests the inherent connection between humans, women in particular, and technology. She writes, “The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment . . . we are responsible for boundaries; we are they” (196). This piece is particularly useful in terms of Haraway's discussion of boundary transgression and embodiment. As scholars consider how queer and feminist composing can inform multimodality, recognizing the ways technology is a necessity for embodiment provides a critical understanding for how multimodality and bodies are interconnected, just a Rhodes and Alexander show in their installation.

Performativity

Through Lorde’s notion of the erotic and Haraway’s articulation of our bodies as connected to technology, multimodality also provides space for experimentations of gender performance and play to be enacted. Gender play especially is exemplified in multiple queer multimodal rhetorics pieces, where discussions and enactments of how the digital especially allows for queers to ponder, play, perform, fuck (with), and queer their genders and sexualities (Miles, Alexander et al., Crow, Glasby, Waite, Rhodes and Alexander, Houle, Kimball, & McKee). Gender and sexuality play is especially important to many queers because we are often socialized to enact hetero- and cis- normative constructions of gender performativity. Butler argues gender performativity comprises "acts, gestures, and desire [which] produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle as a cause" (185). Gender performativity, then, is an externally present interpretation of an inner essence and an essential fiction, a socially constructed simplification of an understanding of gender. Fucking/playing with gender provides opportunities for people to reinterpret their understandings of their sex and gender through a (re)discovery of new modes of gender performance, and the digital is often a space where this kind of queer and feminist composing can be enacted.

Two examples of gender play within a digital world strike me as particularly salient to this argument: Houle, Kimball, and McKee's "Boy? Girl? You Decide": Multimodal Web Composition and a Mythography of Identity," and Alexander et al.'s "Queerness, sexuality, technology, and writing: How do queers write ourselves when we write in cyberspace?" Both pieces enact and theorize how the digital creates space to better understand and perform queerness and fuck with gender. In Houle, Kimball, and McKee's piece, Alex Kimball's experience as a trans person undergoing hormone therapy is highlighted through a hypertextual meditation on Robin Hood using audio, text, photos, and (of course) hypertext. On the interface, the user can click on different transgender symbols to read an excerpt of text, look at a picture, and/or listen to Kimball's voice recordings as they shift in tone due to hormone therapy. In Alexander et al.'s article, the seven authors participate in a MOO chat about how the internet has impacted their queer lives as far as cultivating their own queer identities and getting to know other queer people online. Rhodes and Alexander especially argued that they are “queerer” and “more exciting” online than in-person. They articulate that the anonymity of cyberspace allows them to experiment and play. In both of these pieces, the authors both theorize and exemplify how digital multimodal composing has allowed them to meditate on and play with their own queerness and genders. Kimball’s meditation on his changing voice through his voice recordings and Alexander and Rhodes’ contention that they are queerer on the internet because they feel they can “play” online show how multimodality certainly supports queer and feminist rhetorics and composing through self-expression.

Similarly, the technofeminist movement and its adjoining scholarship show the ways in which women are able to “write themselves” into being as women connected to technology, disrupting heteronormative concepts of who “belongs” online (Cixous, Balsamo, Haraway). For example, Butler asserts that when people choose to congregate in public spaces, particularly as individuals who are resisting or protesting large governmental or capitalist regimes, those same people are simultaneously consciously exercising their rights to protest, and unconsciously exercising their rights to their gender identities. She writes,

> When we exercise the right to appear as the gender we already are—even when we feel we have no other choice—we are still exercising a certain freedom . . . When one freely exercises the right to be who one already is and one asserts a social category for the purposes describing that mode of being, then one is, in fact, making freedom a part of that social category. . . . (Butler 134-5)

This enactment, and the freedom that stems from it, can be mirrored in the digital, and certainly can in technofeminist work. In the case of those doing technofeminist work especially in the

1990s and early 2000s, their enactment of their genders within a phallogocentric framework can be seen as "making freedom a part of that social category." For example, according to Kirkup et al., technofeminist scholarship has a "different impact and a set of possibilities for gender relations and for women. These possibilities increase the human capacities of seeing, hearing, *understanding and communicating:* they are systems of representation" (xiv, italics original). Representing women within the digital is a multimodal act of writing the female self into a space where women were not welcome; this too is a radical act of gender performance and play[3].

All of these examples of embodiment and performativity show how the concept of multimodality as it is engaged in the rhetoric and composition field *can* support queer rhetorics, through providing spaces with which to experiment and play with gender and queerness, to write the self into being, to live out the erotic through embodied practices of making, and to subvert and transgress cis-and heteronormative modes of production. Still, I am left with some critiques of this argument, particularly that people of color are mostly erased from the stories I just told above, with a few exceptions. Furthermore, quite a few if not all of the examples from this section separated theory and practice, treating multimodal theory as a lens with which to think about and enact processes of making, rather than treating making as both theory and practice simultaneously. Finally, all of these pieces work from Western, white, and sometimes capitalist notions of creation and production. In the next section, I will provide a critique of multimodality, attending to the ways in which multimodal scholarship as it stands can be limited and exclusionary.

[3] I'll discuss later the problematics of this idea in the next section, as scholars since have noted that the digital is a space where inequity still reigns supreme, and technofeminism's beginnings were quite like the first and second waves of feminism: women of color were ignored or erased from its history.

Multimodality's Shortcomings for Rhet/Comp

"Multimodality," much like the phrase "new media," is used to describe practices of making that existed long before linear, alphabetic text was seen as the most legitimate form of discourse among Western scholars. Jody Shipka suggests that an embrace of the word "multimodality" or phrase "new media" becomes just another limitation: "in an attempt to free students from the limits of the page, we institute another, limiting them to texts that can be composed, received, and reviewed on screen" (11). In this case, Shipka describes the limitations of understanding multimodality as just the digital, and I agree.

However, I also argue that the concept of multimodality that includes non-digital composing is still limiting in the sense that it becomes a buzzword, an experiment, a means to a still very Western, very traditional, very white end. Indeed, Shipka later argues "when our scholarship fails to consider . . . the complex and highly distributed processes associated with the production of texts (and lives and people), we run the risk of overlooking the fundamentally multimodal aspects of *all* communicative practice" (13). In essence, long before the word "multimodality" was being used, every means of making and communicative practice in which we engaged was already multimodal. It is slapping the word "multimodal" onto that act of making that limits the concept and demarcates it as a signifier for white, Western, neo-liberal and academic logics. This issue is reminiscent of what Powell et al. argue about cultural rhetorics: "the project of cultural rhetorics is, generally, to emphasize rhetorics as always-already cultural and cultures as persistently rhetorical" (1.1). Rhetorics have always been cultural, before they were named as such; to demarcate some rhetorics as cultural and others as not suggests a neutral territory that does not actually exist but is usually coded as unbiased (read straight, white, hetero, male). Thus, just the word multimodal seems to miss the mark in the same ways.

In this section I discuss two critiques I have of queer multimodal scholarship and technofeminist work: first, that most queer multimodal work often must employ a traditional Western framework to appease a discipline that still requires scholars to defend its validity through "classical" means, and secondly, that much technofeminist work, especially from the 90s and early 00's, reflects mostly the identities and considerations of white, straight women.

Western Queers

Queer rhetorics and composition as a whole is relatively new to the rhet/comp discipline, and likely a response to and an enactment of the social turn in composition in the 90's and 00's. For this reason, much early work that mentioned queerness or LGBTQ rhetorics called for scholars to value queerness in their scholarship. Some of this scholarship looked like a call for teachers to become comfortable discussing sex and sexuality in the classroom for the benefit of both queer and straight students (Malinowitz, Alexander). In "A Queer Turn in Composition" Wallace and Alexander suggest that engaging in queer composition and pedagogy in the writing classroom in particular necessitates an active work toward dismantling homophobia; such work requires scholars and teachers to attend to "how our field has participated in practices that ignore or pathologize nonnormative sexual identities" (317). Indeed, much of the earlier queer work in rhetoric and composition seeks to explain to straight rhet/comp scholars that queer scholarship is beneficial. These arguments were necessary to make in a discipline that tended to ignore how identity may impact the composing process until the social turn (Villanueva and Arola), while also seeking its legitimacy from classic, Western rhetorical traditions (Octolog). For this reason, much queer multimodal work— for example, Alexander and Rhodes' "Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive"— draws from Western rhetorical "moves" as a means to foreground queerness' capacity to be part of the rhetoric and composition discipline as it is widely accepted.

In "Pleasures of the Archive" and the accompanying video "Queered," Rhodes and Alexander present a digital queer mini archive in order to discuss and theorize how queer archival practices work with/through/alongside queer rhetorics. Foregrounding queers' engagement with traditional Western rhetorical concepts of pathos, ethos, and logos, Alexander and Rhodes share video clips, pictures, and hyperlinks to theorize queer rhetoric through this archival process. In *Techne*, Rhodes and Alexander invoke the (Western) concept of techne to argue for queer rhetorical making practices that disrupt "norms for thinking, particularly norms that reinforce heterosexist ways of being." Rhodes and Alexander argue for a connected and techno-literate self that also lives and uses media queerly and contend that multimodality is the best way to enact this. In both these projects, Rhodes and Alexander are making critical points toward dismantling heterosexist and normative thought, *and* in this example, they draw from Western rhetorical tradition to do this disruptive work. While this work *is* critical toward shifting the rhet/comp discipline toward new ruptures and transformations, it *also* does so from a frame that has been used to historically justify itself as traditional, classical, and therefore coded as normative.

Straight, White Ladies on the Internet

Just as queer multimodal scholarship in rhetoric and composition does not often engage in rhetorics beyond Western tradition, so too can technofeminist scholarship (especially from the 1990's and early 2000's) disregard intersections of identity, leaving a cacophony of straight white voices and not much else. My critique is not unique, and is discussed at length in the 2019 March special issue of *Computers and Composition*, and more specifically in the piece "TechnoFeminisms: A Conversation about Pasts, Presents, and Futures" by Adams et al. While I want to critique this perceived lack of self-awareness surrounding whiteness, I want to first be clear that the context of the technofeminist movement would suggest that the proliferations of discussions of straight, white women on the internet is caused by a need to speak back to the abundance of discourse on the digital as a (white) male space. Media often portrayed the Internet as a male space, where women did not belong. For example, Blair and Takayoshi discuss a February 1997 episode of *Dateline* that discussed online addiction, profiling a suburban working mother's "loss of her family through her treks into cyberspace for hours at a time. This cyber-addiction led to her alleged inattention to their children, to her job, and to her husband, who consequently divorced her for not fulfilling her duties attached to her role, such as 'making the family meals'" (1). The description of this segment highlights the gender inequity that women encountered as they began to write about their experiences online; in many ways, it appears that the necessity to first address second-wave-esque rights to the internet through a disruption of stereotypes about straight, white, married women was where to begin. Similarly, just as critiques of Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" sometimes focus on her obsession with counteracting phallogocentric discourse and thus still centering her work on a male/female dichotomy, Cixous was working in a specific time and context when such work was necessary. Technofeminism likewise laid important groundwork for women in digital spaces, even if that groundwork has sometimes been historically limiting.

Some of these limitations are easy to highlight: women of color and queer women are often invisibilized, tokenized, and ignored in a great deal of rhet/comp scholarship. For example, Selfe's "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing" describes the importance of aurality to multiple communities across time as a means to argue for other modes of composing beyond written alphabetic text (215-17). After spending nearly two pages discussing the importance of oral/aural practices among communities of color, Selfe notes almost as an afterthought that the work of Jacqueline Jones Royster, Malea Powell, Adam Banks, and Geneva Smitherman reminds her that “people of color have historically deployed a wide range of *written discourses* in masterful and often powerfully oppositional ways while retaining a value on traditional oral discourses and practices” (217, emphasis mine). While I am glad Selfe makes note of the fact that orality is not the only discourse for people of color, her statement comes across as an uninformed caveat following a passage that would suggest the opposite.

Beyond simply treating scholars of color as afterthoughts in discussions surrounding digital multimodal composing, scholars of color and lesbians are often also tokenized. For example, Gruber’s account of Alba, a Mestiza woman and non-traditional student in her classroom, borders on racist as her discourse in online spaces is described as “assertive” and “aggressive” (122). Additionally, benevolent racist statements about Alba “not knowing she was a good writer” suggests Gruber was the white savior teacher/gatekeeper empowering this student of color to see herself as worthy in the academy. Gruber’s point, of course, is not to be racist, but rather to discuss Alba’s classmates’ reactions to her writing, and to argue “power and authority--and the abuse of it-- does not disappear in electronic environments” (124). Gruber’s attempt to note the reified racism existing online also reifies racism itself through her descriptions of Alba. Similarly Addison and Hillligoss discuss what it means to come out as a lesbian online, providing an account of Addison’s coming out on a feminist listserv, which was met with silence. Despite Addison and Hilligoss’ critique of the blatant, silent homophobia within this group, they discuss utilizing a normalizing approach to queerness, “not because we’re invested in presenting a unified homogenous homosexual front, although we do think a collective subjectivity is necessary for political action” (31). Similar to Gruber’s conflicted argument in which she tries to empower a student of color through racist rhetoric, Addison and Hilligoss’ solution to homophobia in digital spaces is to co-opt the “we’re just like you" narrative for queers.

Neither of these solutions are lasting, and they reveal the limitation of technofeminism as articulated by mostly straight white women. Such a lack of self-awareness and circular logic troubles whether digital multimodality can in fact support queer and feminist work. Thus, I am left with the understanding that multimodality, especially if it continues to be defined through a mostly digital, mostly white lens, may continue to support queer and feminist work only if that queer and feminist work is articulated by white people or those who seek to assimilate into white, Western frameworks.

What a Cultural Rhetorics Approach can do for Queer and Feminist Making

In this section, I highlight some ways in which I believe a cultural rhetorics approach to making can open up space for scholars to constellate their understandings of multimodality with what I call “making as world-making,” though I’m sure I’m not the first person to ever come to this revelation. I also want to be clear that I do not discuss concepts of “making” as they have been previously discussed in scholarship. I articulate making through the works of cultural rhetorics scholars and other scholars of color who describe practices of making as world-making; the things these scholars make or talk about are not metaphors for the world they would like to see. Instead, their making changes or impacts the world around them, their relationships, and their cultures and vice versa. I believe a “making as world-making” approach to multimodal scholarship is one important way to support queer and feminist rhetorics and composing that acknowledge and honor the work of scholars of color; further, this approach is a more robust understanding of multimodality as theory and practice as one.

Making as World-Making

Two salient examples of making as world-making that might be recognized as multimodal by scholars outside of cultural rhetorics are Driskill's discussion of double-weaving and Haas' articulation of wampum as hypertext. In both examples, the authors describe something that is made-- baskets and wampum, respectively-- that is impacted by and impacts the world around them. Driskill first describes how to doubleweave a basket: to weave “two complete baskets, one inside the other, with a common rim . . . Doubleweaving is likewise employed as a Cherokee rhetorical strategy, in which two seemingly disparate rhetorical approaches exist concurrently”(23). Similarly, Haas describes wampum as hypertext by explaining the ways in which it has served very similar purposes as hypertext. Specifically, wampum can be read by those who understand their significance:

> Wampum records are maintained by regularly revisiting and re-"reading" them through community memory and performance, as wampum is a living rhetoric that communicates a mutual relationship between two or more parties, despite the failure of one of those parties to live up to that promise . . . Thus wampum embodies memory, as it extends human memories of inherited knowledges via interconnected, nonlinear designs with associative message storage and retrieval methods. (80-1)

Wampum are objects that create a world of diplomatic relations, memory building, performance, relationships, and shared knowledge. Wampum, like doublewoven baskets, are objects that, when people build them, help to shape the world in which people live. They *are* the stories we tell and the relationships we have.

Beyond explaining the ways in which baskets and wampum are world-builders, Driskill and Haas engage in the same methods used to build the objects in building their own rhetorical worlds. For example, following suit from the double-woven basket, Driskill doubleweaves stories of queerness and indigeneity to create Asegi stories, to build rhetorical sovereignty for queer indigenous peoples. Since homophobia and heteronormativity are products of coloniality, doubleweaving these stories is a decolonial approach to recognizing the existence and survivance of (queer) (and) (two-spirit) indigenous peoples; the goals of dismantling homophobia and colonialism are doublewoven. *Asegi Stories*, then, is also a double weaving: “a story that is much more complex and durable than its original and isolated splints; a story that is simultaneously unique while also rooted in ancient form” (25). Doubleweaving a basket is not a metaphor that is then used to build a theoretical framework around indigeneity or queerness; rather, doubleweaving is an act Driskill invokes to build a world in which queerness and indigeneity are always already connected. Similarly, just as Haas describes wampum as collective memory and relationship building, she makes a similar rhetorical move toward the end of her article, when she asserts that the point of her article was not just to simply make the claim that American indigenous peoples invented hypertext. Rather, she writes “I am suggesting that there are other stories that tell tales of hypertextuality that have gone untold, adding the story of wampum alone will not remedy this absence. But it does make one absent story present in our discussions of hypertext. And the addition of this story may lead us to better understand the theory of discovery” (96). Instead of participating in a colonial narrative of “this was here first,” Haas instead utilizes the concept of wampum to do just what wampum does: create connections, build collective memory, relations, and intellectual sovereignty for indigenous peoples. In both Haas’ and Driskill’s cases, making these *things* is what makes the world, and they embody this making through these things.

Indeed, the act of making as world-making is always already built out of the struggles of folks of color in particular; when you’ve been denied a humane world in which to live, one option may be to attempt to piece together a different kind of world. In *Disidentifications*, Munoz argues

> queers of color and other minoritarians have been denied a world. Yet, these citizen subjects are not without resources— they never have been. This study has tracked utopian impulses made manifest by the performers, cultural workers, and activists who are *not* content merely to survive, but instead use the stuff of the “real world” to remake collective sense of “worldness” through spectacles, performances, and willful acts of the self for others. (200)

Making as world-making, then, is a cultural practice engaged through a variety of rhetorical acts in order to build a world, if even for a moment, more hospitable to a minority community or a subject than the mainstream world allows.

Storying and Re-Beautifying

I see this kind of making as world-making enacted in writing and research practices of indigenous scholars (among many other scholars of color I do not have room to discuss in this paper) as well. Storying is an act of making that also impacts our worlds, memories, and lives. Two examples of this work are clear to me in Powell’s “Listening to Ghosts” and in Driskill’s concept of re-beautification in *Asegi Stories.* Both of these examples treat the storying, researching, and writing process as a means to better understand and shift one’s world through an understanding of history and ancestry.

Powell discusses “alternative discourse” as a means of honoring her loved ones and ancestors, of living out their hopes for her, and of listening to their guidance. Driskill discusses revisiting painful colonial moments in history in order to rebeautify them as a survival tactic. Both of these strategies are acts of building through text, and in these ways I would argue that they are multimodal. In Powell’s case, she argues “I think a lot about what ghost stories can teach us, how in telling them I might **both** honor the knowledge that isn’t honored in universities **and** do so in a way that interweaves these stories with more recognizable academic ‘theorizing’ as well” (12, her emphasis). Listening to ghosts becomes a telling of stories that center her ancestors, her indigeneity, and her experiences as a Native woman in academic spaces in order to question what we might see as “alternative” discourse in the first place. In so doing, she is able to do what she says: honor indigenous ways of knowing through more recognizable academic discourse. Listening to ghosts allows her to enact what she theorizes.

Similarly, Driskill describes rebeautification, “a subset of formulas to ‘remake’ oneself (137). Driskill recovers stories of colonialism and remakes them in order to refract their erotic pasts through contemporary imaginings (137). For example, they recount a story about Major Ridge, one of the leaders of the treaty party that finalized the trail of tears. In this story, Major Ridge sings an erotic native song at the request of others in his party, but resists translating it for anyone. He later suggests to some native women that they have no need for white men because they could weave their own petticoats (148). Driskill notes that learning of this story, in which Ridge resists colonial and sexist narratives, “helps restore Major Ridge’s full humanity” and while they “continue to think of Major Ridge as a traitor, he was also a real human being, not only a betrayer of Cherokee people” (148). This act of rebeautification does not change the past; it *does* provide healing and some kind of reconciliation which “helps to rebeautify our memories and relationships with our ancestors" (148). Rebeautification becomes a making, just as listening to ghosts becomes a making, where one's ancestors are honored and collective memory allows for contemporary healing. Such makings change the world around us for the better, and allow us all -- indigenous folks or otherwise-- to build something worthwhile together.

Borderlands and Bridges

These makings and acts of storying and rebeautification are a part of a decolonial project that forefronts cultural identity in ways that have not necessarily been valued by a straight, white, Western discourse. So too are bodily acts of connection and relationship-building. I see this kind of building enacted in the works of Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Riley Mukavetz, in very different ways. In Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, Moraga and Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back*, and Riley Mukavetz' "Toward a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology," these women enact and embody the metaphors they write, effectively making them more than metaphors, but rather, reality itself.

For example Anzaldúa embodies the borderlands she discusses; having grown up in the borderlands, having lived her life as a Mestiza, having spent time explaining her culture to White lesbians, explaining her lesbianness to her family, she lives her life in the third space she discusses, highlighting the ways in which we can and do enact the metaphors we create in writing daily. Thus, though Anzaldúa is often referring to a physical and political border on which she spent much of her life, Borderlands Theory applies to "any kind of social, economic, sexual and political dislocation" (7). Similarly, Moraga writes in her poem "The Welder," that she is a welder, discussing the ways in which heat (the fires of our passions) allow us to build:

> It is the intimacy of steel melting
>
> into steel, the fire of our individual passion

to take hold of ourselves

that makes sculpture of our lives,

builds buildings. (219)

Here, Moraga enacts the metaphor she calls upon, building this poem, this edited collection, and the community of women who came together to create it. Finally, in "Toward a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology," Riley Mukavetz describes a practice called "there-ness" that many of the women she interviews describe as a key part of building the community in which they are a part. "There-ness," she writes, " as a practice, is about being attentive to how relationships and space impact the opportunity for and construction of knowledge making" (120). As Riley Mukavetz theorizes how "there-ness" relates to this community she enacts there-ness herself in her own work, turning something she is studying into something that she is *doing*. In all these examples, these women enact what they observe and theorize so that those observations become actions, and those actions become what they already always were: reality.

