

AN ALFA-OMEGA APPROACH TO RHETORICAL INVENTION:  
QUEER REVOLUTIONARY PRAGMATISM AND POLITICAL EDUCATION

Heather Lee Branstetter

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Approved by:

Jordynn Jack

Jane Danielewicz

Dan Anderson

Christian Lundberg

John McGowan

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## **Abstract**

HEATHER LEE BRANSTETTER: An ALFA-Omega Approach to Rhetorical Invention:  
Queer Revolutionary Pragmatism and Political Education  
(Under the direction of Jordynn Jack and Jane Danielewicz)

This dissertation enriches our understanding of collective rhetorical invention practices. I account for cultural forces that impacted the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA) and outline strategies members used to advocate for greater social justice. Active throughout the greater southeast from 1972 to 1994, ALFA was one of the oldest and longest running lesbian feminist organizations in American history. The members created physical and virtual spaces for community building through various mediated communication technologies and regional outreach.

ALFA collectively invented an identity, culture, public image, and platform for change. This project illuminates the rhetorical-cultural historical conditions and persuasive strategies that enabled these pragmatic yet idealist women. ALFA women formed coalitions, built their own library and archives, and distributed self-published periodicals to connect with others who were similarly oriented but geographically distant. After disbanding, the group donated a massive collection of documents from its incorporated library and archives to Duke University's Sallie Bingham Center. This collection contains newsletters, administrative information, newspaper clippings, meeting minutes, correspondence and media literacy educational materials, and other feminist and human rights movement literature. I analyze these documents, track the emergence of inventive strategies, and read the national lesbian-feminist movement through the context of ALFA's activities, following the organization

longitudinally and situating the women's persuasive innovations within socio-cultural shifts that impacted their activity.

ALFA emerged during a pivotal historic period: social movement organizations flourished, and the social justice paradigm had begun to shift from civil rights to revolutionary politics. The members adapted and developed subversive arguments and rhetorical strategies aimed at overturning unethical power hierarchies, embedding their ideas into the culture through the process of political education. I help develop the nascent yet politically relevant and conceptually productive area of queer rhetorics as I extend recent work on collective or networked explorations of rhetorical invention. This project responds to calls for alternative approaches to the history and theory of rhetoric and composition while enriching our understanding of social movement rhetoric. Ultimately, I illuminate the heterogeneity of rhetorical strategies innovated by an organized collective of women oriented toward the goal of socio-political pluralism and improved cooperation across differing perspectives.

## **Dedication**

To my parents, Mike and Nancy Gibler Branstetter, brother Sam Branstetter, sister Katie Branstetter Bauer, her husband Joe Bauer, and their daughter, Violet Wren Bauer, my grandparents Ken and Joann Branstetter and the late Fred and Margaret MacPherson Gibler. Thank you for your love. You give me strength. You make me want to do good things. I didn't "choose" you (or did I?), but if given the choice, I would have chosen you and I continue to do exactly that. I am thankful for your influence in and on my life. To Rachel Dooley, because your support, encouragement, and love inspired me as I began this project. To L.E.G.A.C.Y., because you taught me so much—I wish you could know how much I appreciated your presence as I finished this work affected by your guidance. To Risa Applegarth, Sarah Hallenbeck, Erin Branch, and Chelsea Redeker, I don't know how I would have written this without you.

And finally, this dissertation is dedicated to the ALFA women, lesbians, queers, or others who have gone unacknowledged or unrecognized as a result of subverting gender or sexual norms. To all who have been ostracized because they have been perceived as sexually deviant. Thank you for reading.

## **Acknowledgements**

Even though our current disciplinary professionalization practices still mainly reward individually-authored things, and even though they primarily acknowledge only those in the scholarly community, my varied range of communities deserve more acknowledgement than I do. I have been fortunate to work with the personal advice and support of my committee, who taught me as they also gave me encouragement and served as my ethical scholarly guides along the way. To my committee:

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negotiating the pragmatic realities of the system. You knew the kind of guidance I needed to hear when I didn't know it at the time but I trusted you and realized the why later. I think that is the mark of a very fine teacher. You were the best mentor for me and I don't know how to express this better and I will try to find the words or the actions at some point. I know that perhaps the best thing I could do to express my gratitude would be to write well, and so I would like to mention here that any failings in my work are reflections of my own weaknesses and not yours.

Jane Danielewicz, I cannot express my gratitude to you either, except to say that your guidance informed my process and that your class *brought* me into the field of rhetoric and composition, which has been exactly where I needed to be, where I would have been from the beginning, had I known that the field existed. I needed to take that first class I took with you because I needed to be inspired at that moment. And I needed to struggle with you in the way that we struggled that one day, as well. Your professional and personal mentorship has guided me through the ups and downs of graduate school. You were there for me when I needed concrete advice but you also taught me that serendipity can be a strategy and an approach to scholarship. (I don't know if I would have discovered Bergson otherwise). You taught me how to be a good teacher by modeling it and by giving me advice when I struggled with my students about feminism that semester and as a result you have helped me feel confident in my teaching, which has been incredibly more rewarding ever since. Now I know how to deal with difficult questions in class, and I am able to push my students to have the courage to talk about the things that are uncomfortable and tricky to talk about, but so important to all of us.

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John McGowan, your advice helped guide me to contain my desire to do theoretical work within the field of rhetoric and composition as my major field of study when I was silly enough to think I would do it the other way around. It was pragmatic and smart but it was also wise and appropriate, because rhetoric and composition is fresh, interdisciplinary, and



flexible. It has been an environment that fostered my learning, and the bold energy of the scholars here have helped me do work that extends boundaries. Thanks for pointing me to Foucault and for helping me to understand *Discipline and Punish* early on in my graduate studies. It was a pivotal moment for my understanding and it has guided my thinking ever since.

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What my influencers have taught me is that the only way that we can achieve true freedom is by absorbing and subverting the forces of domination and possession instead of repeating the cycle. The women of ALFA, who were invested in freeing all people, animals, and our natural environment (and who taught me to believe it could be done), also taught me



how it could possible, if only we can get enough people doing the kind of work they did, living life in the ways that the above people do. We are not in competition for limited resources if we can successfully educate one another about how the process of oppression works and how practices of freedom can overcome it. (And if I ever win the lottery, I'll share the winnings with everyone listed here.) We can achieve freedom if we can teach one another solutions and strategies for struggle, recognizing that while some of us are oppressed, we are all oppressed. It is possible for humans to live lives free from the forces of dominance and possession, if we include *everyone* in that goal.

## Preface

The use of the word ‘lesbian’ to name us is a quadrifold evasion, a laminated euphemism. To name us, one goes by way of reference to the island of Lesbos, which in turn is an indirect reference to the poet Sappho (who used to live there, they say), which in turn is itself an indirect reference to what fragments of her poetry have survived a few millennia of patriarchy, and this in turn (if we have not lost you by now) is a prophylactic avoidance of direct mention of the sort of creature who would write such poems or to whom such poems would be written. [...] This is a truly remarkable feat of silence.

-- Marilyn Frye, “To Be and Be Seen: The Politics of Reality”

Less than a week after I defended this dissertation, North Carolina became the thirtieth state in America to pass a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage (Robertson). The following day, President Barack Obama, our first biracial president, also became the first sitting U.S. president to publically embrace same-sex marriage, stating, “At a certain point, I’ve just concluded that for me personally it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be able to get married” (Calmes and Baker). Although this dissertation discusses gay marriage (at the end of in the chapter on culture and community), it is not about same-sex marriage rights. Yet these particular events are important contextual information, because this dissertation *is* about a group of women-loving-women who were both pragmatically aware of the limitations of their time and idealistically focused on a more hopeful future. This pragmatic-idealist orientation helped these women—the members of the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance, or ALFA—continue agitating for social justice even when conditions felt more oppressive than hopeful. Although this dissertation is not about reinforcing unproductive identity categories and nor does it seek

to advocate a minority model as an efficient path to longer-term social progress for queers, it *is* about combatting institutionalized discrimination through strategic self-identification and inclusive political education. It is about ushering in a more ethical future through presence, words, examples, and the allocation of time, money, energy, and communication resources.

I have attempted to let the ALFA women speak for themselves while acting as an interpreter, but at times I also cross over the tricky eddy line into the swirling waters of advocacy. And for that I do not apologize. While I personally identify as bisexual rather than lesbian (and often call myself queer or half-gay as well), I have come to align myself with the mission and vision of the ALFA radical lesbian feminists, and I hope that my words forward their goals.<sup>1</sup> Hopefully, my analysis has been enriched and not blinded by these personal stakes, which have been threefold: I sought to engage in socially and politically relevant scholarship, to bring greater visibility to the primary source materials in the archives that ALFA built while providing foundational knowledge of the value system and historical context implicated therein, and to make these documents more widely accessible. I have come to believe in the value of the ALFA women's work and I would like more people to encounter and interact with it. This dissertation has been a scholarly and not a political undertaking, but it has become a personally meaningful venture, but I would like to begin with a simple acknowledgment: I hope that the materials I present here will promote greater social justice. Now, almost exactly forty years after the members of ALFA held their first official meeting, our president has set a precedent by expressing his support for same-sex

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<sup>1</sup> I will leave the answer to my readers to decide. (Will there be readers? Please contact me with feedback or questions: [findheatherlee@gmail.com](mailto:findheatherlee@gmail.com)...) It is also important to note that, as you will see, the ALFA women were often not unified about particular reformist political agenda items, since the organization's radical perspective oriented toward revolutionary revision of the systemic injustices inherent in our institutions, and were of mixed opinion about whether or not those institutions could be reformed from within.

marriage, and yet I write these words in a state and in a country where a majority of people have either actively chosen or passively allowed the legal and institutionalized systemic discrimination against a non-heterosexual minority.

Our scholarly environment is more progressive, but we find America's political and cultural recalcitrance and apathies at work here as well.<sup>2</sup> Historian Judith Bennett, writing as recently as 2006, claims "lesbianism remains a tricky subject and sometimes [even] an unspeakable one. Simply put," she argues, the problem is not lesbian history, which is thriving, but rather, "women's history has a lesbian problem" (108). As Bennett makes this assertion, she acknowledges that there have been many advances, especially in special issues of journals, individual panels at conferences, and the general appearance of willingness to engage with lesbian voices when they note themselves to be lesbian *as such*, separated out, different, and segregated. In these cases, these voices often appear in the form of anthologized texts or in representative ways, sometimes as a token and usually as a special category of women who aren't really women—they belong in the section for lesbians, but not in the section for women, excluded from woman, feminist, or even radical feminist, on the basis of sexual orientation. The desire for distance is almost palpable, and when it comes to

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps I should say that it *appears* to be more progressive, at least. Academics have been more willing or able to enforce conformity with "politically correct" expressions of opinion, language, and written policies, whether or not these expressed beliefs are consistent with actual internal values or correspond to real differences in terms of decision-making. The current monetary resource structure of our education system, associated as it is with either government (in the case of public schools) or religious affiliations (in the case of private schools), affects the kind of research and teaching valued by the institution. The beliefs of Americans in general also impact what might otherwise be progressive policies in academia, insofar as our population's cultural and legal preferences influence more pragmatic work environment considerations. Attempts by universities to extend partner benefits to same-sex couples, for example, have been severely hampered in states where constitutional decree bans civil unions or limits marriage-like benefits to heterosexuals only.

bookshelf locations, classroom syllabi, or library classifications, the distance is more literal than figurative.