We've Done This Before: An Opening

When I am home in Oklahoma at the stomp grounds we may talk about the complexities of meaning, but to comprehend it, to know it intimately, the intricate context of history and family, is to dance it, to be it.

-Joy Harjo

Making as world-making is enacted daily in queer communities all the time, as exemplified above in the work of Driskill, Powell, Anzaldúa, Munoz, Moraga, all people who claim queerness, all people who make worlds through their own makings. Thus, I don't want to claim that anything that I am suggesting is new. The previous section is designed to provide some examples of the ways in which I see people of color enacting multimodal composing practices that resist straight, white, Western forms of knowledge, and without enacting the baggage of multimodality as a trendy buzzword used to describe something that everyone does every day. It is also designed to show that thinking of multimodal composing as making in order to make worlds opens up space for us all to expand what we value when we discuss multimodal composing; it also puts more weight in multimodal composition's possibility for supporting queer and feminist making, but also in supporting all of our *lives*. Indeed, according to Stacy Waite, "if oppression is really going to change, it's our civic duty to think in queerer ways, to come up with queer kinds of knowledge-making so that we might know truths that are non-normative, and contradictory, and strange" ("Cultivating," 64). I would argue that many scholars and teachers of rhetoric and composition already *do* think in queer ways, enact queer kinds of knowledge-making; they just aren't always recognizable in our field as knowledge-making. However, the work many scholars are doing to queerly think, act, and make has always been work that makes worlds, regardless of what scholarship says.

The Lesbian Avengers

One example of this kind of world-making enacted by LGBTQ people are the Lesbian Avengers. Founded in New York in 1992 by six experienced political activists aiming to provide mentorship to novice lesbian activists, the Lesbian Avengers were, according to their handbook, " a direct action group using grassroots activism to fight for lesbian survival and visibility" (Schulman et al. 5). Their purpose as an organization was "to promote lesbian issues and perspectives while empowering lesbians to become experienced organizers who can participate in political rebellion" (Schulman et al. 5).

The Lesbian Avengers' activism can be contextualized in a long history of lesbian feminist activist history. As a cultural movement and critical perspective, lesbian feminism was born from multiple thinkers and activists, including Rita Mae Brown, Adrienne Rich, Audre

Lorde, Cherie Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa. In particular, lesbian feminism acted as an offshoot of a feminist movement in which the rights and visibility of lesbian women was often pushed aside for issues straight women were more attuned to, like reproductive rights. In the 1970s and '80s, lesbian feminist activists began to advocate for separatism as a means to fully divest from the heteronormative and misogynist patriarchal society. Lesbian separatist communities like The Furies[4] paved the way for lesbian feminists to advocate for their own visibility, rights, and issues beyond what straight feminists tended to focus on. Conflicts between queer theory as it emerged in the 1990s and lesbian feminism often had to do with conflicts surrounding whether BDSM, sex work, and pornography was or was not liberatory for lesbian women, or whether transgender women could be included in the feminist movement (Jagose 56). The 1990s created a convergence of multiple societal discussions on LGBT issues and queerness, especially as the AIDS crisis turned a critical eye toward the gay male experience while ignoring the work of lesbians in the fight for gay and lesbian rights. According to Rand, "Coinciding with the emergence of lesbian chic in popular culture, the Avengers complicated the bodily abstraction presumed in public discourse by flaunting a sexual excessiveness that could not be contained by a heteronormative economy of desire" (121). The Lesbian Avengers' work, then, was part of a critical history of lesbian feminist activists, and occurred in simultaneity with queer theory's proliferation in academia (which they rejected).

In June 1992, founders Maxine Wolfe, Sarah Schulman, Ana Simo, Anne D'Adesky, Marie Honan, and Anne Maguire attended Gay Pride in New York City and handed out 8,000 green club cards (Figure 1) that said "Lesbians! Dykes! Gay Women! We want revenge and we want it now," and included Maxine Wolfe's home phone number. The Avengers' first meeting

[4] Jackie Rhodes is currently in the process of creating and publishing a documentary on the work of The Furies entitled *Once a Fury*.

included 50 people, and expanded exponentially with every act in which they engaged. By 1996, more than 20 chapters of the Lesbian Avengers had sprung up across the country, totaling to nearly 20,000 members (Schulman).

As a community of practice, the Lesbian Avengers' values, beliefs, and acts of (world)making layered together over their years together to build a particular kind of lesbian activist culture. Indeed, "cultures are made up of practices that accumulate over time and in relationship to specific places. Practices that accumulate in those specific places transform those physical geographies into spaces in which common belief systems can be made, re-made, negotiated, transmitted, learned and imagined" (Powell et al., Act 1). Thinking about their making practices as evidence and products of a specific collection of values and knowledge over time provides context for why the Avengers' work is important to this cultural and queer rhetorics project.

Much of the work of the Lesbian Avengers might be considered "multimodal" in rhetoric and composition circles. For example, in the documentary film *The Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too*, a group of Avengers marched on Halloween Eve to protest a hate crime committed against Hattie Mae Cohens and Brian Mock, a lesbian woman and gay man, whose home was set on fire. At this protest, the Avengers practiced fire-eating to show that fire had no power over them. In the film, as they take the fire into their mouths, they claim "We take the fire of action into our hearts and we take it into our bodies. . . our fear does not consume us." This act of eating fire is a making, a making both of a protest and of a space, even if for a moment, in which fears of being killed for being queer are literally consumed.

I provide this background on the Avengers because I want to be clear that I understand that queer communities are already engaged in making as world-making; I know I'm not discovering something queer people don't already do. Just as Haas is careful to acknowledge that she is not claiming that wampum is the origin of hypertext, I want to acknowledge that I am not calling for queers to start making things and making worlds; I know we're already doing this work. However, as is the case of the Lesbian Avengers, none of these communities are claiming to be doing multimodal work; they may not even choose to claim that they are "making" anything necessarily, certainly not for the means of world-making. These communities are just *doing* it (as Harjo writes, *dancing* it, *being* it) because it makes the world more bearable. What I *am* arguing is that a cultural rhetorics orientation to queer and feminist multimodality includes *this* story as a means "to make one absent story present in our discussions" of queer, feminist multimodal composing, "and the addition of this story may lead us to better understand the theory of discovery" (Haas 96).

In the next chapter, I provide the origin story for my research on the Lesbian Avengers, as well as a methodical discussion of making as world-making, an outline of my methods and the backgrounds of the participants in my study.

CHAPTER TWO: BUILDING A CULTURAL AND QUEER RHETORICS METHODOLOGY OF STUDYING MAKING

Why the Avengers?: My Origin Story

I learned about the Lesbian Avengers and their 1990s heyday during my queer rhetorics course in 2016, watching the documentary film *The Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too.* The film begins by recounting the day the Avengers went to a local school to protest the lack of queer representation in the Rainbow Curriculum in 1992. At the school, Avengers handed out purple balloons with “Ask about Lesbian Lives” printed on them, and watched as children took them into the walls of the school, or had them swiped out of their hands by their parents, a perfect metaphor for the confusion and disappointment accompanied with learning prejudice. What a thing to make, I thought, as I watched. And indeed, the act of making the balloons, constructing a protest around it, was symbolic beyond what I could fully comprehend. In her book *Eating Fire: My Life as a Lesbian Avenger*, Kelly Cogswell writes of the action, “Nope, nobody died, there in front of the school yard. Neither were kids converted, or perverted, or particularly traumatized when their angry moms grabbed their shiny balloons and let them float away. We just signaled to the world we existed” (16). Signaling to the world one’s existence: such an incredible act of making.

I would have never guessed I would end up wanting to write a dissertation on a lesbian activist organization from the 90s. As a bisexual woman who only began participating in direct action organizing since the Trump presidency (and even then most of that organizing has not been for queer rights per se), my connections to lesbian activists in New York City appear tenuous at best. However, since learning about the work of the Lesbian Avengers in my graduate coursework, they have lingered with me as a community of queer women who unapologetically asserted themselves in a world that mostly chose to unsee them. As a bi woman living under the erasure of a "heterosexual" marriage, I feel oddly connected to these women and their cause, and I envy the community they created for themselves. I wanted to know how it was done; I wanted to know what it felt like to make their world together.

***

Having defended my dissertation proposal in February 2017, I went to New York to visit my friend Kim for her 30th birthday. After the birthday festivities were over, I asked her husband John if he might accompany me to the Lesbian Herstory Archives on one of their open days to peruse some of the materials on the Lesbian Avengers. We took the subway to Brooklyn and found our way to 484 14th St, marked with a small rainbow flag sticker at the door. We made our way into the space, a narrow home lined with built-in bookshelves from floor to ceiling, cardboard boxes littering the floor. We could hear dishes clattering in the kitchen. A woman sat at the lone old computer as a few others perused the shelves. It didn't feel like an archive. It felt like going to your aunt's home. We stood in the foyer, unsure of how to proceed until a college-aged, short-haired dyke approached us. She asked what we needed, and I told her I was looking for materials on the Lesbian Avengers. She hesitated and said Maxine should probably come help us and to wait for her.

Maxine came down the stairs, a petite woman in her 70s with thick, wavy silver hair, approached us. I told her I was looking for materials on the Lesbian Avengers. She paused and said, seriously, "Well I *was* a Lesbian Avenger so I can help you." She introduced herself as Maxine Wolfe, and I promptly started fan-girling, having read about her in Kelly Cogswell's book. She took us upstairs, showed us the files and cardboard boxes of files organized by date, and left us to it.

John was surprised to find photos of the Avengers with a booth at the County Fair in Lewiston, Idaho where he had grown up. Through those photos and the binder we found them in, we learned about the Lesbian Avengers Civil Rights Organizing Project (LACROP)[5]. Maxine popped in a couple times to check on us, and I asked her as many questions as I could. When we were ready to leave, I asked her if I might be able to interview her some time, and she agreed, offering her email, but telling me she hated doing Skype or phone interviews. I told her I would come to her in person.

Before I had visited New York, I had visited the Lesbian Avengers website and sent an email via the contact page, asking if there was anyone I might be able to interview. I had no idea who ran the website or the email, but was pleased to receive a response from Kelly Cogswell. She kindly offered to interview with me, and we made plans to meet up in the summer as well.

My attempts to get into contact and interview other participants did not go as smoothly, and was complicated by my methodological priorities. I wanted to foster genuine connections with participants, be respectful of their time and space, and work with them in queer kinship. For these reasons, when I encountered resistant or busy Avengers, I worked from their timelines, which sometimes meant waiting for weeks and months to hear back. I let my queer and cultural rhetorics methodological priorities guide me. For these reasons, I pause in this story to explain those priorities.

[5] While I do not discuss LACROP too often in this dissertation, it is an important part of Lesbian Avenger history to note. Around 30 Avengers volunteered to travel to Lewiston, Maine, Tucson, Arizona, and later to Lewiston, Idaho to help local LGBTQ rights groups fight local anti-LGBTQ ordnances. At each city, Avengers would rent a home and live in the area to get to know the community. Often, activism looked like door-to-door campaigning, public coming-out events, and other visibility-focused actions. LACROP was incredibly successful, resulting in many local queers coming out and becoming more politically and policy-focused in their local communities.

Methodologies

Overall, this study seeks to provide an example of *how* a queer scholar interested in queer multimodal composing or making might approach studying such work from a cultural rhetorics methodology. While my participants and their makings guide this study, I approached this study with three research questions:

1. How (if at all), did the Lesbian Avengers' making practices impact their community as a world-making practice (and vice versa)?
2. How might a cultural rhetorics approach to queer practices of making impact an understanding of queer and multimodal rhetorics and composing?
3. How might researchers of queer, cultural, and multimodal rhetorics learn from communities like the Lesbian Avengers to shape their conceptions of queer making?

I interrogated these questions from a queerly-informed cultural rhetorics methodology. The complicated part of working from a cultural rhetorics methodology is that "rhetorics are made through everyday practices, and these systems of practices, conversely constitute cultural rhetorics" (Powell et al. 1.2); working from where the community I study *is* part of this methodology, which initially made a concrete contention of my methodology difficult, especially because much of this dissertation research was about discovering what a cultural rhetorics approach to queer making may look like. Similarly, working from a queer methodology also means enacting transparency and consent practices in an effort to build and honor queer kinship (Miles, Hayes, Livingston, and Wargo). Just as Bratta and Powell contend cultural rhetorics avoids imposing theoretical frameworks onto a community but rather suggests understanding a community and building an understanding around its practices, my goal for this dissertation was (and is) to understand the Lesbian Avengers' (world)making practices as *they* see them.

In what follows, I discuss the methodological values and priorities I draw from in this dissertation from both cultural and queer rhetorics. Namely, I discuss cultural rhetorics' investment in (1) building theory and practice from the community with which a researcher works, (2) understanding that rhetorics are made up of everyday practice, (3) storying as meaning making, (4) enacting decoloniality and relationality through consent and feedback practices, and (5) seeing made things as inherently rhetorical. Next, I discuss key queer methodological values. In particular, I address (1) the criticality of engaging with non-normative composing practices for queer thinkers and bodies, and (2) enacting queer consent and kinship practices.

Cultural Rhetorics Methodology

1. **Theory is Built from Community Practices**

A cultural rhetorics methodological approach begins with the understanding that imposing a theoretical framework onto a community is a colonial, Western approach to meaning making. Instead, according to Riley Mukavetz, "To do cultural rhetorics work is to value the efforts and practices used to make and sustain something and use that understanding to build a theoretical and methodological framework that reflects the cultural community a researcher works with" (110). Drawing from this understanding, then, has meant listening rhetorically (Radcliffe) to the community with which I work in order to understand how their practices and values translate to their own meaning-making and theoretical conceptualizing.

Cultural rhetoricians have enacted their values of listening in other dissertation projects, and I model this work after theirs. For instance, for Riley Mukavetz, this methodological priority meant attending to the stories of the women in the Little Traverse Bay band and deriving and enacting a theory of "thereness" from those stories. For my work with the Lesbian Avengers, this priority has meant setting aside the notions I've learned from queer and multimodal rhetorical concepts of composition to listen to how, why, and what the Lesbian Avengers made together, and then describing and working to enact their theories and practices in ways they might find appropriate.

The key value here, then, is that community practices form and develop that community's own theories and rhetorics. There is no need to apply theories from outside that community to it, and doing so can result in colonial acts of imposing frameworks of thought that are not appropriate or helpful to that community.

2. **Rhetorics are Made up of Everyday Practice**

Building rhetorical theories from community practices often means understanding that rhetorics are made through everyday practices of that community. Indeed, according to Powell et al.,

> . . .these systems of practice, conversely, constitute cultural rhetorics. We study rhetorics by looking at how practitioners negotiate, and even create, established orders, whether they are the workings of a local community of urban Native women, the creation and maintenance of a crafting circle, or the impact of Western notions of "the body" on actual bodies. (1.1)

Drawing from a DeCertauian understanding of the everyday as the layered, multiple, and continual happenings and actions of a person or people, cultural rhetoricians often see rhetorics being built through seemingly small actions over time.

The underlying value of this concept is that rhetoric is not a monolithic set of rules or values dictated by a specific dominant society. Rather, rhetoric is created through daily, layered practices of varying communities across time, space, and cultures. Indeed, according to Powell et al.,

> First, scholars must be willing to build meaningful theoretical frames from inside the particular culture in which they are situating their work. To do so means understanding a specific culture's systems, beliefs, relationships to the past, practices of meaning-making, and practices of carrying culture forward to future generations. (1.1)

For me, learning about rhetorics (and more specifically about the rhetorical choices around their making practices) from the Lesbian Avengers has been about discussing what their daily practices looked like, what they valued and why, and how they collectively came to value those practices. Doing this allows me to honor them the best I can.

3. Stories are Central to Meaning Making

A key cultural rhetorics practice is attending to, listening, and telling stories. According to Riley Mukavetz,

> In order to negotiate the cultural communities I belong to and the cultural communities I work with, I privilege story as methodology. For me, story is theory. We can learn from the stories we tell and re-tell what we do with cultural communities and the experiences of working with those communities. Those research stories are data for analysis. Here, I will re-tell these stories and re-listen to them to theorize relationality and there-ness as intercultural methods. In addition, I hope that I as re-tell and re-listen, you dear readers, will think about how you might tell stories about your research experiences. (110-111)

Attending to stories of a community and working to listen to, understand and retell those stories allows scholars and those who engage with that scholarship to work with a community with respect and reciprocity. Riley Mukavetz retells the stories of the women from the Little Traverse Bay Band in order to theorize concepts they taught her— relationality and there-ness— as methods. In turn their methods became *her* methods in her scholarly work with them, which allowed her to model a reciprocal means of researching a community like the Little Traverse Bay Band.

Scholars who engage with story in this way move beyond simply applying frames derived from one culture/tradition to another culture's rhetorical practices. Rather, in listening to and telling a community's stories, scholars can foreground the important theoretical and rhetorical work of a community and learn how to engage those practices thoughtfully. In this dissertation, I listen to, engage, and retell the stories of the Lesbian Avengers in order to better understand and apply their rhetorical practices. Part of the listening and retelling has not just been to retell their stories to you, my reader, but also back to *them*. Each chapter I have written was sent to them for their perusal and correction so that I could best reflect their values. I discuss this more below as I outline my methods.

4. **Research is Relational**

Instead of seeing a research relationship as transactional, where a community is studied, reported on, and then forgotten, a cultural rhetorics research orientation means attending to the relational values of the community with which one is working. According to Riley Mukavetz, "A cultural rhetorics orientation is to enact a set of respectful and responsible practices to form and sustain relationships with cultural communities and their shared beliefs and practices including texts, materials, and ideas" (109). To research a specific community from a cultural rhetorics orientation is to enter into a relationship with the people in that community, and then to work to understand what a reciprocal relationship with them might look like. Indeed, according to Powell et al.,

> The manner in which we engage, orient in relation to, or produce scholarship matters. We must be mindful that research methodologies are not value-free tools. Our practices, including our research methodologies, are imbued with ideological and epistemological beliefs and values that have material effects in the world. (2.2)

Especially when working with a community that has been historically marginalized, making sure to enact research methodologies that do not further disempower that group is important; enacting research methodologies that honor, reciprocate, and empower that community is more ethical, respectful, and relational.

Building a relationship with my research participants, one in which they could dictate the boundaries, meant listening for what each participant needed or wanted. I worked hard to not push any of them for their time, and in one case, waited months to hear back from her about an interview. In my initial understanding of a cultural rhetorics orientation to relationality, I felt that I must be a member of the community or become so close to the community that I began to feel like a member. However, I have learned that sometimes enacting relationality means following the lead of one's participants on how, what, and when they want to share their lives with me.

This work has also meant that I have tried to work with my research participants throughout my writing process. After writing each draft of a chapter, each participant has been sent that chapter and offered the opportunity to suggest changes, revisions, or omissions. Many of their revisions have added additional clarity to my understanding of the Avengers' (un)making practices, and sometimes they have offered additional notes not to be published, but just to offer a deeper understanding. All of this work between us has been an act— at least for me— of queer kinship and relationality, of the creation of a project about a community we all care about deeply.

5. Objects are Rhetorical

One of the key methodological understandings I draw from in cultural rhetorics is the understanding that objects, and the community practices that value and make them, are inherently rhetorical. There is no need to textualize an object in order for it to have rhetorical value.[6] Indeed, according to Powell's call to consider the cultural implication of things,

> We need to theorize. And that theory can't engage in textual fetishism, neither by relying on alphabetic print text nor by *textualizing* non-alphabetic objects. We need, in fact, to move our conversations, and our practices, towards things. To a wider understanding of how all made things are rhetorical, and of how cultures make, and are made by the rhetoricity of things. ("Rhetorical Powwows")

Drawing from a cultural rhetorics orientation means understanding that objects will always be connected to the cultures that make and value them. Instead of drawing from object oriented ontology— which erases the people and cultures connected to objects— cultural rhetorics centers the people who make things, and how those made things connect (to) people. Especially in this project, understanding the connection between making things and making worlds requires a methodological understanding of objects as inherently rhetorical and cultural. Furthermore, this

[6] While I root this contention in cultural rhetorics, new materialism is another theoretical approach to such contentions. However, as was critically discussed in both the 2016 Cultural Rhetorics Conference by Jackie Rhodes, Malea Powell, and Kristin Arola, and again by Arola at the 2018 Rhetoric Society of America Conference, object-oriented ontology and new materialism sometimes can separate itself from the *cultural* and *community* connections to objects and vice versa.

orientation to things allows me to think about cultural connections to power, especially for a historically marginalized organization like the Lesbian Avengers. According to Powell et al.,

> We see this orientation as distinctive in the discipline of rhetoric studies where human practices and makings are often reduced to texts, or to textual objects, in a way that elides both their makers *and* the systems of power in which they were produced. (1.2)

Focusing on an object, or the making of varying objects, then, is also about the made object's connection to community, and that community's proximity to power. Acknowledging and understanding the colonial nature of power is a critical part of cultural rhetorics, and therefore this particular dissertation project.

Queer Rhetorics Methodology

These five understandings have allowed me to engage in specific practices for ethical research in this dissertation project. However, queer theory and rhetorics have also been a key aspect of my methodological framework. In particular, queer theory has allowed me to consider the importance of non-normative composing practices and think through issues of queer consent and practices.

1. **Non-normative composing practices**

Drawing from queer rhetorics, for me, means first and foremost privileging and honoring the non-normative: non-normative sex and gender, but also non-normative thoughts and creation. Alexander and Rhodes "define" queer rhetorics by arguing

> Queer rhetoric is self-conscious and critical engagement with normative discourses of sexuality in the public sphere that exposes their naturalization and torques them to create different or counter-discourses, giving voice and agency to

> multiple and complex sexual experiences. As we shall see . . such engagement can take a myriad of forms, and it benefits from a history of activist, liberatory, and feminist rhetorical practices designed to critique patriarchy and capitalist hegemonies. ("Queer Rhetoric," Introduction)

Drawing from and honoring queer rhetoric, then, is at least in part the work of providing counterstories to the (hetero)normative, giving voice and agency to those rhetors with different (sexual) experiences than the norm. To me, this work has moved beyond simply foregrounding the importance of talking about non-normative genders and sexualities to also thinking about the non-normative though patterns of those who have always felt or been treated different(ly).

Understanding and valuing queer rhetorics means also valuing multimodal composing practices as non-normative non-straight discourse. I draw from Stacey Waite, who argues

> Composing queer and composing feminist means pushing against the normative conventions of gender and sexuality, yes, but it also means pushing against normative conventions of scholarship, of essay, of article, of "student essay." In this sense, much of the work in multi-modal, digital, and collaborative composition is linked to what I am talking about here—work on remixing, work on digital composing, work that troubles our previous notions of originality, linear construction, and single author, single subject cohesion. This is also work that can take us to queerer places, places where possibilities for composing move further outside the norm than we can even imagine them. ("Cultivating," 54)

Troubling linear composition as the end-all and be-all of rhetoric and composition from this queer perspective works closely with the cultural rhetorical mission of seeing the rhetoricity of things and the cultures that create them. Indeed, to be queer in sexuality is to be "different" not just sexually but in one's connection to their body, and therefore to their brain and to their thoughts. Privileging non-normative composing practices is a queer way to acknowledge that queer thought and composing has a cultural and bodily connection to feeling, loving, and being treated differently.

Working from both a cultural rhetorics approach to objects and a queer rhetorics approach to non-normative composition has led me to the understanding that (some) queer folks compose things in queer ways, and those ways and things are cultural and rhetorical, and can teach us all something.

2. Queer Consent Practices

Consent is, of course, a critical part of research when one is working with participants, but I draw my understanding of consent from a queer perspective. Drawing from the work of Kathleen Livingston, I see research process as one that must be always in flux and dependent on an ever-changing, ever negotiated practice of consent between the participants and I. Drawing from consent practices from the queer community, I see consent as deeply tied to queer practice and rhetorics. According to Livingston,

> Queer rhetorics invite us to know consent as a collaborative, self-reflexive process, not simply a fleeting conversation about the benefits and risks of relationships that happens at the beginning of play. What I want to suggest is: consent also a set of practical elements, which are part of ongoing, rhetorical negotiations where people can come to know their own power, privilege, and desires, and use them well. When I talk about consent as how we come to know our own power and use it well, I mean to acknowledge one of my assumptions: there is no play without power. . . In queer and sex radical culture, consent is one

> of the stories we tell ourselves—the idea that we can build more pleasurable and accountable relationships through conscious action, as a form of self-care and community care. (15-16)

In this methodological framework, consent is not just about having participants fill out a form. Rather, consent as it is practiced in queer and sex radical culture, is recursive, ongoing, continually negotiated, and critical to the care of the community. With a commitment to community care, I work from an understanding of queer kinship to honor the needs and requests of the community with which I am working.

Paired with a cultural rhetorics understanding of relationality and reciprocity, consent in these terms has meant getting into contact with my research participants multiple times, seeking their feedback on everything I compose, and working to honor their perspectives without causing harm.

Methods

Data Collection

This qualitative research project (Creswell) was comprised of two parts of data collection: recording and transcribing interviews of Lesbian Avengers members and collecting and examining artifacts from the Lesbian Avengers at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City, as well as readily available media like *The Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire, Too*, a documentary on the Avenger's first year directed by Avengers Janet Baus and Sue Friedrich, and Kelly Cogswell's book *Eating Fire: My Life as a Lesbian Avenger*. Both of these acts of data collection occurred simultaneously because of the research site, which took place primarily in New York City. As I began my research proposal, I got in touch with Kelly Cogswell, author of *Eating Fire: My Life as a Lesbian Avenger*, who initially agreed informally to an interview at an undetermined date. In addition, she directed me to a Facebook group where I might get in touch with some original members of the Lesbian Avengers. While I attempted to get in touch with Avengers through the Facebook group, I got no responses. It was not until I met Maxine Wolfe at the Lesbian Herstory Archives that I was able to get in touch with Chanelle Elaine and contact a few other Avengers, who either did not respond or felt their experiences in the Avengers was too minimal to be significant for my research. Eventually, I sent an email query to Sarah Schulman, who responded and agreed to interview as well. Throughout these interviews, I visited the Lesbian Herstory Archives twice, where I sifted through artifacts and took pictures and scanned various documents in the near silent, dusty back-room of the house in which it is located. Additionally, I watched and re-watched Friedrich and Baus' documentary, and continually sifted through Cogswell's memoir. This project was approved by the International Review Board, no. 00000767.

Participants

The four participants for this study had very different experiences with the Avengers, as well as different activist, scholarly, and personal trajectories after the Avengers disbanded. In this section, I'll provide some background for each participant based on my interviews with each of them.

Kelly Cogswell. I initially met Kelly through email. Having perused the Lesbian Avengers' website (www.lesbianavengers.com), I emailed the contact email to see if I might be able to interview someone connected to the site. Kelly responded, offered suggestions for getting in touch with other Avengers, and then volunteered to be interviewed herself. At the time of her interview, Kelly lived in the East Village with her partner, Ana Simo, as an artist and journalist. Very soon after our interview, they moved to France where they continue to live now. I met with

Kelly in the basement of the Tompkins Square Library on a hot July day in 2018. The air conditioning wasn't working, and we both were sweating through the interview. Kelly is a slim white woman from Kentucky with short, choppy brown hair and comfortable confidence in her speech. I felt comfortable with her right away. In our interview, she identified as a dyke and a Lesbian Avenger, and brought the Lesbian Avenger Manifesto (Figure 2) to our interview to discuss, as well as Lesbian Avenger 25th Year Anniversary coasters as a gift to me. I audio and video recorded our interview with her consent.

Maxine Wolfe. I met with Maxine, an activist Professor Emerita in Psychology from the Graduate Center, CUNY, in her basement apartment in Brooklyn on another hot July morning in 2018. Sunlight peeked through her tiny window above her kitchen sink as she pulled her pastel corded, rotary wall telephone off the hook and placed it on the table to avoid disruptions. Everything about Maxine and her apartment felt very New York, and I was nervous and honored to be invited to her place. Maxine has a long history of activism in her lifetime— she has been involved in or has led multiple organizations including Coalition for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA), ACT UP, Lesbian Action Committee, Committee Against Racism Anti-Semitism, Sexism and Heterosexism (CRASH), and helps to run the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn. She came prepared with a neon-green club card (Figure 1) she helped to make with her five fellow founders. As I began taking out the video camera, she asked to only be audio recorded, and I obliged. At the end of our interview, she informed me she was currently involved in a small activist organization called The Revolting Lesbians, whose actions I continue to follow via Facebook.

Sarah Schulman. I interviewed with Sarah over the phone in November 2018. I got in touch with her after a fellow researcher at the Lesbian Herstory Archives suggested I contact her.

Sarah was prompt in her response to my emails and we set up an interview within a week. Sarah is a Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at College of Staten Island (CSI), a Fellow at the New York Institute for the Humanities, and a writer of multiple award-winning works of fiction, non-fiction, and plays. Sarah also worked with Maxine in ACT UP and CARASA, and helped to co-found the Lesbian Avengers. Sarah and I began our interview by discussing her work on the Lesbian Avengers Handbook (Figure 3). Our phone conversation was audio recorded with her consent.

Chanelle Elaine. I interviewed with Chanelle in February 2019 over the phone after many emails back and forth. Chanelle, an African American woman and veteran, is the founder of Creative Bionics, "a badass, female-centric, production company dedicated to social transformation" (Creativebionics. com). Recently, Chanelle produced the film *First Match* available on Netflix. As an Avenger, Chanelle was a key part of the Lesbian Avengers Civil Rights Organizing Project (LACROP)[7], having relocated to Moscow, ID for months to combat an anti-gay measure on the ballot sponsored by the Idaho Citizen's Alliance. When Chanelle and I talked, the "object" we focused on was a press conference in Lewiston, Idaho where multiple gay and lesbian Lewistonians publicly came out. Our phone conversation was audio recorded with her consent.

Interviews

For the interviews, I utilized a modified approach to Halbritter and Lindquist's three-part interview process in which the participant is asked to bring an object in the first interview. In this approach, I asked that participants bring an object that pertains to their time as an Avenger. Halbritter and Lindquist argue that objects "come pre-loaded with stories about why they were

[7] See previous footnote for more information on LACROP.

selected, why they are important, and the roles that they have played in the [people's] lives" (189). Two of these interviews occurred in person: with Maxine and with Kelly. I skyped with Chanelle and spoke on the phone with Sarah. I hoped initially to video and audio record all the interviews so that I might screen-shot how the participants interacted with the object they brought. However, Maxine declined to be video recorded, Chanelle declined to be on-camera, and Sarah was only available via phone. For the in-person interviews, then, I took photographs of the objects they presented to me. I asked Chanelle and Sarah to describe their objects to me. Because I approached this process from a cultural rhetorics methodology, I encouraged participants to guide the interview, but I came prepared with some interview questions as well, focused on making processes and relational interactions. Throughout the interviews, I recorded the audio and took handwritten or typed notes about additional questions or details I wanted to remember.

After recording the interviews, I kept the data on a secure MSU cloud server via Google and on an external hard drive in keeping with IRB requirement. I submitted the audio files to MSU Media Space to be auto-transcribed. This process, while free of charge, is not without error. Thus, I used the auto-transcriptions as a guide as I went through a second time to transcribe the interviews myself. Additionally, I transcribed the interviews myself in order to keep with a cultural rhetorics orientation to dwelling (Riley Mukavetz). As I transcribed, I took notes and compiled (1) emerging themes I saw running across all interviews and (2) any stories of note that the Avengers mentioned particularly focusing on any allusions to making and makings. I shared transcriptions of interviews with participants when the document was finished, offering a chance for them to add comments or redact anything, as both an adherence to a cultural rhetorics methodology (Riley Mukavetz) and an act of queer kinship (Livingston, Miles, Hayes, and Wargo). All participants offered word changes and the changes of the spelling of some names. Two asked for some changes of phrasing and redaction of a few sentences. I revised the transcriptions to reflect their requests and deleted the previous versions to maintain their privacy.

Archival Research

Throughout the interview processes, I took two trips to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY to go through their archives on the Lesbian Avengers. In keeping with previous cultural rhetorics orientations to archival research (Bratta, Powell), I kept notes not just on the artifacts I studied but also on my own personal affect as I experienced my own body in these specific archives (Narayan). I focused my search in the archives on things that the Lesbian Avengers made, like pamphlets, flyers, protest signs, and evidence of rituals like fire-eating or the Dyke March. In addition, I scanned documents that recorded specific events, including a timeline Maxine wrote of the Avenger's acts (Figure 4), and the letter written by the Las Buenas Amigas to the Avengers that (at least partially) caused the demise of the organization (Figure 5). This exploration of the Lesbian Herstory Archives provided me with a deeper understanding of my interviewees' stories as well as examples of makings I could discuss through the dissertation.

Analysis and Writing

After collecting this data, I analyzed it from a queerly-informed cultural rhetorics approach of listening to the stories of the women who shared with me, as well as attending to the stories told through the objects in the archives. I focused on the stories that the participants drifted into— namely the making of things together, and the un-making of the organization itself. I drew themes from these stories, and organized my two results chapters by those two stories and their themes.

I sent each chapter to the participants, offering them opportunities to provide clarifying details, redact certain claims, or make suggestions. Maxine and Sarah provided the most detailed feedback. I revised based on their feedback, and worked to honor their suggestions as best I could. I showed them all revised copies to provide additional feedback if they wished. This process was a long one, and a great deal of labor on their parts. I am deeply grateful for their willingness to engage with these chapters as closely as they did. Finally, full drafts of the dissertation were offered to them to read and make final revisions before I defended the project to my committee.

In many ways, this was the most difficult process because I was (often inadequately) trying to reflect stories that weren't mine back to the tellers, even as they disagreed with one another about how the stories went. I was a curator of stories, but my distance from their experience kept me from being able to always "get it right"-- their patience with me is a true gift.

Going Back to the Start

In "Our Story Begins Here," Riley Muckavetz writes that she sometimes joked that she had two dissertation advisors: her actual advisor, Malea Powell, and one of her research participants, Geri. I too, feel this way quite often about Maxine. When I'm writing, I care more about what Maxine will think of my work than I do about my actual advisor. This research project has become one where I divert to Maxine's expertise. Recently, after re-working a chapter and emailing it to her, she responded with praise, saying she felt I was finally closer to the actual events. Of all the moments of writing this dissertation, receiving this email was perhaps my most rewarding. In many ways, my cultural and queer rhetorics methodology is exemplified in the stories I tell about meeting and learning from Maxine. This research project in many ways begins and ends with her.

Building this methodology allowed me to see the ways cultural rhetorics can help queer rhetoric and writing scholars reflect their queer values even more deeply. Valuing consent and acting in queer kinship are enhanced through cultural rhetorics practices of honoring the stories of others. In the two chapters that follow, I share some of the stories these participants told me, and the lessons those stories taught me.

CHAPTER THREE: MAKING (IN) COMMUNITY: TOWARD AN EXPANDED CONCEPT OF MAKING

Making as World-Making

When I first proposed this dissertation project, I wanted to develop a cultural rhetorics methodological approach to studying queer "multimodality," or making, through examining the makings of the Lesbian Avengers. In particular, I hoped to examine the recursive relationship between making things and making worlds, as already articulated by Malea Powell, Qwo-Li Driskill, Andrea Riley Mukavetz, and Angela Haas. Through interviews of Lesbian Avengers members and examination of the things they have made, I wanted to outline a cultural rhetorics methodology for studying queer making practices that can disrupt the traditionally Western frameworks often used to study and describe queer rhetorics and multimodal composing, as discussed previously in the literature review.

When I thought about making practices, I thought specifically about the act of making *things* or tangible objects. In the case of the Lesbian Avengers, I imagined most of my conversations with my participants would be centered around some of the things they made often like flyers, shrines, manifestos, pins, signs, balloons and t-shirts, and how the making of those things helped to develop relationships and create a world that could be more bearable for lesbian women in the group. This relationship between making things and making worlds was what I planned to learn the most about. In some ways, those conversations *did* occur.

However, my conversations with Maxine, Sarah, Kelly, and Chanelle also proved how much more complicated the concept of *making as world-making* can be. As founding members, Sarah and Maxine engaged first and foremost in the act of making the Lesbian Avengers— in other words, their first act of making was a literal act of world-making because they *made* the

Avengers. The smaller acts of making objects and organizing events contributed to the ways in which the Lesbian Avengers continued to build their world. All participants discussed the smaller acts of making, but only Sarah and Maxine seemed to touch upon the intentional act of world-building by creating the group. This larger and more literal conception of making as world-making was one that I had not necessarily considered, and led me to expand my own understanding of making.

Complex, Multilayered (Meaning) Making

When I began my research with Avengers, I started with a few assumptions that I ultimately learned were incomplete after talking with Kelly, Chanelle, Sarah, and Maxine. First, I saw the Lesbian Avengers as a queer organization, and as such I expected to be able to draw connections between that queer organization and queer rhetorics. After talking with Sarah, Chanelle, Kelly, and Maxine, I've learned that many members found the concept of queer irrelevant to the Avengers; instead, they described themselves as distinctly lesbian. Second, I expected that I would learn through my interviews how the act of making directly helped to make worlds. Instead, I learned that the relationship between making things and making worlds is much more complex and multilayered. Finally, I began this work a bit enamored with the symbolic meaning of the Lesbian Avengers' practices of making (the fire-eating, for example). However, I have come to learn from Sarah, Maxine, and Kelly that the Avengers was first and foremost a direct-action group focused on results; the symbolic certainly exists, but is always layered in with the concrete. In what follows, I'll discuss how Kelly, Maxine, Chanelle and Sarah challenged my initial assumptions and helped to develop a much more complicated understanding of the Avengers as an activist group.

Lesbian Collective Process

Both Kelly and Maxine described the making processes in the Lesbian Avengers as distinctly lesbian and feminist, rather than queer. In Maxine's case, she described the process as a "lesbian collective process[8]," completely collaborative in nature. In our initial emails to one another, I provided Maxine with a brief description of the questions I might ask her, including mention of questions surrounding the various things she might have made as a member. In her response, she concluded her email by stating, "I don't make things.... I have no idea what objects I participated in making for the Avengers -- we all did everything and the idea of 'individual making' goes against everything we did and everything I believe in." This distinction was extremely important to her, one that became even more clear to me in her interview. When asked what the term "Lesbian Collective Process" meant to her, Maxine stated

> Lesbian groups have a history of working at consensus. . . . It's not about one person taking credit for something. It's about everybody doing it together and people do what they can. Like for the Dyke Marches, I always used to sew the front part of the banner. We have a banner that says, "Annual New York City Dyke March." That part of it stays the same every year. And then I came up with the idea of just adding a front part that said, "the first, the second, the third, whatever" and the current slogan. So I happen to be the person who has a sewing machine. So I sewed it. Nobody said, "oh my goodness we can't let you sew the front of it all the time. We have to spread it around." No. I had a sewing machine. I know how to sew. I did it. Nobody cared. And that's the kind of thing that you

[8] This kind of process, though not named specifically this way, can be found in other Lesbian communities around a similar time. For instance, the Combahee River Collective alludes to this kind of process, as well as the Furies.

> have to do. You can't be ego-involved in what your contribution is because it's just part of the whole. So that to me is what a lesbian collective process is.

The importance of not having one's ego be involved in the process was also reiterated by Kelly, who suggested that there was something liberating about a process focused more on the *making* of things, rather than on individual ego or personality. Kelly described the making processes in the Avengers as gatherings focused more on the objects being made than on the individual differences of those who were making them. For example, she said

> . . .some of the parties you would have to make signs or the shrine or whatever is when you're getting to know people in the best way possible. You're working on something very concrete. You don't have to argue about punctuation in a flier. You don't have to all have the exact same politics. You're just like, "let's try not to get paint on the floor, and do you want another beer?" You're getting to know people and have some kind of solidarity. One of the important parts of activism is not just having the world see you and what you think but also seeing each other and realizing you're not alone, and realizing that the word lesbian can mean many different things.

Kelly's description of the process reiterated Maxine's contention that individual peoples' opinions, backgrounds, and egos took a backseat to the making process. What I find impactful about both of their descriptions of the process was that the intentional focus *off* of any one individual person and onto a *thing* to be made seemed to help to build coalition and solidarity, even in the face of great differences in personality and politics. The intentional rhetorical choice, then, to focus on the making in the lesbian collective process did not *just* result in the completion of a task, but also resulted in the strengthening of the group as a whole. In this way, I see the lesbian collective making process here as a world-making process, at least in the sense that the intentional choice to focus on *things* helped distract from a perhaps natural inclination towards consensus (an unattainable goal) to keep a direct action group like the Lesbian Avengers going, or in Maxine's case, in getting it started.

As one of the six women who first began the Lesbian Avengers, Maxine cites the lesbian collective process as a part of coming up with the name of the organization. When discussing how and when the Avengers came up with ideas for different actions, Maxine stated

> One of the things that happens when you're in a group and you're really thinking is…. Like, I can't tell you how we got to the Lesbian Avengers. It's just like, you're sitting there and you brainstorm and then, you know, all the sudden, three people say the same thing because that's where you're led to. So it's always a collective kind of effort and creation. That's one of the great things about working together on a project. One person sparks an idea in another person and you end up figuring out something.

In essence, a lesbian collective process (or any kind of process in which groups work together to create things, actions, and generate ideas around them) is living proof of the old adage "two heads are better than one." The lesbian collective process, in the case of the Lesbian Avengers allowed for individual input to feed into the group knowledge-base and actions as a whole. However, in both Kelly and Maxine's interviews, it was clear that they believed no individual person was ever given credit for a project— even when they could name names of people who had contributed to a project, they often had trouble remembering everyone who had helped and sometimes added in people who they later realized might not have been a part of the process. In this way, the individual actors blurred together because the process seemed to call for such a blurring. As Maxine stated, “That’s one of the great things about working together on a project. One person sparks an idea in another person and you end up figuring out something.” People spark ideas *in* other people— offering credit becomes difficult when ideas are being tossed between each other, being honed as they pass. Because individual credit cannot be given, group solidarity and the *building* of the action, task, or object takes precedence.

Conversely, Sarah noted that she did not necessarily feel that the processes of making in the Avengers was always a collective act. For her, often the making process was one she conducted alone. For example, she told me

> I mean I don't think it was collective. I think that each [act] was done differently. Like when I wrote the handbook, that wasn’t collective. . . Each thing was done differently. I mean there were a lot of people who came from the East Village art scene, so they were already artists. So the shrine, Su Friedrich the filmmaker was involved in that. The way that happened was that there was an anti-gay ballot measure in Oregon, and one of the organizers who had been hired to fight it was someone that I knew from politics. I can't remember her name right now. She phoned me, and she was like, “We need to get press coverage for these murders and we don't know how to do it.” So that's when I brought it to the group. Now some of them decided to do a shrine. That's not my thing. I called the dance critic at *The New York Times,* Jennifer Dunning, who was a lesbian, and she got coverage for those murders in the New York Times. But the artier people, like the more visual artists — Sue and whoever— they did the shrine. . . I think it was different every time and I think some things were done by groups of people and

> some things are done by individuals. I think the flexibility and the variation of it is actually one of the good things about it.

In Sarah's description of how the shrine for Hattie Mae Cohens and Brian Mock came to be created, her part of the making process was one more focused on logistics, on making contacts and building a foundation. In essence, in many of the "collective" projects, she was the first person to work on it before it was handed over to another person or group of people. When discussing an object that she took part in making, Sarah described the Lesbian Avenger Handbook, which she helped to write. She created the content (based on what she had learned from her time in ACT UP); when I asked about design choices for the handbook, she said "That I didn't do. That was not my part." It appeared to me from the interview that Sarah was more involved in content-creation, logistics, and the structural formation of the group than she was in any specific creation of an object like a sign or a shrine. For instance, she started multiple Lesbian Avenger chapters in 1992 while on a book tour, stating

> I wrote a novel called *Empathy* that came out in 1992 and my publisher was Dutton. I told them I wanted the book tour to be every gay bookstore in the U.S. South. So I used the tour to start Avenger chapters because I had a whole system for starting chapters. I started a lot of chapters. I can't remember which ones I started. I think New Orleans. . . I started two or three. Maybe Austin. Because the tour went all through the southern part of the country. It started in D.C. and it went to Atlanta, Alabama, New Orleans, Texas, L.A. I think it was that route. And at each of the gatherings, a lot of people came because they knew that I was going to be using it to start Avenger chapters. And quite a few of those Avenger people did ultimately move to New York also.