But the problem is also more pervasive than this kind of exclusion, Bennett claims. Women's history's lesbian problem is compounded by scholars' continued resistance to opening their minds to the kind of scholarship Adrienne Rich called for as long ago as 1977. Bennett points us in this direction, arguing "feminist scholars" should cease "reading, writing, and teaching from what [Rich] later called 'a perspective of unexamined heterocentricity.' Yet more than a quarter century later," Bennett adds, "women's history still skips lightly over the presence of lesbians and the possibilities of lesbian experience" (108). When lesbians aren't being shuffled into "special interest" categories on the basis of their explicit self-identification, they are either mistaken for heterosexual women or converted, even in cases where lesbian considerations are particularly obvious, appropriate, and relevant. Women's historians, in Bennett's observation, "regularly overlook lesbian possibilities that are more subtle, obscure, or awkward" and instead see the past in "heteronormative terms," which effectively works to "closet our thinking" (109). When lesbians have not self-identified, and if their work or actions have been significant or popular enough to warrant a "don't ask don't tell, let's just pretend she's straight" attitude, they are effectively turned into heterosexual women, either due to a lack of imagination or understanding of possibilities, or through active-passive practices of selective remembrance or mis-remembrance.<sup>3</sup>

Bennett notes that this continued refusal on the part of scholars to consider ambiguous or lesbian-possible women through anything other than a heterocentrist lens

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<sup>3</sup> And they say the queers are the ones doing the recruiting...

probably results from two seemingly reasonable explanations:<sup>4</sup> a lack of “gaydar,” and the problem with the category of lesbian itself, which has been relatively recent and slippery—there have always been queer men and women, but we don’t always recognize them as such. Along these same lines, historian Lillian Faderman explains in her 1999 contribution, *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America—A History*, scholars also worry that claims about women who lived before the twentieth-century emergence of the concept of lesbian will “be seen as being in opposition to postmodernism, which does not recognize the possibility of reclaiming women of the past as lesbians” (2). As a result, scholarly work has been hesitant to include lesbians within the category of woman, as it has also been reluctant to acknowledge (or recognize) women as lesbians (or consider lesbian possibilities) unless such claims can be definitively supported through self-identification or particularly obvious evidence of sexual orientation (and often not even in those cases, as I have discovered).

So, in addition to the refusals for inclusion or dismissals of lesbian behaviors or identity as relevant, there seems to be another kind of homophobia at work within the scholarship—the fear of using the very term “lesbian.” When applied in anachronistic ways, the term is offensive to the values underlying the ideology of postmodern scholarship, and when applied to a woman who hasn’t explicitly identified as lesbian, the term offends scholars who enact gatekeeper roles. The use of labels is tricky (and in many cases isn’t even desirable, as our language often fails to evolve as quickly as our knowledge or values and our

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<sup>4</sup> I am tempted to call them excuses or justifications. Is ignorance an acceptable defense? Does it excuse us from ethical responsibilities or rigorous scholarship? In cases where lack of gaydar is not the problem, does a pedantic insistence upon only using certain terms or philosophies in the name of “scholarly accuracy” or in accordance with “applicable” or “appropriate” historic or ideological counterparts increase the rigor of our scholarship as much as it limits other kinds of accuracy, precision, applications, creative analysis, and possibilities for innovative concept work?

terms stagnate and rot as a result), especially when it comes to queerness. Judith Butler has spent books elucidating the theoretical nuances of the problems and benefits of terminology, categorization, and the performative nature of language. Indeed, Butler has inspired a robust body of queer theory and a less visible but thriving body of queer rhetorical scholarship.<sup>5</sup> The problems that have plagued women's history are mirrored within rhetoric more broadly as well as within women's rhetorical historiography in particular: scholars have ignored, segregated, and otherwise reduced the visibility of women's rhetors who have self-identified as lesbians, or they have avoided using the term lesbian altogether.

And yet, I argue, the terms continue to matter. The framing continues to matter. How we remember women and women rhetors from the past continues to matter. But scholars who study historic women-loving-women appear to have so much difficulty with the unspeakable nature of lesbianism that it has become problematic to find the right terms to use as we argue for greater visibility and inclusion. Bennett goes to the length of adding the term "lesbian-like" into the mix (109), while Faderman jokingly notes:

If there had been more space on the title page, and if the phrase had not been so aesthetically dismal, I might have subtitled this book, with greater accuracy, "What Women of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, Whose Chief Sexual and/or Affectional and Domestic Behaviors Would Have Been Called 'Lesbian' If They Had Been Observed in the Years after 1920, Have Done for America." When I slip into the shorthand of referring to these women as "lesbians," readers might keep my alternate subtitle in mind.

*(To Believe in Women 3)*

Faderman acknowledges that some of our terminology problems indicate anti-essentialist "grand narrative" critiques that she agrees with, as she argues for the value of her own work documenting the importance of talking about lesbians as lesbians, even when the term is

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, like Foucault, Butler has been a pioneer of queer rhetorical work, although the theory gatekeepers would probably protest and resist such categorization.

applied anachronistically. Ultimately, Faderman writes, “if enough material that reveals what people *do* and *say* is available, we can surely make apt observations about their *behavior*. That is what I have attempted to do in this book. I use the term ‘lesbian’ as an *adjective* that describes intense woman-to-woman relating and commitment” (*To Believe in Women* 3).

The pages upon pages of verbal gymnastics, term-defining, and argument-hedging that appear to be necessary when arguing for the value of including women who probably would have claimed to be lesbians themselves—had the word been available to them—are tiresome as they also introduce yet more jargon. Even as I wish that things were different, I prefer the clunky or esoteric explanations and added terms (such as Bennett’s “lesbian-like”) to the evasions, euphemisms, and other sorts of ways some scholars have sidestepped the possibility of feminist rhetors who were lesbians or “lesbian-like.” While scholars in the field of history continue to employ such arguments as they advocate for the inclusion of lesbians’ contributions, we in the field of rhetoric and composition have only just begun to exhume the body of work that might someday accurately depict lesbians’ historical contributions to feminist rhetoric, *despite* the robust state of feminist rhetorical historiography.