As is the case of starting the new chapters, Sarah was often at the forefront of the making process— she created content like the Lesbian Avenger Handbook, made contacts for the fire-eating and shrine event, and helped to start new chapters. Often, others took up her mantle and continued the work, probably in more collective ways.

Listening to Sarah helped to remind me that the process of creating the Lesbian Avengers in the first place was perhaps the most important act of making that occurred. As two of the founding members, Sarah and Maxine might have been creating *things* like the handbook or a club card, but a more metacognitive, strategic, and rhetorical act of making was also taking place in that process: the act of starting and then later continuing to develop a community. Sometimes this act was a group effort, like coming up with the name "Lesbian Avengers," and other times this work looked like the solitary act of typing away at a handbook.

The differences in Maxine, Sarah, and Kelly's understandings of the making process as either collective or individual does not necessarily indicate to me some kind of irreparable cleave of philosophy of making— rather, it indicates to me that the making process of the Avengers was collective in the sense that every object and idea was in some way touched upon, used, discussed, or influenced by multiple members. Some members, like Kelly, might have made *things* often collaboratively with others, while others, like Sarah or Maxine (as in the case of her sewing the banner) may have created something in solitude that was later passed on to others. The process never followed a specific protocol. As stated by Sarah, "the flexibility and the variation of it is actually one of the good things about it."

Which Comes First? Making or Relationships?

One major difference between Maxine and Kelly's understanding of this process was what comes first, or is most important in the continual development of a community like the

Avengers: the making process, or the relationships. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of my aims is to examine the recursive relationship between making things and making worlds, as already articulated by Malea Powell, Qwo-Li Driskill, Andrea Riley Mukavetz, and Angela Haas. Indeed, my main research question asks "How (if at all), did the Lesbian Avengers' making practices impact their community as a world-making practice (and vice versa)?" To articulate this question to my research participants, I asked, "How did the process of making things impact your relationships in the group?" I got two very different responses from Maxine and Kelly that resembled a kind of "what came first: the chicken or the egg?" response. Sarah's response was a bit more holistic.

Maxine's immediate response was "I think the relationships impact the making, not the other way around . . . . Making something together is fine. Like, you know, the Dyke March or something like that. But I don't think that that makes the relationship. I think the relationship makes those things work." In essence, to Maxine, the relationships she had with women in the Avengers group was what impacted the quality of the making (and the process). According to Maxine, the making process itself did not necessarily build relationships but *did* help motivate group members to stay in the group and continue working. She told me,

> I think the main thing that making things does—if it's successful— is feed into the group continuation. But it doesn't *make* relationships. It means that people feel like they succeeded and that's always good in terms of people always wanting to do more. But it doesn't say anything about their relationship with people. It just says they want to do more activism. I always tell people when I train them for the Dyke March— you know, marshal training— your job is to make people feel safe and have a good time so they want to come back again.

> Because we want people to be activists. The more they feel that they're a part of this, the more they're going to do it elsewhere in their lives. But, it doesn't mean that you're going to become friends with the people that you marshal with. You might. You might not.

While making practices certainly seem to offer time and space in which to build relationships if people so choose, Maxine indicated to me that the process itself did not guarantee friendship or love. It *does,* however, help to build group solidarity, as discussed above, and peoples' individual willingness to continue working in the group, or come back for the next action. The parsing of the concept of relationships for Maxine is also perhaps based on the idea that relationships and friendships are one in the same. I argue that building group solidarity is a type of relationship-building, even when friendship is not an option.

Sarah had similar insights, but not in response to this question. When I asked, "to what extent is the practice of making part of social activism?" Sarah responded by suggesting that

> helping other people learn how to be effective is essential. That's the whole game of what being a political leader is. I mean, *that's it*. If you're obstructing other people being effective, then you're a negative force. If you're finding ways to help people learn skills and apply them, then you're moving things forward.

Similar to Maxine, Sarah saw empowering people as an extremely important part of keeping a group together and "moving things forward." While Sarah didn't overtly mention relationships or world-making, her response mirrors Maxine's in that the continuation of the group depends on making sure that people feel like they can be effective.

Kelly and Chanelle's responses differed. Both Kelly and Chanelle seemed more willing to suggest that the making process was what helped to build solidarity among very different people. First, Kelly mentioned, as quoted earlier, that activism allows for "seeing each other and realizing you're not alone." This building of solidarity and commonality exists *because* of the activist work. She later stated:

> Especially for lesbians now . . . it feels like we forget the things that we *do* have in common and the consequences of discrimination against us. And when you're in the street, you can't have so many words to describe yourself. You can't split so many hairs. It's a little bit simpler. You're confronting something simpler — the hatred of you— and you're responding in a way that's simpler, with your body and with your friends.

For Kelly, it appeared to me that she saw the making process, or at least the work of activism, as a key part of relationship and world-building, insofar as activism allowed for group solidarity and common understanding. Similarly, Chanelle also noted this type of making as world-making. She said "community is created *because* you've come together to bring the dialogue that you want to exist on the front lines onto a sign so that they can be these sound bites, if you will. So that people can readily walk by and understand why you're there." *Because* individual women came together to become the Lesbian Avengers and make things together, these individual women created a community, a world, and a dialogue that can be easily read by the public through their makings.

In this way, Kelly and Chanelle's interpretations seemed to differ from Maxine's. To Maxine, the relationship needed to exist first before the making could. For Kelly and Chanelle, the making practices allowed them to build those relationships with others.

Scales of Making

I posit that part of the reason Kelly, Chanelle, Sarah, and Maxine differed on the order of making and relationship-building is because of how and when they each became Avengers. Maxine was a founding member, starting the group with five other women who knew each other ahead of time. For her, the process of making began through her relationships with these women. In fact, the object she showed me for her interview was a club card they made to recruit Avengers during the gay pride parade. The card is evidence of the fact that her relationships both helped her in the making process and allowed for the activism to continue, as she mentioned.

Kelly and Chanelle, in contrast, joined the Avengers after the first meeting. Kelly "tagged along" with two other women who had already been planning to go. She did not know many people, and so her experiences making and doing activism were what allowed her to get to know people. For example, she met her partner, Ana, while in the Avengers. Chanelle joined the Avengers after stumbling into a meeting at the community center right after moving to New York post getting out of the army. Chanelle noted that being a part of the Avengers helped her to develop her own sense of self as a Lesbian, stating that, during meetings, she would listen to the opinions of the other members, trying to decide what she *herself* believed. She stated,

> Sometimes literally, I would, in that neophyte manner, hear a pro and think that was perfectly legitimate and then hear a con and think that was perfectly legitimate. I found that the women in that organization were very articulate and very passionate. As someone who was getting her footing, it was a very interesting experience just to try to immerse myself within the dialogues that were happening and kind of figure out where I stood within them.

For Chanelle, because she was a “neophyte,” The Lesbian Avengers was a space for her to build a sense of self and identity through membership of the group. For the founders, this sense of identity had already been built. As discussed in Powell et al.,

> cultures are made up of practices that accumulate over time and in relationship to specific places. Practices that accumulate in those specific places transform those physical geographies into spaces in which common belief systems can be made, re-made, negotiated, transmitted, learned and imagined. (Act 1, Scene 1)

As discussed in Chapter One, for Chanelle and all the members of the Lesbian Avengers, a community of practice was developed over time and through building relationships with one another. Joining the community sometimes meant having a neophyte understanding of that community and negotiating, learning, and imagining how to be a member of the community. [9]In this sense, another form of making in the Avengers was the individual making of people into members.

Sarah’s response reflected some of Kelly’s understanding of how the making process helped to build relationships, but from a more meta understanding of the purpose of the group. She said,

> There were twenty-two chapters on four continents. There are thousands of people involved in this thing. So, that's always interesting. That they're still out there. A lot of people got skills or felt entitled or made things— there are some people

[9] As a community of practice, the Lesbian Avengers grew “out of a convergent interplay of competence and experience that involves mutual engagement. [Communities of practice like the Lesbian Avengers] offer an opportunity to negotiate competence through an experience of direct participation” (Wenger 229). For Chanelle, and likely for others as they joined the group, negotiating competence in the group was a combination of listening, as Chanelle did, and involvement in community activities (like making things together).

> who are still in relationships that they started in the Avengers. I think it's had a lot of consequence for people.

The Lesbian Avengers grew very quickly over a short time. With 20,000 members at its peak, the organization itself could never mean the same thing to everyone. Instead, members were impacted by the Avengers in ways only specific to them. Both Sarah and Chanelle discussed this legacy of impact, through from different perspectives. When I asked her if she felt any sense of activist mentorship from the older members of the group, Chanelle said,

> I consider Maxine a mentor. . . You know where I feel like that can probably be best seen is the organizing of the Dyke March. The Dyke March came out of the Lesbian Avengers and it's still happening. It's been happening every year since its inception, which I think is more than 25 years that it's been going on. The torch is continuously passed for the next set of activists who then organize that march. In looking in that space, you can really see that was an outgrowth of the Avengers. I think that happened *within* the Avengers but I think the staying power of that you can really see is within the Dyke March organizing.

While Sarah discussed the impact of the Avengers on its individual members, Chanelle zeroed in on the tangible legacy of a thing made: The Dyke March. In both of their remarks, a broad view of the Avengers' impact shows explicitly how their making practices (through organization-building and in the making of objects) has built a new world individually for those directly involved in the group and for the public in general.

Still, Sarah's response had some personal distance to it: while she discussed what the Avengers had done for others, she only mentioned that there are some people from the Avengers she’s still friends with and some she doesn’t care for. In this way, her response reminded me of Maxine’s, who, besides her comments on relationships and making, listed off all the women from the Avengers that she is still close to. Neither Sarah nor Maxine mentioned the kind of transformative camaraderie that came with making like Kelly did, but Sarah seemed to note that she could tell that transformative camaraderie had occurred for some.

Chanelle’s responses seemed to sit squarely in the middle between Kelly and Maxine and Sarah’s. She noted how the Avengers helped to shape her sense of self, and how the different acts of making allowed for relationships to be built. But she also clearly articulated the ways in which the making of the organization itself was its own act of making. Towards the end of our interview, after describing how making *things* helped members build relationships, she said,

> So there is that kind of making, which is a very physical way to see it, I think. And then there's the making — I haven't really thought of it in the ways in which it's coming out in this conversation but. . . well, all it's kind of making isn't it? This all kind of stems from relationship and the community that you're able to build within a movement . . .

Here, Chanelle began to parse out what I had noticed in my previous interviews— there are two ways to look at making as world-making: making *things* to help build relationships, and making a community from the ground up where people can make things. For both Maxine and Sarah, the making *began* when they made the organization, and that making process started based on a relationship between six women. For someone who was not one of the initial six like Kelly or Chanelle, the organization already existed when they got there. Thus, Kelly and Chanelle could be immersed in the transformative world-making process through acts of making with people they were getting to know. Sarah and Maxine, however, had seen behind the curtain from the beginning.

In this way, there appear to be two different kinds of world-making in an organization like the Lesbian Avengers: the literal, intentional world-building that occurs when anyone creates an organization from the ground up, and the small acts of world-making that occur in the process of facilitating the organization through making *things*. These two acts are not separate, as the former constantly informs the latter, and the latter perpetuates the former. Both acts of world-making are important, but the literal act of creating the group allows Maxine and Sarah to have some additional insight to the nuances and complications of making as world-making.

Sarah mentioned a lesson she learned that seemed particularly salient to this issue-- often in groups there are two types of people: initiators and implementers. She said,

> In trying to help people emotionally transform into agents of change, that one of the things I realized was: you can develop implementers. You can teach people how to be effective by following the steps. It's hard but it's possible. But, you *cannot* develop initiators. You can't develop people that have ideas. People who have ideas are born that way. People who carry out tasks can learn to be empowered enough to do that. But it's a certain kind of character trait who can really see a solution and see every step that needs to be taken to fulfill it. You know whether it's stupid design question or it's eating fire, or whatever that is the thing. And that took me a while to figure out because originally I thought that you could develop anyone into an initiator but you can't.

I don't want to suggest that Sarah and Maxine were initiators and Kelly and Chanelle were implementers, but I imagine that the six founding members were initiators, and many of the non-founding members acted most often as implementers. Any organization likely relies on both kinds of people to keep a group working. A group full of initiators would likely cause a disjointed mission, and a group full of implementers could not run without leadership and conceptualization.[10]

The concept of initiators and implementers ties in well with my understanding of the two different kinds of world-making that exist in a group. Initiators focus on the intentional act of world-making that occurs when creating an organization, and implementers focus on the daily task of making *things* to keep the group going. However, as I discuss in Chapter Five, I see crossover and blending between the concepts of initiator and implementers.

The Symbolic Vs. Direct Action

Another issue in which I felt Maxine, Sarah, Chanelle and Kelly differed was in their valuation, or lack thereof, of the symbolic in direct-action work. To Maxine, the most important part of activism is that it *does* something. When I asked her about her favorite memory of the Lesbian Avengers, Maxine cited the time the Avengers followed the Mayor of Denver around New York until he was forced to cancel his tour (to be discussed later). To explain why she liked it so much, she said:

> I really liked that because I like actions where they have an outcome. I'm not into symbolic actions. You want to make sure that something happens from what we've done. Like when we did the rainbow curriculum, we got the schoolteachers to come out and support us. It wasn't just the Rainbow Curriculum was the only issue. It was also about getting people to stand up and say they didn't agree with it

10 Indeed, "communities of practice depend on internal leadership, and enabling leaders to play their role to help the community develop" (Wenger, 231), but they also "must have critical mass so that there is interest" (232). In Wenger's discussion of what makes up a community of practice, leadership and membership appear to mirror what Sarah is saying about initiators and implementers.

> publicly, so that information got out to the general public about it and it didn't just stay in Queens.

To Maxine, activism is important when it gets direct results. For this reason, she possesses a clear focus on goals when she discusses her activist work, even now in her new group, the Revolting Lesbians. Indeed, in the archive, I found multiple notes created by Maxine that explained the logistics of an act, including maps of buildings with notes on where the security guards were standing, etc. Her activist work has continually prioritized the practical and the concrete, and for good reason. As I mentioned earlier, Maxine believes the job of a marshal "is to make people feel safe and to make people have a good time so they want to come back again." To be practical is to keep people safe, which allows the activism to continue and more direct results to be accomplished.

In contrast, Kelly seemed to be just as interested in the symbolic work of activism as the concrete results. For Kelly, the symbolic work of activism appeared to me to be personally transformative, specifically. When I asked her about how the making process impacted relationships, she said,

> You know, you hear the word "lezzy" before you even know who you are. Or I did, anyways, and it's not uncommon. And at the same time, we're so imaginary. We're imaginary people and it means something when, even if all you do is put the word lesbian on a sticker and then put that sticker somewhere, you are taking yourself from the realm of an almost mythical creature and putting yourself on the subway, on a lamppost. You're putting your own flesh out there. And that's one of the reasons why street activism is so important especially for some groups. In fact, it's like the only thing that we can do because those of us that are— I mean,

> we're hated in people's imaginations but we're also hated in the flesh because the consequence of that hate is that we are physically attacked and raped and murdered. And the same obviously holds true for people of color. So if you're hated in the flesh, you have to do your activism in the flesh, so that people realize what you are, which is very human. You don't have a tail, you don't have horns, you don't have superpowers. Even though we, you know, we played around with wishing we had superpowers. And maybe you do have superpowers when you work together in groups.

For Kelly, the symbolic parts of activism were transformative and perhaps just as important as the direct action results. I appreciated her comment about having superpowers when working in groups, because it again highlights the way in which the making process promotes group camaraderie and solidarity, but in *this* case, she's discussing its symbolic power to help an individual see themselves as capable through the help of a group.

Similarly, Chanelle mentioned the recursive relationship between the makers and the making as representative of each maker as a part of a whole. She said, "The community that is created there because the creativity that's needed to have those signs represent not only the voice of the organization as the Avengers, but also individual voices of the people who are doing these signs." To Chanelle, the voices of each maker stood out in the making of signs as a way to symbolize the individual members of the movement, even as they functioned as a collective whole. In this way, representation is both symbolic *and* concrete.

Kelly discussed this kind of symbolic power again when I asked what her favorite action in the Avengers had been. She lit up and began discussing the stink bombs:

K: I liked the stink bombing action we did. So I'm a twelve year old boy. Who cares? I still think stink bombing is good.

E: It is pretty hilarious. It's a great way to disrupt things in a really fun way.

K: Also because the act came together perfectly. You get the stink bomb, which is satisfying all by itself, but then the slogan was, "Homophobia Stinks." I still think that's a classic.

E: Actually my very last question is: is that one of your favorite memories of the Lesbian Avengers? Do you have one?

K: That was really pleasing. But I don't know that I would have a favorite one. The Dyke March on Washington that was just so fucking huge. That was amazing. Because, how often are you ever in a sea of lesbians? I mean it was a sea of lesbians in front of the White House and we ate fire in front of the White House. But I also like the really little things like stink bombing. I mean there's like you know accomplishments that belong in history books like the Dyke March in Washington and then also just the "we stink bombed!"

E: I forgot about the stink bombs.

K: They're good. You should if you haven't watched the Lesbian Avenger documentary because that had sort of unintended consequences. Some of the people we stink bombed complained on T.V. that we stink on them and they ended up calling city-wide attention to the fact they got stink bombed. They gave us free publicity. So we're like, "All right! Complain about us on national TV! Yes please."

Part of Kelly's appreciation of the stink bombs came because the act in itself was funny, a classic joke. It also came with ironic consequences of getting free publicity from the people they had stink bombed. In this way, the action itself worked because stink bombs are funny, *and* because they helped to get the word out on the Avengers. Kelly also mentioned that the stink bombs embodied what she called "a queer aesthetic" in that they encompassed a "dada-esque humor" often present in queer art.

Sarah's response differed from both Kelly and Maxine's in the sense that she, again, focused more on a meta understanding of the purpose of the activist group. While she could not name one specific act of making that was a favorite, she told me

> I'm a movement person. So it's the whole big thing that I like. I'm not a person to sit there and make a shrine, for example. I'm a conceptualizer. So I like seeing that there's going to be a campaign against the mayor of Denver. I like seeing that there's a young woman who's a veteran who just got out of the Army who's now using her skills— Chanelle [Elaine]. I like watching people learn how to have parties and make friends. I like watching the whole big thing. I like seeing the whole big machine of it. That's why my writings about all this stuff is so analytical, because I'm looking at it in a big way. I'm not a paper mâché person.

Sarah is not as interested in the symbolic power of making something out of paper mâché, but she also seems to understand that others' appreciation of that symbolic power is still an important part of a political action. The success of the "big machine" of the organization relies, it would appear, on both an appreciation for direct action and the symbolism of that direct action, especially for a group of extremely marginalized women. Sarah told me, toward the end of our conversation, that "*We* were the people we were fighting for, and our situation was *dire*. It was not only dire experientially but psychologically. People were very very disempowered." Empowerment, then, had to be found for people in multiple avenues: through paper mâché, through chasing away a mayor, through stink bombs, shrines, and the building and continuation of chapters all over the country. The creation of the "big machine" of the organization is perhaps the most clearly established act of making that the Lesbian Avengers contributed to.

Conclusion

Sara, Maxine, Chanelle and Kelly show how *making as world-making* is a much more complicated process than the simple idea that making things in relation with others helps to build relations. World-making is often an intentional choice, as was the case of the six women who began the Avengers and handed out the club cards at Pride in 1992. Additionally, world-making may mean that some world-makers conceptualize that world from the beginning, while others may not think about the purpose of the world while they make (within) it. Regardless of who acts as initiators and who acts as implementers, both groups are equally important to the perpetuation of the community. Furthermore, the activism of the Lesbian Avengers was first and foremost direct action, focused on gaining tangible results: winning votes, gaining members, changing the political climate. The symbolic meaning of those acts, while important, were not necessarily ever a main goal.

The Lesbian Avengers built a culture and community out of imbricated practices like collective and individual making, dialogue, and direct action. Over time, these practices made up what the Lesbian Avengers became, but the vision for the organization began long before the community of practice was truly born. In this way, *making as world-making* adds a complicated layer to cultural rhetorical notions of community and to current conceptualizations of communities of practice. In the following chapter, I discuss the Lesbian Avengers' collapse as an organization, or its unmaking. Wenger writes, “communities of practice cannot be romanticized. They are born of learning, but they can also learn not to learn. They are cradles of the human spirit, but they can also be its cages. After all, witch-hunts were community practices” (230). I discuss how the Lesbian Avengers began to un-learn some of their fundamental making practices, which led to their undoing.

CHAPTER FOUR: LESBIAN AVENGERS ENDGAME: UN-MAKING (IN) COMMUNITY

Un-Making

When I began this project, I knew very little about how the Lesbian Avengers ended as an organization. My first foray into understanding its coming apart was through reading Cogswell's book *Eating Fire*, in which she discusses how racial tensions among group members and allegations of racism began to erode the group's foundation. She writes " . . . we had to face facts. The group had gotten younger and whiter, with a whiteness more freshly scrubbed, less and less diverse (where were the cab drivers and teachers?), though there were also some young dykes of color appearing. . . Was the Avengers a white group or not? Were we racist?" (131). While race relations certainly appear to have been a major part of the group's undoing, the complexities of the unmaking of an activist group like the Lesbian Avengers are myriad. Understanding these complexities has important implications for rhetoric and composition scholars and for other LGBTQ activists in terms of how we consider our use of practice and theory, discuss identity, and tell our stories, both personal and professional.

Some of the problems cited by Sarah, Maxine, Chanelle and Kelly were the tensions between abstract theorizing and direct action, guilt and worries around racial inclusivity and racism, and the complexity of power, identity and visibility in a fast-growing activist group. In this chapter, I outline some of the issues discussed by the participants. These Avengers' stories are told through their own unique positionalities and perspectives, and these stories conflict at times. Furthermore, some discussions of how the Avengers came to an end were intentionally off the record; for these reasons, the story I offer is incomplete. Drawing from archival documents, Cogswell's text, and interviews with participants, this chapter attempts to paint as clear a picture as possible of the unmaking of the Avengers *in order* to provide insights into the larger reasons for their unmaking. In the next chapter, I will discuss what these unmaking practices (as well as the making practices from the previous chapter) can teach writing and rhetoric scholars and LGBTQ activists about their work and community-building practices.

Theory Vs. Practice

When asked how the Avengers changed over time, Maxine and Sarah, who were among the six women who founded the Avengers, first cited structural changes before mentioning the eventual collapse that appears to have occurred over debates about race. Specifically, Maxine noted a shift from a focus on direct-action to discussions that “weren’t about something we wanted to change and how to do it.” The Avengers had been modeled closely after ACT UP, of which both Maxine and Sarah had been members. According to Maxine, ACT UP relied on votes as opposed to consensus; she told me, “if the thing that was voted to do was not what you wanted, you could decide not to do it and do something else.” Sarah called ACT UP’s process one that focused not on consensus, but rather on what she called simultaneity. She told me

> … So in ACT UP, we had simultaneity of action. If you wanted to do needle exchange, and I thought it was a terrible idea, I wouldn't try to stop you from doing. I just wouldn't do it. If I wanted to go into St Patrick's and you didn't want to, you just wouldn't go. . . If you thought something was stupid, you just didn't do it. That’s the healthiest way. The *worst* thing that can happen is an organization of consensus. Consensus is a nightmare. But simultaneity of action where people just do the things they're comfortable with and don't do the things they don't want to do is the healthiest way for an organization or a movement to grow.

A focus on simultaneity of action allowed members of the Avengers to stay involved even if they did not want to participate in a particular event.

Maxine described this model differently, noting that if a person didn't want to do an act that had been voted in by a majority of the membership, instead of trying to make that event palatable for every member, the dissenters didn't have to feel required to do it. For instance, with regard to the Rainbow Curriculum protest, in response to those who were uncomfortable talking about lesbians with school children, they would suggest they simply sit that event out. She said,

> We would say "maybe you should come back for the next action." Because there was a thing in the lesbian community at that point where everyone tried to be so inclusive that you ended up at the lowest common denominator. Which meant you did things that were too safe and ineffectual, as far as I'm concerned. . . This is only true when the reason is fear of doing the action or of what people will think of you not because someone has moral opposition—in the case of the Rainbow Curriculum action that was not the case. . . .When people objected to balloons that said "Ask About Lesbian Lives" we asked if they would be opposed if the balloons said "Save the Whales." Obviously they were fearful about people thinking they were influencing the children to like lesbians; that's why we would suggest they do some other action.

A focus on specific activist events and an effort to do multiple acts at once allowed members many options for cultivating community, and kept the focus on the actions as opposed to losing momentum over fear or a lack of consensus. This focus also allowed members who were afraid to do some actions the opportunity to stay in the group and contribute in ways they felt more comfortable. To Sarah, this focus is what kept the Avengers running; however, she said, the breakdown of this model began the breakdown of the group itself.

According to Sarah, as soon as the Avengers began shifting from meetings that planned events to meetings that opened the floor to specific kinds of theoretical discussions, things began to fragment. She told me,

> What happened in New York is that the model started to break down, instead of doing the work of coming to the floor with a concrete proposal. So the idea was that— and we did this from the first meeting— like the worst thing you can do when starting a political movement is to get all these people in a room and then say, "What do you want to do?" That's not leadership. The best thing is to come in with a really concrete plan and say, "This is what we're going to do and if you don't want to do it then you don't have to be here. So, if you want to work on it that committee is there, and that committee is there." That was a model so that the only way you could bring something to the floor was if you took the time beforehand to work it out with other people and then bring your concrete proposal to the floor. That is the only way to do things. But that broke down, and people started using the floor for these . . .vague discussions that were not geared towards anything concrete then you get this kind of polarization. Because if you're debating an idea you can get polarized very easily but if you're trying to figure out how to do a concrete thing, it's much easier to be united. So maybe those two things are connected.

A few ideas that were noted in my interviews were the inclusion and visibilization of bisexual women within the group, providing money for legal aid to Aileen Wournos[11], and issues of race, visibility, and coalition. Discussing these issues but not coming up with concrete events or acts around these issues began leading to discord among the Avengers, according to Sarah.

Maxine disagreed with Sarah's suggestion that bringing a concrete proposal to the floor is the only way to do things. She noted to me that consensus can work "when every member of a group is committed to the principles of the group, like the [women who collectively run the Lesbian Herstory] Archives. But the Avengers did not have agreed-upon principles." As people began bringing these issues to the floor without a completely solid plan for an act, group members lost focus. She told me

> . . . we purposefully made the Lesbian Avengers an action group, *not* a theory group. Because every time you try to make a theory group, you don't do any actions, basically. And you sort of assume, which I think is partly true, that people start developing a political perspective as they do the political work. It's more of a Marxist praxis idea. But one of the downsides of that for some people is that they *have* no political perspective and they don't have any history. So people can come in and try to push certain things and others don't have a way to evaluate it. Anything that people want to do sounds good. If it's action. The nuance of why you would want to or not want to do something disappears.

For example, to Maxine, the suggestions for raising money to provide legal aid to Aileen Wuournos went against the tenets of direct action because the Avengers did not have any basis on which to support Wuornos. Maxine articulated to me that the Avengers did not have enough

[11] Aileen Wournos was a lesbian sex worker who had murdered seven men who she claimed had raped or attempted to rape her while she was seeing them as clients. The 2003 movie *Monster* is based on her life.

information, and no one had asked if she wanted legal aid or even what that aid would be. She told me, “None of this was worked out or discussed. Instead, a few women, including some who had never come to the group before and never came back after, kept pushing this.” Sarah also mentioned the Aileen Wuornos discussions as examples of moments when the group began to unravel from a direct-action focused group to one that spent more time theorizing.

Maxine was clear that these issues were not as cut and dry as a simple theory vs. practice debate. She wrote to me in an email,

> Actions have theory involved in them, always. It is, in fact, the way that political perspectives evolve. Praxis means theory + action. It is best to discuss theory in relationship to a specific action. For example in doing the Rainbow Curriculum action, we discussed how it was about racism, as well as homophobia, although the woman superintendent we did the actions against only talked publicly about the LGBTQ issues. So, of course, they are not separate. But when you discuss such things without a specific focus you do not get any clarity--it is not grounded theory. So I make a distinction between grounded theory and abstract theorizing.

Indeed, praxis is action that is theoretically rooted; the Lesbian Avengers had always spent time discussing the “why” and “how” of their actions. However, it was when action became abstracted from their purpose, or when abstracted theorizing never led to the potential for action that the organization began becoming stalled. Cogswell even notes this in her book, stating, “Maybe we shouldn’t have gone into detail with all of this theory. The strength of the Avengers was action, not blab” (134).

The work to define and understand what led to the demise of the Lesbian Avengers—especially through attempting to define the organization by its adherence to direct action, theory, praxis, or civil rights actions appeared to strike a chord for many of the participants of the study. A cultural rhetorics orientation to our discussion leads me to consider the ways in which action, or practices, *are themselves theory*. Delineating how direct action must be tied to theoretical underpinnings but should not be *only* theory or *only* practice *is* in itself a theory on which the Lesbian Avengers was based. Choosing to value direct action and providing opportunities to do some of-- but not necessarily all-- the acts *was* their theory and their practice; their choice to avoid theoretical discussions disconnected from any future plans to act is too. Powell et al. argue that the

> persistent focus on the *how*—the *practices* of meaning-making that create, negotiate and maintain those structures – [. . .] equals a focus on rhetorics. In other words, rhetoric is not so much about "things" as it is about "actions." This orientation towards actions, then, teaches us how particular practices—ways of thinking, ways of problem solving, ways of being in the world—are valued (or not) within specific cultural systems and/or communities. We believe studying those power relationships is central to the project of studying rhetorics. (1.3)

Privileging direct action is a theory, a practice, and a rhetorical act— one that helped to define the Lesbian Avengers as a particular *kind* of activist group. As these rhetorical acts began to shift, so too did the group's community practice and identity, a shift that the group was clearly not prepared to undertake, leading to its demise.

All the group members mentioned how, once theoretical discussions became a practice the Avengers engaged regularly, tensions around race began to un-make the world they had built together.

What Happened?

Gleaning from passages of *Eating Fire*, my interviews with the four participants, and materials from the archives, the issues of race and racism within the Avengers began when the Lesbian Avengers developed a coalition with two other lesbian organizations in New York: Las Buenas Amigas (LBA) and the African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change (AALUSC). The coalition began work protesting a Hispanic radio station, Mega KQ 97.9 FM, whose morning show often included offensive jokes. In *Eating Fire*, Cogswell described the radio show in-depth:

> Their morning shock jocks had a repertoire of jokes about raping fags, with plenty of elaborate pranks like one calling people up to tell them they had HIV, then laughing at their horror and humiliation, before announcing, "Jes' joking!" They sneered at Indian cab drivers and weird disgusting dykes, and didn't even bother coming up with punchlines to skewer black people, just came right out and said they were stupid with bad hair. (105)

Before starting the coalition with LBA and AALUSC, a small group of Avengers invaded the radio station in protest, taking over the sound booth to demand the end to hate radio, as Lesbian Avengers picketed outside the building as well. The initial protest was successful, and afterward the Lesbian Avengers began their coalition work with LBA and AALUSC to continue this action. According to a timeline of actions found at the Lesbian Herstory Archives and written by Maxine Wolfe (Figure 4), the first Mega Radio action took place on August 14th, 1994, and Mega Radio actions (leafleting, picketing, and rallying) continued with the coalition until that December. Throughout the Mega Radio acts, tension began to build between the leaders of Las Buenas Amigas— Patricia and Carmen— and Ana Simo, who was leading the Mega Radio acts for the coalition, according to Cogswell. Cogswell described this tension as "weirdness" between them a few times (119, 124), and suggested some of this weirdness had to do with differences in communication style.

Regardless of all the reasons for the weirdness, Las Buenas Amigas eventually sent a letter to the Lesbian Avengers formally withdrawing from the coalition. Their reasoning behind this choice, according to the letter, is as follows:

> The predominant factor behind our decision to withdraw from the Coalition is that we, as Latina lesbians, were forced to withstand a measure of indifference and hostility to our culture, our language and economic realities within the very Coalition which purpose it was to fight such evils in our society, as to make our continued participation impossible. (2)

Examples cited for this indifference and hostility to their culture were fourfold: that all coalition meetings were held in English with no translation provided, meetings were held early in the evening in the East Village, which was extremely inconvenient to the members who worked and lived in the outer boroughs of the city, members of LBA were frequently left alone while the Lesbian Avengers members convened privately in other rooms, and some LBA members were treated as if they all looked alike when some Lesbian Avengers mixed up their names. Additionally, LBA mentioned "To the extent of which we had access to a few people, many of whom were related by various ties of friendship, living arrangements, relationships, etc., we found it impossible to overcome a claustrophobic sense of futility" (3). The coalition meetings were indeed held at Ana and Kelly's apartment; Kelly and Ana were (and continue to be) in a romantic relationship. To Cogswell, much of these issues seemed to be a large misunderstanding. For instance, LBA members were sometimes left alone because Ana's computer was in the bedroom, and she would take the revisions there for Cogswell to complete. Cogswell explained she had a hard time remembering names for everyone, including new Lesbian Avengers' names.

However, LBA's complaint about the control of the meeting place appeared to run deeper, according to their letter. In their letter to the Lesbian Avengers, LBA spoke of an incident in which Ana had announced to the Lesbian Avengers that they should be encouraged to attend a coalition meeting in which LBA intended to request a change in the meeting venue. However, when LBA presented at the meeting, they reported in their letter that

> one of the representatives of the Lesbian Avengers interrupted an introduction by a member of Las Buenas Amigas with a challenge to our right to call this meeting and distribute a discussion sheet. Her exact words were 'how dare you change the location of the meeting and provide an agenda.' She followed up with the weapon of choice, claiming that somehow our actions were 'undemocratic.'. . . She repeatedly interrupted our members, distorted materials sent previous (sic) by us and then refused to pass around the materials in her possession so people could judge for themselves, but still stood by her original distortion, and generally put us in a position of defensiveness.. . .
>
> To add insult to injury, the principal person with whom we had worked, Ana Marie Simo, who had made the announcement the previous evening at the meeting at The Avengers, did not bother to attend. (5)

In the photocopied letter, the quote beginning "how dare you" is underlined next to a question mark. Cogswell describes these events, but no mention of an Avenger interrupting an introduction with a "how dare you" statement exists in her book. Instead, Cogswell writes

> In practically an act of repudiation, a furious Carmen read a detailed indictment of the racist plot for Avengers supremacy. We were guilty of censorship (when I refused to accept more comments?), secret meetings (Ana coming to the bedroom to bring me revisions?), control of the meeting place (a large, free apartment with stereo and bathroom?), forgetting or confusing names with bigoted intent (definitely me). While Patricia smirked next to her, egging her on, Melanie and I shrank in our seats from Carmen's lifetime of anger, all this talk of racism that seemed directed at us since there were so few white girls among the dozen or so Avengers who regularly participated in the coalition. . . (128)

The reports of how this particular meeting transpired are very different between the two accounts. Whether or not someone yelled "how dare you" to the members of LBA is also, in some ways, beyond the point of what I am trying to articulate in this chapter. Rather, it's clear that conflict arose, and the ways in which that conflict was handled is part of how the Avengers came apart. For instance, the way in which this issue was presented to the Lesbian Avengers afterwards appeared to intensify the problem.

Upon receiving the letter from Las Buenas Amigas, Cogswell describes the scene of reporting the issue back to the Avengers in their meeting. She writes,

> It was tough coming up with a report to the Avengers. We couldn't tell the truth without getting personal, and Ana didn't want to attack Carmen. 'Why not?' I asked. 'The bitch's lost her fucking mind.'
>
> 'She's hurting.'
>
> 'She's a nut, and her girlfriend is the devil.'

> 'I shouldn't have pushed so hard. Besides that would let the Avengers off the hook. We do have a problem with race.'
>
> So we went to the center and delivered a sanitized version of the whole thing, only to have the room fall silent until some white girl pointed a finger at Ana and said, "You've offended people of color. How could you? That's horrible. You're racist." (128-129)

According to Cogswell's book, conversations among the Avengers continued on to discuss racial representation in the group, which eventually led to two small groups called CITYAXE and Skim Milk to break away from the Avengers (134-36). Ana wrote a response letter to the LBA, suggesting that much of the contentions between the two organizations is rooted in what it means to be a "good Latina." She writes,

> . . . we reject the memo's conclusions that this was due to "indifference" and "hostility"; there was never, ever on the part of the Lesbian Avengers disrespect of Latina lesbian language and cultures (there is more than one).
>
> *Remember: There are Latinas in the Lesbian Avengers; we are among the group's founders; Latina lesbian cultures, sensibilities and language play a crucial role in the creation of the Lesbian Avenger's political culture. We will not be erased.*
>
> There are many cultural differences among the Lesbian Avengers themselves, almost as many as between LBA and the Avengers— yet, the Avengers manage to work together. It has never been a painless task. It is even harder when working in coalition. (3, emphasis hers)

However, continued fracturing and creation of subcommittees in the Lesbian Avengers began to dismantle the ability for the Lesbian Avengers to manage to work together as Ana had noted. The timeline (Figure 4) Maxine wrote and donated to the Lesbian Herstory Archive states of that particular time, “I was not around in January but this was when all the issues started about the Mega KQ actions and about other issues — Between January and March all kinds of issues with the CitiActions Subgroup and there were no actions” (6). A few actions picked up between April and June, followed by a note that the Avengers “spent the summer processing and trying to come up with a new structure” (7). According to the timeline, two more actions were completed in October and November of 1995 and none after that.

Cogswell’s retelling in *Eating Fire* and the archival documents —the letter from the LBA (Figure 5) and Ana’s response— provide some evidence of how the personal conflict, racial tensions, and discussions surrounding those issues began for the Avengers, but they are only constellated tellings of a forever incomplete story. Cogswell writes,

> Now, students visit the Lesbian Herstory Archives and dig up Carmen’s damning letter and our mealy-mouthed response, which seems to give her credence. And when they write about the end of the Avengers, they quote all these fragments of truth, half-truths, and lies. (129)

I, too, am one of those students trying to piece together what happened, but the complete story exists only within the memory of all the Avengers involved, some of whom are estranged from one another. In my interview with Chanelle, she did not pinpoint what exactly went wrong, but noted some members probably could piece it together. She suggested, “I think having a conversation with Max and Marlene Colburn and then Kelly and… I venture to say Ana Simo, but I don’t know, to have this dialogue could be very telling for this research. I would love to be there for that." I told her that I would too. Even then, I suppose, we would all just be building another part of the story to be told and archived.

The exact events and how they occurred simply can't be found in these written documents or in the conflicting stories of all the Avengers; I don't intend to try to "get to the bottom of what happened," but paint as clear a picture as I can in order to discuss the un-making of the Avengers. The purpose of working through "what happened" toward the end of the Lesbian Avengers is not necessarily to get the story as factually accurate as possible. I am not sure that is possible for me to do. Instead, sharing this section is an attempt to provide context for the discussions to follow in the remainder of the chapter. This issue was likely the catalyst for the larger issues around identity politics, power, and burnout that are described in the remainder of this chapter.

Issues of Identity & Racism

While Kelly, Maxine, Sarah, and Chanelle approached what caused the demise of the Lesbian Avengers a bit differently, each one of them mentioned discussions of race being a key part. For Sarah, the discussions of race were not necessarily the cause of the un-making of the Avengers, but a symptom of a larger problem caused by a shift from its initial focus on direct action over theoretical discussion. Maxine suggested that claims of racism caused people to panic. Chanelle, a woman of color having just returned from the Lesbian Avengers Civil Rights Organizing Project in Maine and Idaho, found herself surprised by how the discussions seemed to be causing such conflict in the group; she expressed lingering confusion about the issue in her conversation with me as well. For Kelly, as she outlines in her memoir, race was a key factor in the group's undoing.

In her interview, Kelly told me,

> I mean that was one of the good things about actually being in New York is that it's a media capital so a lot of what we did created images of lesbians they got disseminated. So then it was kind of like, “well how do we do what we’re not doing? Like, how do we make…. So we’re making lesbians visible. Well, what kind of lesbians?

To Kelly, the racial tensions began to arise as the Lesbian Avengers became more nationally visible. With more and more Avengers groups cropping up all over the country, (some of) the New York Avengers began to consider what their visibility as a mostly-white lesbian organization meant. With the development of the Mega Radio project, and the disagreements from Las Buenas Amigas that followed it, came a fracturing of the Lesbian Avengers. Conversations on race began to turn into arguments among members. As Kelly described them,

> Some of the fights had to do with tactics and some of the fights had to do with questions of essentially what would be called white privilege now. Like, trying to figure out what's racism and what is something else. I think white privilege would be a good description of what a problem there was in the Avengers in trying to set priorities.

From the conversation and from Cogswell’s book, it appeared to me that Kelly and her partner Ana were some of the first to discuss the Lesbian Avenger’s “problem with race” as Ana called it in Cogswell’s book. To Kelly and Ana, the issues with Mega Radio were primarily about race.

Kelly was clearly among the community of women in the Lesbian Avengers who felt that the Avengers were too white and needed to change that. In addition, she also felt that the LACROP project was getting prioritized over the work that some of Lesbian Avengers of color were doing with Mega Radio, and later, in CITYAXE. In her book she writes,

> Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if, instead of fighting with the group, we had founded the East Village Avengers chapter, for instance, or the Queens Avengers, and sent a letter to LACROP asking them to help us organize in the region. Would they have sent help then? I shouldn't joke. Poor LACROP. They came back from Idaho to this shit storm, already worn out and having trouble readjusting to their New York lives. (135-36)

LACROP and these racial issues seemed to be occurring simultaneously, and the interest of many Avengers (according to Kelly's book), fell on LACROP rather than the Mega Radio actions and the CITYAXE subgroup. However, women of color were deeply invested in *both* LACROP and Mega Radio. For example, Chanelle was a key player in LACROP, and was one of the Avengers coming back to the shit storm, as Kelly called it. Thus, while some may argue that the focus on LACROP over the Mega Radio acts were racially motivated, I find it hard to articulate whether this was entirely the case. For other members, the conversations were more complicated.

For Maxine, the conversations around race appealed to white guilt, which caused distress for members who simply wanted to do the right thing, even when it wasn't necessarily clear what the "right thing" was. She recounted the events by stating that

> people came in who could be called racist by anyone and everybody would panic. And that became an issue in the demise of the group. So then, somebody suggested that we do one of these antiracist trainings, which I had had experience with, and basically I do not think they work unless they are done in a very specific way. People can easily be guilt tripped. . . At any rate, on that score, people decided to do this anti-racist training and I had had much experience with prior to

> the Avengers. Mainly what I found was that it just made people feel guilty. If you were gonna do it, you had to be really careful about who you were going to pick to do it, and what were the circumstances etc. etc. because all it did was make people feel guilty and willing to do anything that any person of color asked them to do. I've always had the position that there are right-wing people of color and there are left-wing people of color. Basically, you can disagree with people's political ideas without being a racist. Most people don't figure that out. And I got called a racist many times because I am not willing to give up my political perspective just because the person I am speaking with is a person of color.