My own personal sexual preferences and sense of identity could enable me to escape the realities of discrimination against lesbians and partake in the privileges of heterosexual belonging and privilege, pretending that the problem is not mine to worry about, yet my personal political beliefs and desire for socially relevant scholarship will not allow me to ignore our field’s silence regarding the rhetorical contributions of lesbians. At times I imagine that my writing here will come across to heterosexual scholars as too demanding or lacking in generosity or empathy, so I must admit I simply do not see ignorance as an excuse. It is forgivable, yet not excusable. A brief digression into the topic of race may help to



illustrate the point for my heterosexual readers, since I am white (so far as I know, at least) and yet I believe that my genetic heritage does not give me leave to pretend that racism is not my problem to deal with, whether in my personal life or my scholarship. While I believe that race-sexuality analogies are usually insensitive, inaccurate, and often ineffective as they also work to reinforce media-exacerbated divisions and subtly imply that queer identities are only applicable to white people, I also believe that considering race-based discrimination and its connections to other forms of oppression can illuminate overlooked patterns common to oppression in general and work to teach social justice solidarity. In white America more broadly, and especially in the South, we are haunted by the legacy of slavery. Our ability to elect a biracial president does not excuse our continuing refusal to eradicate white supremacist values, manifestations, and consequences. Racism has become generally unacceptable and so white people do not want to be perceived as racist, yet we all continue to be affected by white privilege and bear the responsibility for its persistence.

We can profess open-minded perspectives, affirm the value of diversity, or claim to recognize that skin color is only relevant insofar as our socio-economic, cultural, and political practices invoke or reinforce it. Yet our behaviors, policies, and decision-making practices often indicate otherwise. Excuses, justifications, dismissals and even more overt expressions of racist assumptions emerge during discussions of race, and these revelations can be costly. The solution for many white people is to avoid the topic of race and race considerations altogether, avoid interpersonal interactions, maintain distance, and gloss over difference, even when it is contextually relevant or indicates an area where social justice interventions would be especially productive. But racism will not go away if white people react to uncomfortable discoveries about our own white privilege blind spots in defensive

ways, by denying its existence, avoiding race considerations altogether, or by wallowing in a feeling of helplessness. Things are obviously better now than they have been in the past, in many ways, and things are obviously better in America than in some other countries. Yet our situation is still urgent, and we have no excuse for continued ignorance, apathy, or inaction. Regardless of whether or not white people believe that we are personally responsible for the past or even present-day realities, it is our responsibility to self-educate and agitate, demonstrating a commitment to an anti-racist present and future in our personal and work lives. Racism is learned and so it can be un-learned, but not if we deny its pervasiveness or avoid discussing its impact. Racism will not go away through a process of wishful thinking. It will not go away if we refuse to talk about it. White supremacist thinking will not go away if we pretend that it doesn't exist or impact our lives in meaningful ways. Although many aspects of race-based kinds of oppression are different from and not comparable to discrimination on the basis of sexuality, we can take a page from the ALFA radical liberation program of political education and begin with acknowledgment and a process of self-evaluation that includes a philosophical reorientation and an examination of unproductive manifestations and consequences that might often be more subtle than overt in nature. I expect other white scholars to include race as a consideration in their scholarship just as I also expect heterosexual scholars to cease excluding or avoiding lesbian considerations.

Returning to a focus on specifically lesbian feminist rhetorical contributions, then, it is probably time to ask: What is at stake for our scholarship? I should say that I don't expect everyone to suddenly begin researching lesbians, but I do hope that there will be more supportive space for such research in the future. I hope that we will be able to open the doors of the closeted thinking that has thus far been the norm in rhetorical feminist historiography

in particular. Of all of the scholarship available on women's suffrage, how many scholars have bothered to mention that even though the concept of lesbian identity was unavailable to them, somehow these women recognized each other *as such*? How many conference papers, articles, and books that mention Susan B. Anthony also mention the "emotional, playful, and erotic letters between Anthony and [Anna] Dickinson" or Emily Gross, the woman she called her "lover," which (unlike the term niece) "was not a term she bandied about to describe the legions of women who admired her" (Faderman, *To Believe in Women*, 25, 28)? Does it matter that Anna Howard Shaw was effectively partnered, both domestically and romantically, with Anthony's real niece, Lucy? Is it relevant that other suffrage leaders such as M. Carey Thomas, Mary Garrett, Jane Addams, Mary Rozet Smith, Anne Martin, Dr. Margaret Long, Frances (who liked to be called "Frank") Willard, Anna Gordon, Carrie Catt, and Mollie Hay would likely have called themselves lesbians if they were living in a post-1920 America? While obviously the historical scholarship could be more abundant and more visible, it is there. Faderman has done much work on her own to document these relationships, provides pages of evidence in her 1999 *To Believe in Women*, which extends the work of her earlier books, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981) and *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (1991).

The ALFA women I discuss in the following dissertation explicitly identified as lesbians, and they were working in the tradition of these previous women who worked so hard to achieve suffrage and yet have not been remembered as lesbians, even though many of them were. The ALFA women believed that the way we remember our past was important and they saw their work as an extension of the work of Susan B. Anthony and other "lesbian foremothers" (as they often called the women who preceded them in the fight for equality).

They were continually frustrated with the lack of recognition attributed to lesbians' fights for women's rights, as they struggled for the cause of heterosexual women as passionately as they fought for equality as lesbians. The problem that remains in my assessment is this: more of us need to be willing to also stand in solidarity instead of imposing a distorted heteronormative lens over the historical rhetorical picture. We must educate ourselves about queer considerations even when our work is not explicitly queer. We must cease excluding lesbians from the category of "feminist," or as Bennett puts it, quit worrying about applying our contemporary term "lesbian" to women of the past, and get "over the threshold, out of the master's house, and into the possible worlds that we have heretofore seldom been able to see" (111).