The issue of race and racism in the Lesbian Avengers was complicated to Maxine, who separated political opinion from racial identity. As some Lesbian Avengers called for a shift in focus towards racial issues (that perhaps became more of a theoretical discussion), some other members wanted to adhere to the original direct-action goals of the group. Such an adherence, it appears, was sometimes read as racist. Simply *having* these kinds of conversations was enough to begin the collapse of the group. Maxine said,

> ...There was a whole slew of stuff about race that led to the breakdown of the group. Once you start saying that the things that are going on are racist, no lesbian wants to join the group. That's what happens. You know, people just. . . they believe it.

Indeed, when a community centered around empowering a disenfranchised group gets accused of doing so at the expense of another disenfranchised group, that community is put in a position where it must try to alleviate such a disparity, ignore it, or disband. The trouble with addressing an issue with racism, however, is *how* to do that work beyond simply discussing it. Sarah saw this problem as part and parcel to the action vs. theoretical abstraction debate. She said “The thing with the Avengers is you can't just come to the meeting and say ‘Racism is bad. Aileen Wuornos is a victim,’ or whatever. You have to come in with an action. As soon as people stopped doing that, it was chaos.” Finding ways to address the white privilege in the Avengers while still maintaining its momentum was much more difficult than the initial recognition that it may have been a problem.

For Chanelle, the arguments surrounding white guilt and white privilege were interesting to her as a woman of color. She told me

> I think that within the group there were issues around race that as a woman of color, I don't know that I understood all that was being brought to the table at the time. And I'm not sure that it was deserved by the way in which it was kind of being brought to the group, but it certainly had a huge impact on the group and its ability to maintain itself beyond this identity and accusations that I don't think were accurate. But they were given a lot of weight because they came from a woman of color. How that impacted white women and guilt around that could've also then created dissension that may not have been as deserving, or didn't allow for a dialogue that could have been had to get to an agreement, or being able to figure it out beyond the sides that were being taken.

For Chanelle, the conversations were given a kind of weight that caused members to be unable to come to any kind of resolution. In the previous chapter, I discussed how Chanelle developed her sense of self through listening to conversations among the Avengers. She observed how she often found herself agreeing with parties on the opposite sides of an argument. She noted something similar as she discussed the issue of race in the Avengers . She said,

> I think that there's very strong opinions that can be articulated very clearly and you think, “oh that makes total sense” but I don't know that it *does* just because it was articulated clearly. It still comes with a lot of opinion based on a perception of whoever you're talking to believes happened.

Here, Chanelle clearly outlines the trouble of trying to find out “what actually happened” in the demise of the group (or in understanding any past event). Each of the women I interviewed has different and sometimes conflicting stories about how things came to an end. In an attempt to constellate these stories in order to give a broader picture, I also want to acknowledge the methodological difficulties of reflecting everyone’s story when some people feel they were wronged. Some participants told a different story but would not speak on the record— while much of this chapter relies on Cogwell’s book and the Las Buenas Amigas letter, there is likely much of the story that I am missing.

Power, Privilege, Identity, and Agency

While it appears that the Lesbian Avengers began to erode over conversations surrounding race and identity, Sarah, Maxine, and Chanelle both suggested larger, underlying causes for how and why these discussions became so painful and ended in the demise of the group. Sarah saw this issue more connected to power, privilege and agency among lesbians as a whole. Maxine noted that privilege, or the lack of it, led members to forget that they themselves were a disenfranchised group, regardless of race. These questions around power and privilege likely led to an inability to heal from painful conversations around race, as Chanelle suggested. All of these women’s comments highlighted to me the struggles of activism of any kind, but especially of activism in which the group for whom you are advocating is one to which you belong.

When I spoke to Sarah about the end of the Lesbian Avengers, it was clear to me that she had thought very deeply about how and why an activist community like the Lesbian Avengers could fall apart. She noted to me a book that she had written entitled *Conflict is Not Abuse,* the lessons of which were derived from her time in Act Up and the Lesbian Avengers. Sarah noted that lesbians in particular at the time were such a disempowered group that they had been acculturated to assume they had very little agency in a situation. Activism relies on members claiming the agency to *act*, and this, according to Sarah, could be painful. She told me,

> the lesbian constituency at that time was a very particular constituency because it was people who have been acculturated to never have any power. So they had never been trained to have power or how to handle power. So there was this kind of characterological group behavior where people felt like the only power they had was the power to say no. It was like this obstructive-ness. People did not see themselves as people who could have an idea and carry it through. They saw themselves as people who could only be listened to if they stopped things from happening.

Maxine made a similar suggestion, but almost from the opposite end of the spectrum. She suggested that some members of the Lesbian Avengers' had trouble seeing *themselves* as in need of advocacy, regardless of race. She told me,

> One of the things about lesbians who are in groups who are middle class, is that they always think that everybody else in the world has it worse than they do. Cause they don't really cop to the fact that they have had any limits in their lives.

> And many of them haven't, if they come from a well-off background, so they think anyone else's problems are more difficult than theirs.

I argue that Maxine and Sarah's opposite understandings of what happened are actually two sides of the same coin. It's simply true that lesbians — of any race — are a historically minoritized and disenfranchised group. When a person spends their entire life believing they have no power, it's emotionally painful to be told they, in fact *do* have power. One way to avoid thinking about making this emotional leap is to simply focus on those who also have little social power, or those who may have *less*. In any case, either of these choices can cause paralyzing inaction.

Sarah described what she called "an emotional leap" for members of the group when they were asked to perform concrete tasks, because to perform a concrete task, a person had to admit that they had the power and agency to complete it. She said

> If you've been trained to be powerless, then complaining is your only form of resistance. So to demand that the person now has to take the responsibility of imagining a real solution and figuring out how to achieve it means stepping out of something that is psychologically and emotionally familiar. And for a lot of people that's very frightening because it means taking responsibility. Now, of course getting responsibility is getting power. So there's a lot of complicated factors.

According to Sarah, the connection between action and responsibility and power would often lead members of the Lesbian Avengers to seek out interactions and experiences that put the responsibility and power in the hands of others. To Sarah, this passing off of responsibility led to the devolving of the action-focused structure of the Avengers, which led to more space being provided for conversations around race to arise. The theoretical discussions, then, were not just wasting time and keeping things from *happening* in the Avengers, they were also allowing members to fall back into their previous understandings of themselves as having no real power or responsibility, an understanding that felt safe and familiar to some.

However, upon reading a draft of one of my chapters, Maxine disagreed with Sarah's contention. She wrote to me in an email,

> . . .The idea that getting responsibility is getting power. From my view that is a recipe for disaster. At the [Lesbian Herstory] Archives, for instance, the whole idea of being a coordinator is to take responsibility without getting power. The two can, and should, in my view be separated. Just because a person has been marginalized in the society and feels powerless does not mean that when they take responsibility for actions they should see themselves as getting power. They can see themselves as more powerful— that is different from getting power. The getting power in an activist group is a community achievement, becoming a movement— not an individual achievement.

Maxine's contention effectively complicates the meaning of power in terms of its connection to responsibility and its connection to action. Maxine noted in this email the complexity of how power is used. When I spoke with Sarah, "getting responsibility means getting power" resonated to me as meaning that responsibility leads to a sense of agency and ownership. To Maxine, the phrase was more concrete; in many cases, having responsibility can and does mean also being allotted power over others (when one is promoted in their job, for example). In an activist community like the Avengers, having individual power over another is counterproductive to the organization's goals and values. However, *feeling powerful,* as Maxine notes, is a positive effect of gaining responsibility. "Feeling powerful," to me, means developing a sense of agency, ownership, and connection.

However, to suggest to members that they had the agency to enact change when they felt unprepared or unable to acknowledge that agency was perhaps another key part of *why* the conversations around race became so painful so quickly. Sarah told me,

> You know, the lesbian denouncing somebody was like the prototype of a lesbian political action. And that's a very comfortable stance because you're self-righteous and you're a victim and you don't have to do anything. And it's very painful to step out of that. So I think the falling back on that is really what the problems were … That's the framework that I see in interpersonal relationships, intimate relationships and political dynamics: that the forces that challenge you to check to rethink who you are are often the forces that people blame and condemn and want to get rid of. But that discomfort — Sarah Ahmed writes about this—Ahmed says that the only way that a person can always be comfortable is if other people are suppressed. That discomfort is the essential part of politics, but it requires a certain kind of maturity.

Hearing these contentions from Sarah helped me to better understand why the conversations around race and white privilege were so painful and caused such a quick collapse among the group members. Some members (perhaps those who focused more on direct action and less on theory) were asking other members to consider what they could and could not actually change with regard to race and racism, but many group members did not want to accept the discomfort that came with that kind of responsibility.

Chanelle noted this pain, and acknowledged the way the pain led to the un-making of the group. She also noted how some of the un-making of the group might have been related to the strength of its making in the beginning. She told me,

> This all kind of stems from relationship and the community that you're able to build within a movement, and the ability of that movement and community to sustain itself within its ranks, within its members. If the making of that community isn't strong, if the making of that community can't have these super difficult dialogues and come out whole in the end, that making becomes undone and the movement won't keep up together.

Her suggestions reminded me of Sarah's— so much of community and world-building relies on empowerment and action. When acknowledging one's own power to act is emotionally painful, how, then, can that community come together to build itself? In the end, Chanelle noted that the demise of the group felt a bit like what she had seen in non-profit work; so much burnout just led to people being ugly to one another. How can you build a world for yourself if you've been told the world you live in currently *does* not, *should* not, and *cannot* belong to you? Chanelle said,

> If you're not cultivating community within your own space, there's no way for you to save the world. It's the same thing the Avengers kind of suffered from — we liked each other, we loved each other, but there was some kind of disconnect that didn't allow for when the difficult conversations came on the floor for us to be able to come out whole from that. So there was some un-making or there was some not making enough of that then became the alleyway for its demise.

I appreciated the way Chanelle noted the demise of the group as un-making, and further as un-making due to problems with the building of the community's foundation in the first place. She concluded by telling me, "if our own shit's not whole then we certainly can't make other people's shit whole." I listened intently during this conversation, thinking about how I had experienced this exact issue in other communities. The trouble is, how can a group advocating for its own visibility and empowerment be whole when wholeness is contingent on having visibility and empowerment in the first place?

Burnout & the Privilege of Activism

Underlying many of these issues leading to the arguments that caused the collapse of the Avengers, was the problem of activism in itself. Doing activism while also doing what is required in one's daily life (childcare, career, etc.) is difficult, time-consuming, and sometimes expensive. Kelly and Chanelle both mentioned burnout and fatigue as another part of the problem. Kelly noted that the stress of activism over the course of years led to explosions between and among members. She told me,

> And then also after a few years everybody's working really hard and really burnt out. It gets very difficult to try to find money and do work, or go to school because there were students *and* also do activism almost full time. A lot of us were crazy involved in the project and in fact some people quit their jobs to do the work. So of course like every group under those kinds of stresses, you kind of explode or implode after a few years and you kind of forget who the enemy is. Little things become horrible arguments. So eventually the Avengers kind of imploded a little bit. We ripped ourselves apart pretty thoroughly.

Before we discussed this, I hadn't considered the extreme time constraints of those who were doing this activist work while also managing their own lives. That some people had quit their jobs to do this work was a surprise; that level of commitment among some members but not among others might have caused some problems as well. However, who can afford to be committed in these ways?

Chanelle suggested to me that the ability to do activism in the first place is a kind of (often unrecognized) privilege. She said to me,

> . . .there is a certain privilege that can come with being an activist because you have the time and the resources to show up at a protest in the middle of the day. And, you know, there's different movements that have had to look at the way in which they do their organizing in order for it to be as inclusive as possible. Very simple strategies on how to do that can be overlooked because you're not thinking about daycare and being able to take time off work. Who are the people who can take time off work comfortably and who can't?

Burnout and arguments among members seems almost inevitable when you have members who have quit their jobs, those who cannot afford to, those who are single, those who have children, etc. Different capacities for commitment lead to different senses of responsibility, lead to different arguments about who should be doing what, and in what ways. And of course, commitments to the Lesbian Avengers and to one's own life just simply led to exhaustion. Chanelle said,

> I think it could be said that there was activist fatigue and there was a lot of work being done. You get to a point when you have a certain group of people who are doing a lot of work that over time that it becomes difficult to maintain. So I think that that could be at play.

I was reminded of what Sarah Schulman had told me about what the Avengers stood for. She said, "*We* were the people we were fighting for, and our situation was *dire."* When a person's activism is based on fighting for oneself, how long can such work be maintained before that work becomes too painful, too exhausting to continue?

Re-Making?

This chapter was a struggle for me as I worked to illustrate how the Lesbian Avengers came apart through the voices of four different people with four different perspectives. In discussing the un-making of the organization, I am also engaging in a re-making of sorts as I piece together these fragments of stories. Sharing this re-making with the participants of this study have meant being open to their expertise over the situation, while also attempting to constellate everyone's story even as they conflict with one another. I am extremely grateful to Maxine, Sarah, Kelly and Chanelle's patience with me and guidance in the writing of this chapter in particular.

Most importantly, however, I am grateful to have learned how deeply complex acts of making and world-making can be for an activist organization, especially when personal safety and identity are on the line. The un-making of the Lesbian Avengers was a rife with heavy interactions, some that continue to sting. Additionally, the group's un-making revealed complexities around how to make an organization feel whole enough to persist through damaging interactions. These lessons have been critical to the next chapter, in which I outline the conclusions I've learned from the Avengers, and how those implications provide takeaways for activist organizations and academic communities alike.

CHAPTER FIVE: PRACTICING ACTION, RESPONSIBILITY, AND POWER: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I discuss what my findings have to offer both academic and non-academic communities, queer and otherwise. In particular, I present what the concepts of making and un-making have to offer (1) rhetoric and composition as a discipline, (2) disciplinary units like rhet/comp departments, programs, or writing centers, and/or (3) other queer (activist) communities. In choosing these particular communities of practice for which to provide implications, I aim my considerations toward communities of which I am a part, that I care most about, and that I believe can benefit most from what these Lesbian Avengers have taught me. As a cultural rhetorics scholar, I offer these implications hoping to shift some of the practices and values of these communities toward more sustainable and humane *actions*.

Cultural Rhetorics Approach to Queer Rhetorics

First however, I offer up some implications for what I've learned by enacting a cultural rhetorics framework with a queer community. Specifically, I want to illustrate for other queer rhetorics scholars what a cultural rhetorics framework does for queer rhetoric and composition scholarship.

1. Pushes away from "marginal" rhetorics.

Despite queer rhetoric and composition's persistence in the rhetoric and writing discipline since the 1990s, queer scholarship is often still treated as marginal in some circles. Queer rhetorics is not widely engaged with by scholars who do not personally identify with queerness, and while some queer scholars enjoy some level of notoriety (Rhodes, Alexander), their work is still often considered marginal. A cultural rhetorics approach to queer rhetorics offers a different way of thinking about queer rhetorics that creates space for meaningful engagement of all writing and rhetorics scholars. Powell et al. write

> ...our discipline, like all cultural communities, is continuing to change and adapt its stories about the possibilities of rhetoric. But we mark those new stories as *the beginning* of the work of making paradigmatic shifts, not as the end. One of the ways we see that disciplinary community resisting those kind of paradigm shifts is through the language used to mark those changes and adaptations—words like "other," "alternative," "marginal," "non-traditional," etc. These terms imply a norm, a stable center in which a "main" rhetorical tradition exists and is augmented by "additive" traditions. For us, all rhetorics are cultural. All rhetorics are global. All rhetorics have histories and traditions. So, instead of letting ourselves get caught up in "center/margins" binaries, we're more interested in offering a way of thinking about practices like "culture" and "rhetoric" that makes it clear that *everyone* has them. (1.1)

A cultural rhetorical approach to scholarship about, for, with, and alongside queer rhetors can acknowledge that their work is cultural and has always been persistently rhetorical. Instead of creating a hierarchy of standard, traditional, canonical rhetorics over marginal rhetorics like queer work, a cultural rhetorics approach insists that queer work is constellated alongside all other rhetoric and composition.

In this chapter, I aim to illustrate that an LGBTQ activist organization like the Lesbian Avengers has much to teach any organization or community about making, un-making, and relationships. Their specific cultural practices and rhetorical choices impacted their organization in specific ways, and these implications can provide takeaways for many people, queer or otherwise. A cultural rhetorics orientation to queer work like this dissertation can provide a constellated system of knowledge-building that makes queer work applicable to those who do and do not identify as queer.

2. Pushes toward non-Western modes of thinking through queer rhetorics.

As discussed in chapter one, many queer scholars continue to approach their scholarship from a Western lens. Recent queer scholars of color have acknowledged that queer rhetorical scholarship also tends to focus on work by white rhetoricians. For example, in June 2019, Eric Darnell Pritchard posted a guest blog critiquing a recent call for papers from Literacy in Composition Studies. He writes, "it was not long before my reading the CFP, for many reasons, turned to an all too familiar experience of disappointment and exhaustion as a Black queer femme and Black queer feminist studies scholar in rhetoric and composition." After Pritchard expressed his misgivings with the CFP, the journal worked to rectify the situation by first pulling the CFP. When the CFP was re-issued under two new editors of color, Pritchard noted the CFP still did not cite "Black women or women of color in the field who have published work on queer literacies and composition." While the CFP remains unsatisfactory in terms of citational practices of queer scholars of color, as well as with specific and critical engagement with those scholars' work, the original lack of engagement with scholars of color elucidates an all too familiar tale of the erasure of the epistemological contributions of scholars of color.

I don't want to claim that this dissertation perfectly engages in the citational practices that Pritchard calls for. Quite frankly, I recognize that I cite very few Black scholars in particular. And of course, I chose to work with and learn from the stories of a lesbian organization made up of many white women. There are flaws in my own queer work. However, I argue that a cultural rhetorics framework like this one can at least provide space for scholars to engage with an epistemological background founded by scholars of color, and more specifically, founded on indigenous values and thought. Drawing from cultural rhetorical values of story, relationality, decoloniality, and constellation necessitates thinking about the engagement and investment in non-white, non-western scholarship. Cultural rhetorics, then, can be one starting point from which to rectify the problems that Pritchard cites in his critique.

3. **Intervenes in multimodal rhetoric's preoccupation with the made object, and instead focuses on the social and cultural act of making.**

Queer rhetorics scholars often engage in multimodality as a means to subvert traditional, linear, "straight" discourse of the Western rhetorical tradition. As quoted elsewhere, Stacy Waite argues "if oppression is really going to change, it's our civic duty to think in queerer ways, to come up with queer kinds of knowledge-making so that we might know truths that are non-normative, and contradictory, and strange" (64). Composing in queer ways to engage with queer kinds of knowledge-making means transgressing our typical understandings of written compositions, as Rhodes and Alexander do in "Queer: An Impossible Subject in Composition" or through more overtly multimodal work (Glasby, Miles). Often, however, what is multimodal about a piece is the mode of the piece, while the topic does not engage with theories or considerations about the making of that piece. The concept of multimodality sometimes does not necessarily engage in the communal act or practice of making, but rather focuses on items and compositions after they have been made, thereby invisibilizing the often social and cultural nature of making.

A cultural rhetorics orientation to queer rhetorics means thinking about multimodality differently. In particular, when scholars begin to think about multimodality instead as making, the communal and cultural act of making is foregrounded, rather than the product that was made. As Powell et al. contend,

> In addition to the false stability [object-oriented scholarship] imposes on the dynamic rhetorical phenomenon within cultural communities, this object-oriented approach to understanding culture also erases the human bodies involved in their makings. This erasure has far-reaching roots and impacts that stem from and recapitulate a colonialist/capitalist paradigm. (1.1)

Cultural rhetorics helps to intervene in a disciplinary trend of focusing on cultures as objects to be studied, to the objects they make as mere objects and not cultural happenings as well, to the insistence that objects can be examined outside their cultural context, to the belief that some things, concepts, and communities are without culture.

A cultural rhetorics approach to multimodality means thinking about the ways in which *culture* is *made*, broadening perspectives on what "counts" as multimodal or as an act of making. This approach allows for scholars to think about the making practice as always already tied to cultural practice and meaning-making. For queer communities, this orientation can help queer scholars to think about the networked, relational process of queer composing, of thinking about people and how they have made their worlds more bearable in a homophobic society.

Lesbian Direct Action and How it Applies to Making

Having provided some discussion on the implications of this methodological framework, I articulate in this section how I enact these methodological implications in this project. For me, this has meant parsing out the key lessons the Lesbian Avengers taught me, and then explaining how and when those lessons could be engaged with as practices. In this section, I provide four lessons and four accompanying takeaways.

Lesson One: There are multiple ways to make, and multiple levels or tiers of making.

The Lesbian Avengers showed me that making is not just relegated to the making of tangible objects, like (in the case of the Avengers) flyers, manifestos, shrines, or balloons. Rather, the process of making includes the act of building relationships with one another, and in the building of the organization as a whole. Maxine, Sarah, and the other four founders were intentional about the creation of the Lesbian Avengers from the beginning, and the practice of making began with the initial conversations between them that brought the organization to fruition.

As I stated in chapter two, I initially began this dissertation thinking that the practice of making things is what facilitated the making of worlds, or in this case, a community or organization. Maxine's suggestion that the relationships are what helped to build the organization showed me that the connection between relationships and making is recursive and has differing origins for each member and organization. In these ways, relationship-building and (world) making practices are recursive and reciprocal.

As the Lesbian Avengers continued as an organization, their world continually expanded to include 20,000 members and over 20 chapters worldwide. The expansion of their world required members to continually make and remake things, their relationships with one another, and with the ever changing and growing organization.

For the Lesbian Avengers, putting together the organization was the first act of making, but then communal acts of making within the organization kept it running healthily, and allowed it to be continually remade. Through participating in multiple actions, members of the organization bonded with each other, felt empowered and more invested in the cause, and stayed in the organization, sometimes recruiting more members, who then also participated in the actions. The acts of making were present in the creation of the tangible objects needed for each act (stink bombs, for example), but also in the various protests and actions themselves. These actions layered over time to help to build an identity for the Lesbian Avengers, and therefore to the varying members *as* Lesbian Avengers. Indeed, from a cultural rhetorics perspective, "cultures are made up of practices that accumulate over time and in relationship to specific places. Practices that accumulate in those specific places transform those physical geographies into spaces in which common belief systems can be made, re-made, negotiated, transmitted, learned and imagined" (Powell et al., 1.1.). For the Lesbian Avengers, their belief systems and practices were intertwined, made, and remade. For this reason, the making of things and the creation of the world of the Lesbian Avengers is almost impossible to pull apart or separate.

Takeaways / Key Practices

What might this lesson mean for other organizations and communities? The key takeaway this lesson presents to me is that members of a community (re)shape that community with everything they make: every action they take, every friendship or enemy they find, every object, tryst, or sub-group they develop. A community of practice is built through layered storying and actions of the members of that community, for better or worse. This layering means that a world is made and remade every moment, is ever changing, and is completely reliant on the varying levels of participation from all its members, including those peripheral ones. Making this layered building process of an organization transparent to members of the community might help members to feel more agency and responsibility of the organization, and help leaders to see how important individual members are.

In a space like a writing classroom, this takeaway might be practiced through the intentional building of a classroom culture. Instructors can certainly set the tone of a classroom, but the students themselves are responsible for building the classroom culture of learning together. Additionally, from an administrative standpoint, an academic space like a writing center is a place that is being made and remade constantly through our tutors' interaction with each other, their director, their clients, and with their lives outside the center. Acknowledging this continual making in a space like the writing center as an administrator means respecting the power of the consultants and their clients in the development of the ethos of a particular center. We might also work to acknowledge that sometimes, what is made will not be tangible Applying a cultural rhetorics understanding to this lesson might look like providing guidance to students but also distance and space for them to process independently and collaboratively, without input from the instructor.

In an English or Writing and Rhetoric department or discipline, we might again apply this lesson by understanding that all of our interactions contribute to the overall making and ethos of the organization as a whole. We might also work to acknowledge that sometimes, what is made will not be tangible or visible. For example, (un)making of community can look like a meal shared, a conversation in the hallway, or a rift among colleagues. We may not always have tangible evidence of what we create, but the creations that be world-(un)making, nonetheless.

Lesson Two: Senior and junior members have different stakes in an organization, and both of their sets of priorities are important to the group's sustainment.

The Lesbian Avengers were comprised of founding members and those who attended meetings and participated in actions with varying levels of commitment. Some Avengers designed and implemented new direct actions, while others were happy to contribute in the making process without initiating new acts. Sarah separated these two types of members into initiators and implementers. She felt, after her years with the Avengers, that training people to come up with creative ideas and take charge of them was difficult, or perhaps impossible. She suggested that initiators were born, not made. Other Avengers disagreed with her, and I suggest that regardless of whether initiators and implementers can be trained, members have different stakes in an organization.

However, no organization can survive with only implementers or only initiators. For example, an organization full of members with "big-picture" designs for the group may have conflicting visions, with few people willing or able to implement the daily tasks required to enact a particular vision. Conversely, an organization of members who are not as invested in organizing and developing the mission of the group may become disorganized and fizzle out. Organizations require members with varying stakes to interact and support each other, especially as they move in and out of initiator and implementer roles throughout their membership. Indeed, according to Powell et al., "All cultural practices are built, shaped, and dismantled based on the encounters people have with one another within and across particular systems of shared belief" (1.1). In a system of shared belief like an activist organization, members encounter one another *within* and *across* those beliefs— their individual stakes are equally important because each interaction makes and remakes the organization itself.

Takeaways / Key Practices

For those in other organizations, this lesson can be applied in terms of understanding and evaluating how we value our members. I believe that leaders (or initiators, as Sarah calls them) tend to be glorified over group members not in leadership positions. However, I argue that varying stakes in an organization help it to run smoothly, and allow for multiple priority sets in an organization to keep the group flourishing. Indeed, members who feel less beholden to maintaining the organization's vision or mission can co-opt an organization for more subversive aims. According to de Certeau, "The more a power grows, the less it can allow itself to mobilize part of its means in the service of deception. . . Power is bound by its very visibility. In contrast, trickery is possible for the weak, and often it is his only possibility" (37). Those in power in a community are bound by their visibility, while those "weaker" members are able to maneuver within their organization more freely, often using more tactics of subversion than sanctioned (even in a subversive organization like the Lesbian Avengers). Tactics, according to de Certeau, can comprise of "clever tricks of the 'weak' within the order established by the "strong," an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf, hunter's tricks, maneuverable, polymorph mobilities, jubilant, poetic, and warlike discoveries" (40). In essence, different members have varying stakes and therefore different priorities, which impact what kinds of subversive and transgressive actions they can take.

This take-away is particularly important for organizations like writing centers. Consultants don't think like administrators, administrators often have growing distance from their time as consultants. This means their priorities for the center will be different and that's a good thing. Consultants can co-opt the center for their own subversive and transgressive aims in ways administrators cannot. Writing center administrators are often accountable to campus partners that help to keep their doors open, but many writing centers espouse goals to change the institutional power structures that disempower the most marginal members in the university. Embodying a third space invested in the needs of students from within the institution allows for writing center directors and consultants to cultivate an environment dedicated to student growth and development. The only way to successfully do this work is to offer space for consultants, as "weaker" members (or "implementers"), to engage in their own individual acts of subversion in the center.

Writing center administrators can aid consultants not just in developing the day-to-day skills they will need as practitioners, but also in encouraging a fluency in some of the writing center's key conversations, specifically around the center's political, social, and cultural connections. They can train consultants to see themselves as empowering agents of social justice, ready to assist their clients in questioning things like rigid enforcement of Standard English in a paper, honoring a client's identity when the academic institution might not, and claiming ownership of the writing center space. Indeed, Denny writes

> In writing centers, people from the margins are frequently the majority population, yet tutors and other writing center professionals often do not tap these students' own innate social and cultural literacies as resources for aiding their academic work. Having learned how to survive in a society marked by racism, sexism, class-bias, nationalism, and homophobia, students marked as other have sophisticated tools, yet writing center staff and the students' instructors usually do not mentor them on ways to manipulate these devices for use in the academy. (107)

Training consultants to see themselves as people who can transgress the typical rules of the center allows administrators to engage their university's administrative rules while still undermining the oppressive status quo. In this way, consultants— whose stakes and priorities for the center differ greatly from an administrator beholden to the university— can enact insurgent tactics from within that administrators simply cannot. If consultants understand the potential for transformative connection in their individual consultations, they can take ownership of the space and help to build its collective ethos as an empowering environment.

Lesson Three: Abstract theorizing tied to no direct action plan (can) lead to un-making/ degeneration of an organization.

The Lesbian Avengers appear to have fallen apart when discussions became invested in theoretical exchanges without marrying those conversations to specific practices. For the Avengers, this abstract theorizing eventually drifted to questions surrounding the group's identity in terms of its whiteness and privilege, fracturing cohesion and splintering members into subgroups. Without strong practice-oriented focus on community-building to build a foundation of good-will and trust among members, theoretical discussions can weaken and potentially un-make an entire community, which is what Chanelle claims to have happened. She said, "if the making of that community isn't strong, if the making of that community can't have these super difficult dialogues and come out whole in the end, that making becomes undone and the movement won't keep up together." As these theoretical discussions occurred, individual members were unable to organize these theories into actionable solutions for their organization.

The dismantling of an organization can stem from a lack of practice of building a foundation of trust in a community. To Chanelle, this inability to organize may have stemmed from a weakness in group members' capacity to engage in difficult dialogue. To Sarah, moving away from direct action ruined the organization's momentum. Powell et al. argue that "all cultural practices are built, shaped, and *dismantled* based on the encounters people have with one another within and across particular systems of shared belief" (emphasis mine, 1.1). I want to focus on the use of the word dismantled here— while scholars often discuss dismantling as a positive term for upending systems of oppression, I think a key part of the argument Powell et al. make is that not all cultural practices are positive. Sometimes the dismantling of cultural practices based on encounters with systems of shared belief is the dismantling of a community itself. Sometimes the dismantling is the unmaking of an entire community, for better or worse.

To this end, the lesson that can be adapted from the Lesbian Avengers is twofold. First, theoretical discussions are most useful to a group's cohesion and continuation if those theories can be connected to specific practices members then enact. Second, practicing building trust and modeling open communication in an organization from the beginning can potentially protect it from becoming derailed by difficult discussions, especially around identity.

Takeaways / Key Practices

Academia provides space for more theoretical discussions than most. Academics are notorious for abstraction, and this can cause problems of inaction, especially in departmental service. Cultural rhetorics posits that the creation of and adherence to theories is a practice in and of itself; in this way, practice and theory are one and the same. In other words, people make things, people make relationships, people make culture (Powell et al.), and one of those "things" people make is theory. Thus, understanding that theory-building is a practice can help a community see that theory and practice are and always should be tied together to avoid inaction or un-making of a community.

English departments— as are all academic departments— are practice oriented in nature. Departmental, regional, and national service perpetuate the growth and development of English and writing and rhetoric studies as disciplines. While some scholars tend to see themselves largely as theorists, the practice of maintaining the discipline allows us to theorize in the first place. In activities geared toward maintaining a community— like meetings, workshops, conferences, publication writing and editing— I argue organization members should be intentional about creating a balance between theoretical discussions and the specific practices tied to those theories. For example, when meetings or trainings veer toward theoretical discussions and the group appears stalled in terms of developing practical means to enact and engage those theories, I argue administrators and committee members should find ways to suggest an action plan, so the theory can go to good use and positive change.

For example, Sarah told me in her interview, "one of the things I used to like to do-- which used to piss people off-- at the end of the meeting I went around the circle and had everyone say what they promised they would *do*." While this strategy may have been effective for getting things done, Maxine told me Sarah's strategy also

> contributed to the unmaking -- with people feeling like they were being guilt tripped and it didn't necessarily mean they would actually do the thing they said they would. On the other hand, when a group--not an individual--decides that should be the way a meeting ends (and I have been in many that work that way) no one feels pissed at anyone else. And, included in the asking is the knowing that if, for some reason the person is unable to do what they said they would, they could tell the group without fearing negative reactions.

Maxine's distinction here is helpful, especially for academic leaders and teachers who want to find ways to hold a group accountable while also helping them to feel motivated, empowered, and not judged. Modeling this kind of practice in an academic setting likely looks like having a final discussion as a group about how it would like to proceed in order to make sure specific needs are met before the next meeting. This action is one way to avoid a meeting that could have been an email.

Lesson Four: Action leads to responsibility, which leads to agency, which necessitates action.

Beyond a recursive relationship between making and relationship building, the Lesbian Avengers I spoke with showed me the cyclical nature of responsibility, agency, and action. Namely, participating in an action means having the responsibility to complete (some part of) that action. Engaging an action, and having the responsibility to engage in action means also acknowledging that one has the agency to necessitate action. And having agency means needing to act. This cyclical relationship is complex and, as Sarah argued, can be emotionally difficult for someone who has been historically marginalized. She told me,

> If you've been trained to be powerless, then complaining is your only form of resistance. So to demand that the person now has to take the responsibility of imagining a real solution and figuring out how to achieve it means stepping out of something that is psychologically and emotionally familiar. And for a lot of people that's very frightening because it means taking responsibility. Now, of course getting responsibility is getting power. So there's a lot of complicated factors.

Understanding the cyclical nature of action, responsibility, and power/agency means also understanding the emotional complexity of this cycle. In essence, taking action is not simply about *doing* something— it's also about acknowledging that one has the power and responsibility to do something. Making that acknowledgment can be difficult for a person as they take action; seeing someone stall in their actions can be confusing for an organization's leader as well.

Takeaways/Key Practices

I have seen this cyclical nature be ignored and consequently cause problems in the writing and rhetoric discipline, from department through national disciplinary work. For example, in my graduate program, I saw the emotional complexity of this issue rear its ugly head on more than one occasion as PhD students were encouraged to begin seeing themselves as colleagues and key actors in their disciplinary communities. At Michigan State University's graduate program in Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures, graduate students are instructed from a cultural rhetorics orientation. In essence, they are taught to see themselves as part of a discipline that grows and changes through community and cultural practices, and we are part of the community that engages in those practices. Additionally, many students in the program come from marginalized backgrounds, and have therefore often been shown through their daily interactions that they have no power to act. To be told, therefore, that they are key actors in their discipline and must take responsibility in changing and growing the discipline for the better can be emotionally painful.

Often this emotional pain can transfer into self-sabotage or self-infantilization. For example, graduate students saw themselves as only being able to complain about the conditions of the graduate program, but rarely were willing or felt able to engage in practices to change those conditions. Additionally, discussions in courses often were preoccupied with theoretical critique of varying scholars and readings, without much discussion on what those scholars should be doing instead, or how to build on those scholars' work in ways that the graduate students saw would be more productive. Rather than being able or willing to see themselves as people with power to enact change, the comfortable position was to see themselves as powerless, because at least in their powerlessness, they would not be obliged to act.

As a writing center consultant, I sometimes saw this with graduate student writers. Namely, I witnessed PhD candidate after candidate completely stalled in their dissertation research, sometimes re-designing their dissertation prospectuses countless times, even after having defended. Some students never acted; that is, they never started the research project they set out to do, they ran out of funding, and never completed their PhDs. Others procrastinated so long that they had to complete their dissertations (or articles) in a matter of days, weeks or month; I had one client who wrote his entire dissertation (every single word of it) in one sleepless month.

Through my discussions with Chanelle, Kelly, Maxine, and Sarah, I believe a great deal of this stalling, inaction, complaining, and frustration is tied to the emotional connection to the cyclical nature of action, responsibility, and power. Teaching graduate students to act is not as simple as it seems— there must also be discussion of how action, power, and responsibility are often tied. Additionally, when an advisor, instructor, or writing center consultant engages with a graduate student who appears to be self-sabotaging, procrastinating, complaining, or is otherwise stuck, they should consider where in this cyclical connection that student might be struggling.

What Can A New Generation of Queer Activists Learn from the Lesbian Avengers?

The Lesbian Avengers were founded as a means to mentor younger lesbians into direct action activism. Having participated in activist circles like ACT UP and reproductive rights organizations, founders like Maxine and Sarah aimed to show a new generation of lesbian women how direct action could be organized and sustained. Now, nearly three decades later, the Lesbian Avengers' stories can benefit younger generations of queer activists who have primarily engaged their activism in a world much more focused on digital and online activism. In this section, I discuss what younger queer activists can learn from a direct-action organization like the Lesbian Avengers.

1. **Boots on the Ground Action**

Perhaps the largest difference between activism in the 1990s when the Lesbian Avengers were active and now is the influence of digital media and communication. Whereas the Lesbian Avengers came together through club cards and a phone line, direct action events like the 2017 Women's March are widely advertised through social media platforms like Facebook. Hashtag activism has become a key part of social and political dialogue, including the #MeToo movement, #SayHerName, #BlackLivesMatter, and more. While hashtag activism is discoursal in nature, boots on the ground Black Lives Matter protests have been a key part of the activist landscape of the 2010s. I don't want to argue that current activism relegates itself to online settings, but I do want to argue that the digital landscape has perhaps changed how people value boots on the ground action.

Because the Lesbian Avengers were active in a time where discoursal activism was much slower— often distributed through zines, flyers, building in-person community connections, and word of mouth— they relied heavily on specific acts that caused tangible effects. They focused on making tangible objects for their activism: shrines that would last, flyers to hand out, stink bombs to be thrown, balloons to be passed out. The acts were often widely publicized, like their protest of the Colorado governor's campaign through New York City. Their acts were also exceptionally transgressive: they did not get a permit for the Dyke March on Washington (nor for any subsequent Dyke March thereafter), they often staked out locations, exits and security guards of spaces so they could escape arrest, they spent a great deal of time considering and anticipating potential physical harm.

Political activism in the digital age is a bit different— protests are nearly always accompanied with permits, groups like Antifa are vilified while white supremacists are labeled “good folks" by the president, and many “progressive” white liberals worry about disrespecting and upsetting the right. Pride is heavily commercialized, and the legalization of same-sex marriage has led many people to assume the fight for LGBTQ rights are over. Additionally, many people can engage in activism entirely online without setting foot into potentially dangerous physical settings. For these reasons, a shift towards valuing transgressive, disruptive, boots on the ground direct action can potentially help Millennial and Generation Z queer activists amplify their current impact.

More specifically, just as the founders of the Avengers acted as mentors to younger lesbians who did not know how to engage in direct action, they can continue to act as mentors to current activists who are experiencing very different contexts for their activism. Current queer activists can and should draw from the skills and guidelines the Lesbian Avengers have created: the marshaling handbook for the Dyke March, the Lesbian Avenger Handbook, the carefully thought-out plans for protests available at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Doing so can enhance their impact and provide guidelines for how to effect tangible change.

2. Simultaneity of Action

Sarah discussed simultaneity of action as a model that enhanced group continuation and allowed group members to avoid needing consensus to do a specific act. As Sarah said, “. . . simultaneity of action where people just do the things they're comfortable with and don't do the things they don't want to do is the healthiest way for an organization or a movement to grow.” Lesbian Avenger members disagreed often, as is evident by the groups’ demise. However, the organization achieved a great deal in a short time because they engaged in multiple activities at once without stopping to make sure that everyone in the organization approved of the acts.

In the current activist climate, especially for queer organizers, digital discourse hinders specific, tangible progress. Through social media platforms, people can argue about the specific problematics of organizations, politicians, and acts until there is nothing left to do. For example, activists pushing for same-sex marriage rights may encounter queers who argue that marriage is a neo-liberal, capitalist venture and that participating in action supporting it is not queer enough. These kinds of arguments (while valid and certainly present in the 1990s) can stop activism in its tracks, leaving someone interested in participating in a cause paralyzed for fear of not being "woke" enough. As social media and online discourse allows for armchair activism, it also provides space for people to debate an idea into non-existence. The discoursal opportunity to problematize most issues online creates inaction and fear of critique from others.

Modeling simultaneity of action from groups like the Lesbian Avengers and ACT UP can help potential queer activists engage in direct action without guilt or fear of critique. While some queers want to focus on trans rights, and others want to focus on same-sex marriage, both issues contribute to equality for LGBTQ folks. Rather than policing what kinds of action are the least problematic or the most queer or transgressive, recognizing that engaging in many kinds of pro-LGBTQ action creates the most positive change can allow for more young potential activists to feel comfortable engaging in activism.

3. Knowing our History

Critical for current queer activists is knowing where we come from, who our elders are, and how their fights have contributed to the progress of our safety, inclusion, and rights. The stories of the Lesbian Avengers and ACT UP are critical components to our history, and to better understanding what cannot be lost as we move forward in our activism. One example of this particular blindness to history is the story of the origins of Pride. While Pride is increasingly corporatized and commodified by white gay men, the origins of Pride stem from riots at the Stonewall Inn— a drag bar— and in the streets surrounding that included violence against police. Whitewashing and corporatizing Pride comes at the expense of the histories of people who risked their lives for a celebration many LGBTQ folks now take for granted.

Similarly, as gender and sexual fluidity become more widely accepted among the LGBTQ community as a personal identification, multiple younger queers may disregard the experiences of lesbian and gay folks as too binary, or not radical enough. Acknowledging and understanding the work of lesbian and gay activists is a critical part of queer history. When queer activists do not understand their community's history, they risk undermining the real work their elders did to make their present more bearable. From a cultural rhetorics orientation, telling and listening to stories is what constellates us with our relations. Powell et al. argue, "if you're not practicing story, you're doing it wrong" (1.1). A cultural rhetorics orientation to queer rhetorics acknowledges the importance of the stories shared by queer elders, and further acknowledges that we *are* the stories we tell and listen to.

Therefore I argue that queer scholars have much to learn from the (her)stories of the Lesbian Avengers and other LGBTQ activists in the 80s and 90s: about direct action, the AIDS crisis, the connections between race, class, sexuality, and gender, among others. We need to know where we have come from before we can move forward.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided some lessons the Lesbian Avengers I spoke with taught me and the potential takeaways these lessons can provide for academic and activist communities. My goal for this chapter was to demonstrate that activist organizations have much to teach us about how we make and unmake our communities, and how our layered practices and stories are key parts of those (un)making practices. Additionally, this study illustrated the ways in which a cultural rhetorics methodology can intervene in practices that tend to objectify communities and textualize objects, creating more space for scholarly inquiries into the cultural making practices of all organizations, queer or otherwise.

Perhaps what this study has taught me, more than anything, is that *it all is making*, and the implications for this understanding stretch far beyond our grasp and deep in the bones of our work and our lives, no matter what we do. In the making of this dissertation, I have begun to see the ways in which I am a result of the (un)making practices of others, my knowledge exists because of the layered acts of making and unmaking of people who came before me, who learned alongside of me, and who learned from me. I believe that such an understanding of making and unmaking can make and has already made me a more strategic and empathetic scholar, mentor, teacher, activist, and learner. The concept of making and unmaking provides a means with which to consider how we all are implicated in one another's lives. We all have rhetorical agency and responsibility for change. We're all making all the time.

APPENDIX

Figure 1: Maxine’s object for her interview, a club card.