A cynical scholar or frustrated graduate student—one who has been blinded by resentment and the frustration of disillusionment with the ongoing lack of scholarship acknowledging lesbian women's rhetorical contributions—might read Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford's 1995 "Border Crossings" article, for example, as a slap in the face.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, the authors have incorporated self-identified lesbian women into their analysis, which demonstrates the inclusive value system underlying the article. Yet as they make a case for the importance of women's contributions into the field of rhetoric, the authors seem to have an aversion to using the word lesbian, as though lesbians have not been at the vanguard of feminist activism, both in our history and in our present. Such omissions have thus far been commonplace in our scholarship (both more recently as well as in the work of these pathbreaking women), but I pick this instance as an instructive example because the authors'

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<sup>6</sup> I have chosen this figure of speech deliberately. See Gust A. Yep's 2003 article for more commentary on "the symbolic, discursive, psychological, and material violence of heteronormativity" (11).

avoidance of the topic of sexuality is noteworthy insofar as a consideration of sexual orientation and identity might have enriched the resulting article, which is rife with discussion of self-identified lesbian women (Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa) and lesbian-like historical women (Emma Goldman and Margaret Fuller). Regarding Goldman and Fuller, the analysis is only partially affected, since the term lesbian was unavailable to them as a self-identification category and the possibilities for what the article might have been able to claim are a bit more ambiguous. Beyond the representative or politically strategically relevant reasons for making a more explicit acknowledgment of lesbian rhetorical contributions, I ask, would it have made a difference to the overall argument of the “Border Crossings” article to think about the lesbian-like reasons why Emma Goldman might have so “scandalized contemporary popular audiences” or been “in favor of *free love* and birth control” (423, emphasis mine)? Does it enhance our scholarly understanding if we consider Margaret Fuller’s sexuality when we think about possible reasons why she has been called “the most forgotten major literary figure of her own times” (Suzanne Clark, qtd. on page 424)? I am inclined to answer yes to both questions, of course.

In the case of Lorde and Anzaldúa—both of whom have made it a point to include their race and sexuality as important aspects of their identity and writing—the avoidance of sexuality as a consideration carries with it more tangible implications, as far as scholarship is concerned. As Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford discuss Lorde’s open letter to Mary Daly as an example of an innovative woman writer who “explicitly rejects traditional hierarchical linear patterns of argument in attempting a critique that is open, dialogic, accepting and, indeed, loving” (419), they miss at least some of the bigger picture that might be seen by someone

reading more queerly. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, writing in 1993, points out that the letter is also

a deliberate attempt to force an acknowledgment by Daly of what Lorde represents. For Lorde is not only “an African-American woman in white patriarchy,” a “non-European woman,” she is also one of the “women-identified-women,” who is particularly outraged by a radical white feminist ignoring her or misusing her words. (165)

Here, Joeres explains, Lorde desires something simple: acknowledgement. Lorde wants others to recognize her identity and what it signifies. Lorde wants acknowledgement of what she represents as both an African-American woman *and* as a woman-identified-woman in white patriarchy. In order to know what Lorde means when she uses the term “woman-identified,” we must both be willing to look at queer considerations and also have an understanding of historical context, insofar as the term has been rather specific to the time-space of second-wave radical feminism. Usually a woman who claimed to be woman-identified used that term interchangeably with the word lesbian. It was in part a political designation, indicating that the woman who used it sought to bring more attention and resources to women’s needs. Somewhat similar to the current-day usage of the word queer, the term did not necessarily refer to sexual orientation, but it most often indicated a sexual preference for women, whether that preference was seen as an extension of politics or a more inherent identity-based orientation understanding.

In elucidating the context here, we also discover what is at stake: Lorde attends to difference in order to note that when we cover over it, we “lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy,” and overlook “how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other” (Joeres 165). One of these tools is the so-called “divide and conquer” strategy, whereby those in power have the rest of us so busy fighting amongst ourselves that we are

not able to progress in more productive ways, and thus I will not dwell on further critiques of Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford's article here, and instead thank them for blazing the feminist trail for the rest of us, hoping that in the future we might have as robust rhetorical histories of lesbians and lesbian-like women as we do of heterosexual women.

Omission of more explicitly lesbian considerations of context (particularly ironic, in the case of Lorde, since an attempt to gain acknowledgment and explain the impact of intersectional oppression were among her rhetorical aims) in feminist rhetorical historiography scholarship is somewhat forgivable, since many of our histories are rife with distortions, and since much of the research material has been either unavailable or hidden. Carrie Chapman Catt's biographers, for example, have interpreted her move to live with Mollie Hay after the death of her husband as a reactive and mournful indication of her extreme heterosexual attachment, ignoring "excellent evidence" of her "homosexual motivations," as Faderman puts it (*To Believe in Women* 63). What's more, women contemporaries of lesbian-like women have also sought to cover over the nature of women-loving-women relationships: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, explains away her friend's opposition to marriage by saying that "the outpourings of Miss Anthony's love element all flowed into the suffrage movement," even though Anthony's "extant letters reveal the great degree to which her love element also flowed into other women" (Faderman, *To Believe in Women*, 25). The general public's view of Anna Howard Shaw as good-humored and easygoing is inaccurate as it also fails to attribute credit to lesbian contributions—Shaw depended upon her partner Lucy's domestic work and emotional stamina to help pull her out of the despair to which she often succumbed, and she thus attributed much of her success to Lucy, who she wrote gave her the "courage and hope" to

keep working (Faderman, *To Believe in Women*, 51). Indeed, many of the famous rhetorical women of our past were only able to succeed in the ways they did as a result of financial support given by their women partners. Jane Addams might not have been able to achieve such impact with Hull House had it not been for the generosity of her partner Mary Rozet Smith (Faderman, *To Believe in Women*, 6). While these omissions are forgivable, they are becoming less so, as historians and rhetorical feminist historians uncover more information about lesbian feminists and lesbian women rhetors in our past. The omissions and elisions that plague our current scholarship have led to scholarly inaccuracies as they also sell women and their accomplishments short. As a result, we have missed out on a deeper and more nuanced understanding of important rhetorical invention strategies.

What else do we find when we attend to this place that Bennett calls lesbian-like? That remains to be seen, I guess. The queers cannot do all of the work. I point to Faderman's research and ask us to consider Bennett's argument not simply because I would like to hear queer voices emerge from our rhetorical scholarship, but also because I believe that a queer lens will help all scholars in rhetoric to think of our projects in more creative and courageous ways. We might learn to be more liberated, more deviant, feel freer to explore new interpretations and stir the pot to see what floats to the top. In one instructive case, Chuck Morris has done something along these lines with Abraham Lincoln. His exploration into the queer possibilities in the case of old Abe has revealed that there are gatekeepers of public memory, those who would like *not* to think about Lincoln's queerness. When we push boundaries, we discover where they truly are and why they exist, as we also move our scholarship toward greater accuracy and give credit where credit is due. We more fully engage with our past and present in order to enact transformative future possibilities. This



politically relevant angle has provided much of the motivation for my project. As I wrote, I kept in mind the following questions: How can we, regardless of personal orientation and sexuality, be more accurate and innovative scholars of rhetoric? What happens when we queer our feminist rhetorical historiographies? What comes to the surface?