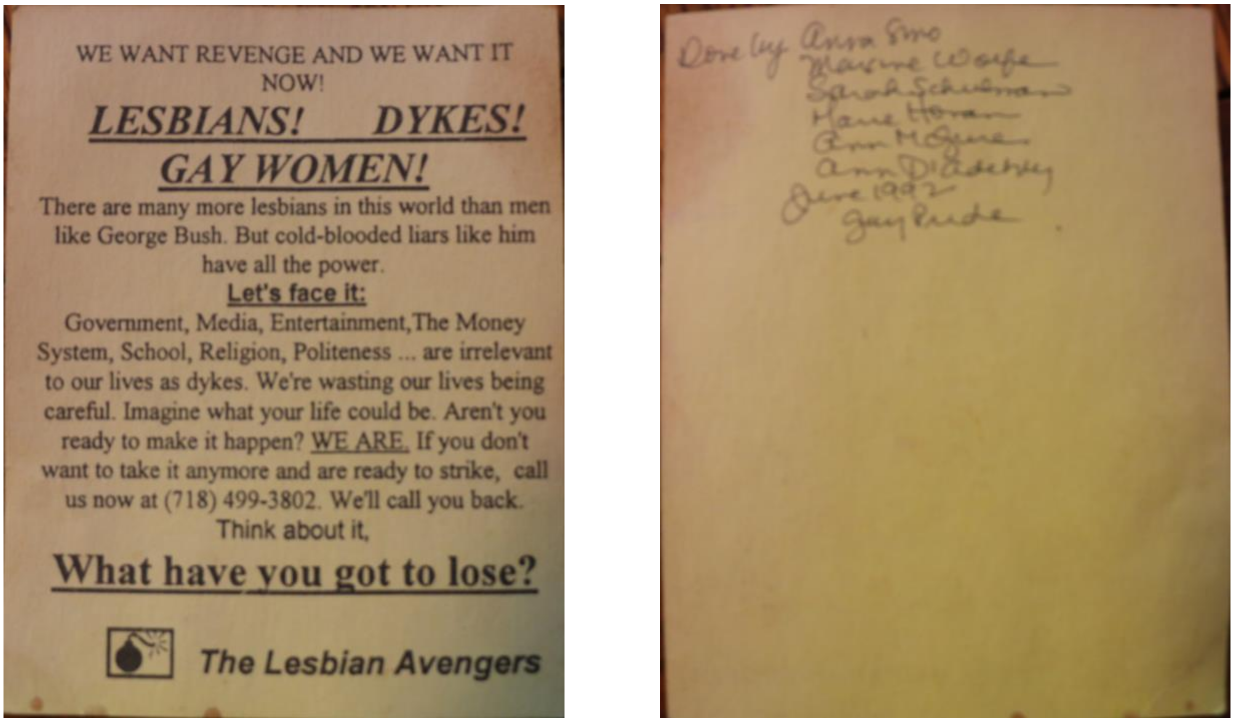


Figure 2: The front page of Kelly's object, a manifesto.

Figure 3: The front cover of *The Lesbian Avenger Handbook*, Sarah's object.

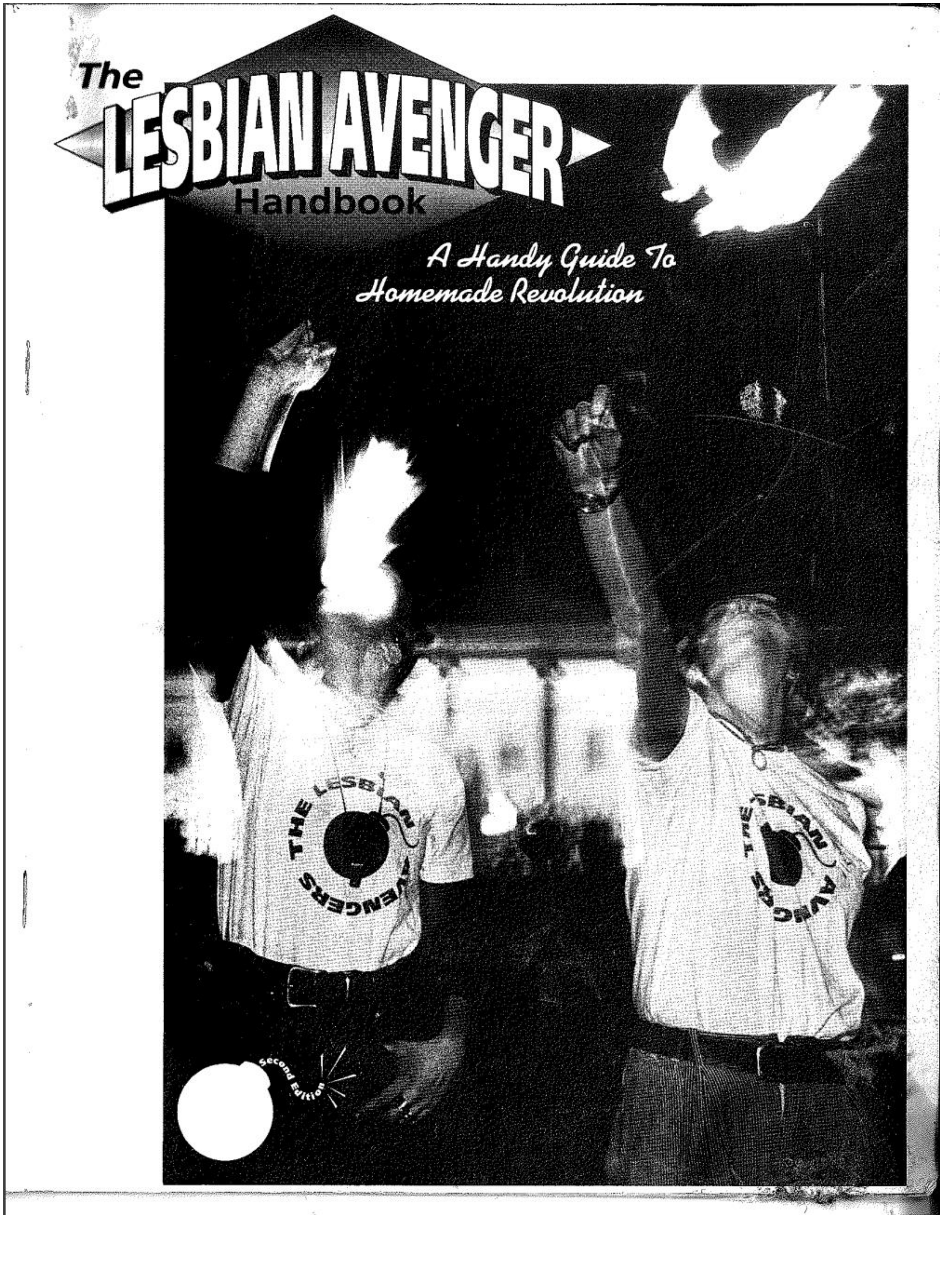
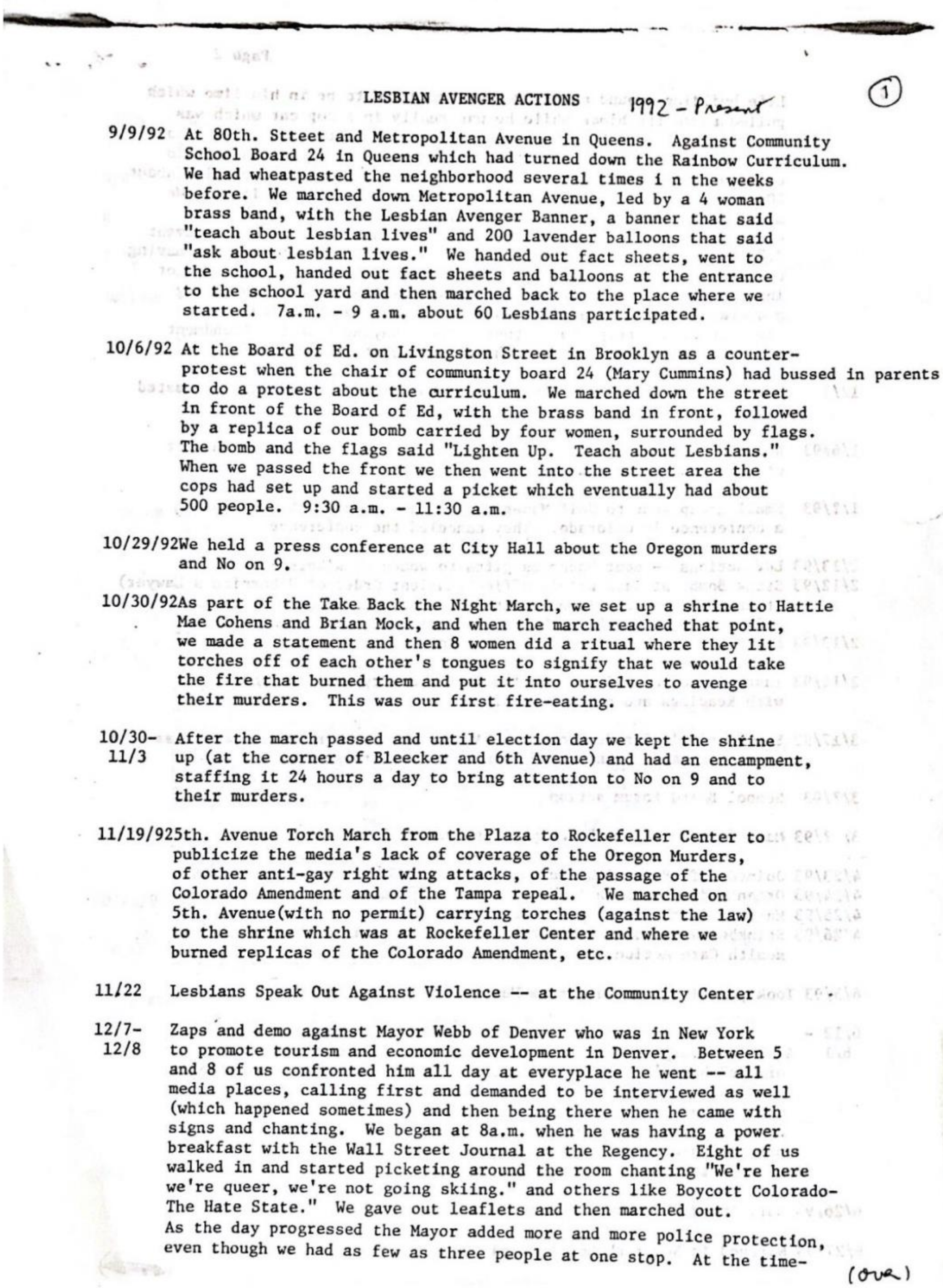


Figure 4: The first page of the list of Lesbian Avengers acts in chronological order.



LESBIAN AVENGER ACTIONS 1992 – Present

1

9/9/92 At 80th. Stteet and Metropolitan Avenue in Queens. Against Community School Board 24 in Queens which had turned down the Rainbow Curriculum. We had wheatpasted the neighborhood several times i n the weeks before. We marched down Metropolitan Avenue, led by a 4 woman brass band, with the Lesbian Avenger Banner, a banner that said "teach about lesbian lives" and 200 lavender balloons that said "ask about lesbian lives." We handed out fact sheets, went to the school, handed out fact sheets and balloons at the entrance to the school yard and then marched back to the place where we started. 7a.m. - 9 a.m. about 60 Lesbians participated.

10/6/92 At the Board of Ed. on Livingston Street in Brooklyn as a counter-protest when the chair of community board 24 (Mary Cummins) had bussed in parents to do a protest about the curriculum. We marched down the street in front of the Board of Ed, with the brass band in front, followed by a replica of our bomb carried by four women, surrounded by flags. The bomb and the flags said "Lighten Up. Teach about Lesbians." When we passed the front we then went into the street area the cops had set up and started a picket which eventually had about 500 people. 9:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.

10/29/92We held a press conference at City Hall about the Oregon murders and No on 9.

10/30/92As part of the Take Back the Night March, we set up a shrine to Hattie Mae Cohens and Brian Mock, and when the march reached that point, we made a statement and then 8 women did a ritual where they lit torches off of each other's tongues to signify that we would take the fire that burned them and put it into ourselves to avenge their murders. This was our first fire-eating.

10/30-11/3 After the march passed and until election day we kept the shrine up (at the corner of Bleecker and 6th Avenue) and had an encampment, staffing it 24 hours a day to bring attention to No on 9 and to their murders.

11/19/925th. Avenue Torch March from the Plaza to Rockefeller Center to publicize the media's lack of coverage of the Oregon Murders, of other anti-gay right wing attacks, of the passage of the Colorado Amendment and of the Tampa repeal. We marched on 5th. Avenue(with no permit) carrying torches (against the law) to the shrine which was at Rockefeller Center and where we burned replicas of the Colorado Amendment, etc.

11/22 Lesbians Speak Out Against Violence -- at the Community Center

12/7-12/8 Zaps and demo against Mayor Webb of Denver who was in New York to promote tourism and economic development in Denver. Between 5 and 8 of us confronted him all day at everyplace he went -- all media places, calling first and demanded to be interviewed as well (which happened sometimes) and then being there when he came with signs and chanting. We began at 8a.m. when he was having a power breakfast with the Wall Street Journal at the Regency. Eight of us walked in and started picketing around the room chanting "We're here we're queer, we're not going skiing." and others like Boycott Colorado-The Hate State." We gave out leaflets and then marched out. As the day progressed the Mayor added more and more police protection, even though we had as few as three people at one stop. At the time-

(over)

Scanned with CamScanner

Figure 5A: The letter from Las Buenas Amigas to the Lesbian Avengers (p.1).

Las Buenas Amigas
Lesbianas Latinas en Nueva York

forjando un espacio para nosotras y solidaridad global

c/o The Center 208 West 13th Street New York New York 10011

January 19, 1995

MEMORANDUM FOR THE LESBIAN AVENGERS AND AFRICAN ANCESTRAL LESBIANS UNITED FOR SOCIETAL CHANGE

From: Las Buenas Amigas

Re: Coalition of Lesbian Groups

The Steering Committee of Las Buenas Amigas met on the evening of January 18, 1995 to evaluate, among other matters, the participation of the group in the Coalition formed by The Lesbian Avengers, African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change and our own group. Fifteen members of the Steering Committee were present and various members who could not be present had made their opinions known before the meeting. Each one of the Steering Committee members present had participated actively to varying degrees in the protest against Radio Mega 97.9 and in the subsequent educational campaign.

The Steering Committee voted unanimously to withdraw immediately from the Coalition, after a discussion in which each of the fifteen members present spoke as to their experience in the Coalition.

It is fair to say that everyone present considered the experience of Coalition work to be enormously exciting and was grateful for all the hard work and dedication demonstrated by the membership of The Avengers and African Ancestral Lesbians. Various members of the Steering Committee spoke of having created friendships with women from the other groups and of being invigorated by moving out onto the streets of New York City, in the company of women from varied ancestries, to confront a Latino community which, because of segregation and racism, has been relegated to a separate and unequal status. It has been the isolating cordon of poverty, linguistic differences and cultural differences which has allowed the Latino community to fall prey to exploitative and propagandistic media such as Radio Mega 97.9. Challenging such media, in the company of our lesbian sisters, is undoubtedly one of the most exciting and moving experiences many of us have had in our entire lives.

Figure 5B: The letter from Las Buenas Amigas to the Lesbian Avengers (p.2).

The predominant factor behind our decision to withdraw from the Coalition is that we, as Latina lesbians, were forced to withstand a measure of indifference and hostility to our culture, our language and economic realities within the very Coalition which purpose it was to fight such evils in our society, as to make our continued participation impossible. For example, all Coalition meetings were held in English with no translation provided, even when Latinas made up the majority of participants. This chilled and inhibited the participation of many of our members who do not speak English. Meetings were held weekly on Wednesdays, in the early evening, at a house in the East Village. This, in itself, put enormous pressures on the majority of our members, who face a gruelling work day and who live, for the most part, in the Outer Boroughs of New York City. Latinas were frequently left alone together in the living room of the meeting house while The Avengers, as a group, retreated to the bedroom or to a separate part of the room (something that in Latino culture is generally considered a mark of severe rudeness and rejection). In certain instances, Latinas were treated as if we all looked alike (such as instances in which we were not recognized by The Avengers, and were called by other names).

Did Las Buenas ask for trans.? Do Las Buenas speak in Spanish

accountable in what way?,

Little, if anything was ever done to address the issue of creating a common bond or culture within the Coalition (beyond having a common enemy in Radio Mega 97.9) and of making white women, who have a disproportionate amount of power in the society at large, accountable to women of color. When the issue was raised, we were told by the representatives of The Avengers that this was a "human problem" not a problem of the ways in which racial supremacy perverts even seemingly "alternative" relationships among individuals in our society. In fact we were told that The Avengers should not have to think about this issue any more than anybody else. We disagree.

In the meantime, not only the culture but the political vision of Las Buenas Amigas was disparaged by representatives of The Avengers. The idea of analysis and thought and mutual support, which are pillars of the group culture of Las Buenas Amigas, was disparaged in favor of a romanticized ideal of "action". We found that while we could march with our lesbians sisters, those same sisters failed to look at us in the eye when we were in the same room, failed to be concerned about the issues that concerned us and demonstrated an unwavering commitment to remain in control at all costs of the Coalition work, even when it became obvious that women in Las Buenas Amigas were becoming alienated from day to day work and activities of the Coalition.

What ways

We tried in many different ways to resolve the problems outlined above in an amicable manner. We brought up the issues, tried to get names and contacts in The Avengers so that we could have access to a broader group of people, put together a Working

2

Figure 5C: The letter from Las Buenas Amigas to the Lesbian Avengers (p.3).

who was on the working group list

Group List, tried to put together an infrastructure which worked for all of us.

The issue of infrastructure was of concern to us because it was linked to why we felt powerless and increasingly utilized by the representatives of The Avengers. To the extent that we only had access to a few people, many of whom were related by various ties of friendship, living arrangements, relationships, etc., we found it impossible to overcome a claustrophobic sense of futility.

Anger Problem

Personal problems which interfered with work could not be resolved adequately in such circumstances because we lacked the ability to work and talk to different people within The Avengers. In addition, the people who were seemingly deaf to our concerns, were also intent on speeding forward with a Coalition, more for purposes of rendering legitimacy and heart to The Avengers, we felt, than for purposes of building solidarity and of empowering Latina lesbians.

Up to the time of the March against Radio Mega 97.9, on November 17th, the foregoing problems had been present, but had been outweighed by the progress we were making in terms of Radio Mega 97.9. After the March, with no unifying action to work towards, we found the lack of infrastructure, seeming lack of alternatives and indifference to our requests for evaluation of the Coalition increasingly intolerable.

Our written and oral communications to the representatives of The Avengers were repeatedly ignored for long periods, not answered, or answered only in part (requiring time consuming reiterations of our same questions and concerns). Any request for an evaluation was coopted and couched in terms which assumed the Coalition would continue to exist in accordance with the same terms it had existed. Even the very concept of democracy was coopted. ?

letters & articles in what

For example, we worked very hard in Las Buenas Amigas to draft timely letters and articles, as requested by the Coalition members. Repeatedly the representatives of The Avengers would stall and delay the process of finalizing work with tardy and often capricious comments. The letter to Raúl Alarcón, Jr. drafted immediately after the March was delayed for three weeks to our mounting frustration. An article for "Colorlife" was delayed as well. why

Why is the responsibility falling on the Avengers

In the most eggregious example, letters to community groups which required a great deal of time and work to draft were delayed for many weeks before being finally approved at a Wednesday meeting. In the final draft after approval was granted, we included, at the suggestion of a member of African Ancestral Lesbians, a paragraph urging recipients of the letter

3

Figure 5D: The letter from Las Buenas Amigas to the Lesbian Avengers (p.4).

why

to watch "La Cosa" (a Spanish language show in which white performers appeared in black-face) in order to see for themselves the faults we were pointing out. This draft of the letter was returned to us with the forementioned paragraph crossed out by the representatives of The Avengers and no explanation of why it was crossed out.

It took a number of days to contact such representatives to complete the inquiry as to their new deletion. Their response was that the letter now asked the recipients to do too many things at once and that if we wanted it to go out in that manner, we had to wait until the next weekly meeting to re-discuss the issue. When the person responsible for drafting the letters could not attend the meeting due to work requirements, she left a message for the representatives of The Avengers asking that they raise the issue without her present. Two full days after the meeting, such representative, who had requested that the letter be re-discussed, sent a fax informing us that she had not listened to the message left on her machine until after the meeting so had not raised the point. She also enclosed a copy of the letter with new and different comments by the representatives of The Avengers.

In contrast, it was not uncommon to receive draft letters and pamphlets put together by representatives of The Avengers with only 15 minutes time to respond. It was also not uncommon to have our comments rejected a priori because of "lack of space" and other concerns. "Democracy", we found, was a malleable concept, to be used as a weapon of delay and obstruction to our concerns.

Increasingly, when we raised issues we were told it was "undemocratic" to voice them to the only representatives of The Avengers for which we had telephone numbers and other contact information. At the same time, because many of us could not attend the Wednesday meetings because of work requirements and distance from our homes, and because our membership increasingly voted with their feet to stop work on the Coalition, we found that the issues we tried to raise never got a fair hearing. Instead, time was devoted to discussing neighborhood campaigns, the success of which was measured in terms of the number of pamphlets distributed, even when it became obvious that less and less Latinas were participating in the effort and that little or no interaction was taking place between pamphleteers and community people.

Finally, in mid December, we decided to put together a discussion sheet and to propose changing the site of the scheduled Wednesday meeting in order to begin a process of evaluation. One of our members attended the Tuesday meeting of The Avengers and was reassured by an announcement stating that

4

Place of meeting
Work Requirements

Figure 5E: The letter from Las Buenas Amigas to the Lesbian Avengers (p.6).

representatives of New York City's lesbian diversity, even when we were not being accorded our due respect by the representatives of The Avengers within the Coalition.

We received no further communication from The Avengers until Tuesday, January 17th, when a call was placed by one of the most recent members of the Coalition (and, we believe, of The Avengers) asking for information about the position of Las Buenas Amigas with respect to the Coalition and the meeting scheduled for January 29th. This call coincided with the meeting that evening of The Avengers. To say the least, we felt further utilized and manipulated.

It is with great sorrow that we reached the decision we took last night. We part with great hope that The Avengers will use this opportunity to evaluate themselves. We have learned a tremendous amount from The Avengers and African Ancestral Lesbians. We have also learned how intractable issues of relative power, in terms of race and ethnicity, can be and how deceptive easy solutions can also be in solving the problem.

We vowed last night to never again leave ourselves as open to exploitation as we have done this time. Ironically, the innocence with which we proceeded in this process was our strength but also our Achilles Heel. From now on, any work in coalition undertaken by Las Buenas Amigas will be evaluated on our terms.

The preceding contains only a few of the examples which have led to our withdrawal from the Coalition (which makes the scheduled January 29th meeting superfluous).

We hope to be able to work together once more in the future under better circumstances.

Respectfully,

LAS BUENAS AMIGAS

Coalition on our terms?

6

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WORKS CITED

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