Jessica Enoch and Jordynn Jack offer some indication in the recent *College English* article, “Remembering Sappho.” While this piece is mainly about teaching, the authors indicate that they are “also interested in letting our pedagogical interventions engage with the work of feminist historiographers in rhetoric” as they express a desire to “expand the ways scholars compose feminist rhetorical history” (519). In this essay, they take important steps toward articulating what is at stake in the way we remember. Using the example of Sappho, who “has been remembered and leveraged by various groups throughout history: as lyric poet, lesbian, madwoman, feminist, creative force, distraught lover, sexual deviant, and so on,” Enoch explains that “forgetting can also be seen as a more overt and strategic process of erasure—a purposeful act of striking from public memory—because the memory of the person or thing proves dangerous to the status quo” (529). Enoch and Jack thus remind us that our scholarly erasures have political and public consequences. Omitting or substituting one kind of memory in favor of another can work as a sort of deletion: the question “is not so much *whether* these women are remembered or forgotten, but *how* they are remembered and forgotten, and what effect their presence and absence has on everyday life in the present moment” (534). If our scholarship is to be relevant, they remind us, we must think about how our rhetorical constructions of the past extend into the public sphere (or not), as they encourage us to consider the extended impact of our work. In a time when LGBTQ people continue to fight for recognition and battle inequity both inscribed in law and socially

enforced in our institutions and everyday interactions, I hope that my dissertation (and whatever form it takes in the future) is able to work toward greater understanding in the present and help usher in a more ethical and inclusive future. I hope that it moves toward enacting the kind of work Enoch and Jack describe, the work the ALFA women lived.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction: Crashing the Second Wave—Rhetorical Invention and Southern Lesbian Feminists**

The large, bold print is meant to be sensationalist, meant to attract attention: LESBIANS ARRESTED, reads the July 2, 1973 newspaper headline. The story, written as a first-person narrative, documents the account of Freddie Creed, a woman described as “a strong, beautiful Lesbian sister who has been fighting an important battle for the freedom of our people.” Freddie, after kissing her “dear friend” Nora Kennedy in a bar located in Birmingham, Alabama, was arrested and charged with “disorderly conduct,” and “sexual perversion.” She relates what happened in detail:

Nora was [already] sitting in the police car, and as he opened the door, the Vice Squad Officer grasped my arm and pushed me into the back seat, saying, ‘Now ya’ll finish what you were doing inside.’ Nora was crying again and hysterical with fear and panic—reciting passages from the Bible and pleading with the Vice Officer for a show of mercy and human compassion.... The Vice Officer responded with ‘Shut up, bitch’...

The article concludes with a call to action that explains, “Police harassment is nothing new for the Gay community. The new thing is that we are fighting back” (ALFA Papers, Box 2, File 22).

These women leading the rally to “fight back” were members of the newly formed Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance, or ALFA, and their emergence during the previous year had signaled, in their words, an end to the “long dry spell for Women’s Liberation in Atlanta” (Box 2, File 21). Legal cases like Freddie’s and other women who were harassed, fired, and arrested for transgressing the established gender roles of the time served as initial

rallying points and helped solidify ALFA as an influential hybrid of the women's and gay liberation movements. Based in Atlanta and active in the greater Southeast from 1972-1994, this collective's core membership numbered around 150 women during its heyday in the 70s and 80s, and AFLA could count on another 150-plus women to participate in their major political, educational, and social events. Considering the fact that most of these organizations were rife with conflict and usually burned out after several years, ALFA's longevity is especially noteworthy. This group, although organized in order to bring together women who were marginalized on the basis of their gender and sexuality, also identified with and were themselves oppressed in other ways as well; they fought for the rights of any person who found him or herself invisible or unacknowledged and wanted to re-write the societal power structures so that they could live in a more ethical world.

In what follows, I examine the persuasive strategies employed by the members of ALFA in their effort to transform the sexist, heterosexist, racist, and classist forces of their time. As such, this project offers a highly contextualized study of the rhetoric of a particularly influential group that has, until now, been largely overlooked. This collective's persuasive strategies both extended and transformed the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, in an effort to address the constitutional rights of other oppressed groups and respond to Dr. Martin Luther King's call to move toward a more just world for *all* humans. After ALFA disbanded, the women donated all of their records and documents to the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture archives at Duke University, and studying this group allows me to offer up a rich, local, and grounded analysis of rhetorical practices of invention, or the art of identifying the "available means of persuasion," as Aristotle put it. The study of argumentative invention, which emerged as one of the five main canons of

rhetoric with the advent of the discipline, continues to be a rich area of research in rhetoric and composition studies. Primarily, scholars of invention seek to articulate the available lines of argument in order to understand which strategies enable the most effective persuasive action (see especially Lauer, Crowley, and Atwill). I document and analyze the progression of ALFA's rhetorical strategies, tracing the group's emergence out of the Little Five Points neighborhood in Atlanta and documenting its evolution while it gained momentum as a hybrid of the women's and gay liberation movements and eventually disbanded after twenty-two years. I argue that the ALFA women's historical and geographical position enabled their formation into an especially productive political, social, and educational organization. I believe that this same historical and geographical positioning (southern, lesbian, and radical feminist), has also led the impact of these women to be elided by scholars who would otherwise find their particular rhetorical strategies compelling. By focusing on ALFA and its cultural context, my dissertation provides unique insight into the nature of effective situated and longitudinal collective inventive practices oriented toward social justice.

### **Research Questions**

My dissertation responds to the following questions: if invention is both contextualized within and arises out of cultural exchanges, how have women rhetors used the already available political space in a local area to articulate the need for feminism and social change? How do collective rhetorical innovations and adaptations affect the social realities of our historical and political space? What can we learn by studying an individual social movement organization that was so long-lived and yet failed to achieve its lofty goals of a utopic and inclusive society? Why should we care about the collective inventive rhetorical



practices of ALFA? In what ways was ALFA both similar to and different from other radical feminist and lesbian organizations that were also active during the late 1960s-mid 1990s? What is the value of building an alternative social culture that attempts to eradicate the influences of patriarchy and imperialism, embraces individual difference, and emphasizes the importance of an inclusive and diverse community? How did ALFA's organizational structure, strategies, action, vision, and grounded practices forward the members' progression toward greater social justice? What makes this particular pragmatic-revolutionary movement organization worthy of study to people who would not be drawn in on the basis of subject matter alone? What might the experiences and experiments of these women teach us about a political education approach to social justice?

### **Background and Significance**

In this section, I explain why this particular group mattered, how their collective invention strategies make them worthy of study, and what they have taught me about how social justice advocacy work could be done in a way that many other groups and organizational structures and communities could learn from the ALFA women's example. Along the way, I discuss the scholarly interventions and contributions that this project aims toward.

It was clear to me that there must have been something special about ALFA's collective invention practices, since the organization was able to achieve such longevity, especially considering ALFA's context as a radical lesbian feminist organization located in the Bible belt and active from 1972-1994. The archivists at the Sallie Bingham Center knew enough about how special ALFA was to direct me to their material. The members themselves

knew they were special, claiming in the final page of the minutes that upon the organization's closure, it had earned the record "as the longest surviving lesbian organization" in the country, modestly adding "that we know of" in parentheses (ALFA Papers Box 7 File 23). As for the accuracy of this statement, previous scholarship about lesbians during this time has largely neglected to include ALFA. It has focused primarily on short-lived groups like the Radicalesbians and The Furies. According to my research, ALFA was indeed among the longest-lived openly lesbian organizations in the country, surviving longer than most, if not all other lesbian feminist social movement organizations. The nationally syndicated Daughters of Bilitis, deserves acknowledgement here—they were the first officially explicit lesbian organization, and some sources say they were active from 1956-1970 or 1972, while Marcia Gallo argues there were probably a few women in one or two chapters struggling to keep it going until 1978 (202).

If the organization's approach to social change was so special that it enabled them to agitate for social justice longer than most other comparable social movement organizations, the question remains: why weren't they already more well-renowned, and why has nobody already written a book about ALFA? There is certainly no dearth of material, no question of the reach of the women's work. The newsletters alone were published for twenty-one years of monthly issues that by 1982 averaged 16-18 pages and had a circulation of 360 (ALFA Papers Box 18, DVD). The women even created their own library and archive, and through this resource they reached local lesbians in the greater Atlanta region as their membership numbers soared into the hundreds. Clearly, during the long life of their organization, these activists reached a vast number of women through their writing and interpersonal actions.

So why had this organization received only nominal attention in only two books of niche scholarship about gays and lesbians in the South, only one of which was “scholarly”? Maybe nobody cared about lesbian feminist social movement organizations. Maybe nobody cared about what happened in the South. I reassured myself that books suggested otherwise. Maybe nobody knew they had existed because maybe the women hadn’t really accomplished anything substantial. I reassured myself that maybe we just hadn’t been able to hear their story yet because their conditions had been too oppressive. Since there was so much material, I would surely find something compelling about this organization that would contribute something that people would care about.

In terms of scholarly contributions, my project’s nature as a historical case study of ALFA’s rhetorical strategies intersects with the disciplines of English, history, communication studies, sociology, and political science, but it primarily speaks to three major scholarly conversations within the field of rhetoric. First, at its heart, my study speaks to scholars interested in *rhetorical invention*. As I mentioned above, invention has been a longstanding interest to scholars of rhetoric, but repeated calls for more contextualized, longitudinal studies of collective invention, both institutional and organizational, have gone unanswered. As Louise Wetherbee Phelps explained in her 2002 assessment of the field, “provocative suggestions for examining invention from a collective perspective (for example, doing empirical and historical studies of the ecology of invention) were left undeveloped” (72). Anis Bawarshi’s study responds to and renews Phelps’s request for such scholarship, and yet we continue to see the need for work that articulates alternatives to organizational structures that enable greater diversity and freedom during this time of “too big to fail.” As we continue to struggle to support creative projects within our traditional bloated

bureaucratic and institutional structures, more scholarship that illuminates the collective invention practices of groups such as ALFA would help us envision more ways in which we might structure various types of organizations in order to encourage greater innovation. John Muckelbauer examines some of the theoretical groundwork necessary and he echoes calls for more grounded and longitudinal case studies in his recent book, *The Future of Invention*.

Second, in terms of current socially and politically relevant scholarship, this dissertation helps us understand the rhetoric of *collective social action*. I connect my research to the expanding body of recent work that documents the continuing impact of social justice movements, democracy, and “publics/counterpublics” (c.f., Warner, Fraser, Tate, Charland), none of which has focused explicitly on the rhetorical strategies of lesbian feminists during this time. Because ALFA was embroiled within the political upheaval of the 1970s and arose out of the civil rights movement, my work helps us understand the persuasive resources deployed by the women’s and gay liberation movements. I indicate the ways in which ALFA and other gay liberationist groups borrowed from the organizations that preceded them, both to their success and detriment. In particular, I indicate some alternatives to a minority-rights model for change and help us understand why the more radical LGBTQ social movements have been constrained by an image and *ethos* problem that continues to impact us today. By studying the strategies and approach of the radical women of ALFA, we also learn about pragmatic techniques and strategies that might help ground revolutionary social movements in general, a topic which has particular relevance during this historical moment both worldwide, with the phenomenon of the “Arab Spring” and here in America where we are witnessing the influence of the so-called “occupy” movement. My discussion of ALFA

reveals that it is possible to be both pragmatic and idealist without severely compromising organizational and personal integrity or devolving into a destructive all-or-nothing approach.

Finally, I address those scholars who are interested in *queer rhetoric* and *feminist rhetorical historiography*. I elaborate the ways in which contemporary feminist rhetorical studies have sidelined the contributions of lesbian feminists and thus far failed to illuminate its particular strategies. The rhetoric of the so-called “second wave” of the women’s movement has been remembered in an increasingly ossified way, as a movement that primarily involved white, heterosexual, middle-class women who sought entry into the workforce and control over reproductive rights. My project adds to the evidence that this movement was in fact much more heterogeneous and thus has the potential to suture the divide that many scholars have thus far exacerbated. The study of queer rhetoric, while still nascent, has thus far been primarily male-centered and has failed to highlight the kinds of rhetoric advanced by gay *women* specifically (see, for example, Charles Morris III). I seek to bring a queer perspective into feminist rhetorical historiography work and help provide other rhetoric and composition scholars with some tools that might help them to see more queerly. I focus on this particular intervention below because rhetoric and composition scholars don’t appear to question the merit of work that contributes to our knowledge of collective invention and social movements in the same way as they appear to question the value of work that is explicitly queer and feminist in nature, even though the overlaps here are particularly productive. My desire to extend our understanding of queer feminist rhetorical historiography has also thus guided my method and approach to this project.

Jacqueline Rhodes has provided one of the only precedents for my dissertation project, insofar she writes about radical feminists from the recent past, social movements,

and networked inventive practices. Her 2005 book *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency*, that “The history that we tell becomes the present that we value, and the present that we tell becomes the history that we value” (22). It is by now commonplace among academics to argue that when we construct our narratives of the past, we uphold certain ways of valuing of our present. Rhodes goes on to argue that radical feminists have been “mishistoricized” and constructed in a way that “only touches the surface of the radical feminist movement and that does not address at all the unique textual and discursive action that was part and parcel of the movement” (23). Interestingly, while Rhodes’s book, which emerged from her dissertation, appears to *want* to discuss lesbian feminism in a more open and explicit way (Rhodes *does* include more explicit discussions of lesbians in her research now), they are all but invisible in this book about second wave radical feminism. I don’t mean to point this out as a critique of Rhodes’s work, but as a case that illustrates the consequences of the perceived hostility toward queers doing scholarship about queers. I have thus far neglected to ask Rhodes if she was actively discouraged from discussing lesbians in a more significant way as she wrote about these radical feminists, but I am also aware that even more overt discouragement isn’t necessary, when it comes to limiting possibilities for scholarship. I hope that in the future she will add her own story about the direction that project took and why.

Regardless, lesbians have at the vanguard of both the first and second-wave of the women’s movement in America, and yet their contributions are most often elided or dismissed, distorted or ignored, and I am not alone in this assessment. While it has by now become a cliché to assert that queer rhetorical studies is both interdisciplinary and defies categorization, I do think that these two trends are important to note. Scholars in fields as widely varied as sociology, history, cultural studies, and literature all discuss queer

perspectives and issues as they intersect with concerns that we might think of as typically “rhetorical.” And yet, as recently as 2003, Gust Yep, Karen Lovaas, and John Elia assert that communication studies “is just beginning to acknowledge, recognize, and apply [queer theory’s] fundamental tenets to the study of human communication” (3). Larry Gross (2005) also confirms a feeling of invisibility and perhaps even disciplinary silencing of queer voices; he writes, “Until comparatively recently, we suffered under a semiofficial conspiracy of silencing that was endorsed at the highest levels” (509). According to Gross’s assessment of the field, “GLBT and queer scholars are divided, both among and within themselves, over the meaning of the current state of their field and the current realities of GLBT and queer lives,” especially with regard to issues of invisibility/visibility (Gross 520).

Although I am coming from the English department side of things, I agree that Yep et al.’s and Gross’s observations hold true for us as well, perhaps even more so. Despite the widespread use of theoretical approaches that incorporate Foucault, Butler, and Michael Warner, more explicitly queer-oriented work has been difficult to locate as a visible discursive site both within studies of composition pedagogy and rhetoric. I hope that this dissertation will offer some contribution toward demonstrating what we miss when we omit the contributions of lesbians, as I discuss this long-lived and prescient group of radicals from the South and explore what they might teach us about moving toward the future with a more inclusive history. We do find some work that documents queer rhetorical history—in this vein, scholars identify the impact of LGBTQ rhetoric in both public and semi-private spheres. Charles Morris’s collection (2007) features topics ranging from collective social movement studies to identity, race and trauma. Within the study of queer historiography, we also find an emphasis on the importance of public memory as it is geographically situated

(Howard), and the emergence of work in comm. studies and rhetoric/composition that focuses specifically on recent history, agency, and culture (see, for example Erin Rand's recent *QJS* article about Larry Kramer and the genre of the polemic, in addition to discussions of the AIDS crisis and the issues it uncovered, as documented by Blake Scott's rhetorical-cultural study, *Risky Rhetoric*).

In terms of a major trend that dominates almost every study that I have read, queer rhetoric has been grappling with questions of how to define and discuss our politics while situating that discussion within a more complex theoretical understanding that pushes beyond binaries and categorization. Joshua Gamson's 1995 article, "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma" points out the ways in which social movement studies scholars have explored the emergence of collective identities, the development of interpretive frameworks and the negotiation of boundaries and power. Gamson reviews this literature while advocating for further discussion of the queer "drive to blur and deconstruct group categories, and to keep them forever unstable," a focus that he believes "poses a significant new push to social movement analysis" (393). Even though Gamson's work is at this point somewhat dated, I believe that we have yet to work through this issue productively. The scholars featured in Morris's and Yep et al.'s collections continue work that complicates the political, cultural, and ideological struggles central to enabling further deconstruction of the theory/practice and essentialism/social construction divides, yet I believe that these debates represent ongoing sites of contestation within queer rhetorical studies. Jonathan Alexander, writing in 1999, is one of many scholars to point us in a useful direction. Following scholars such as Michael Warner, Jeffrey Weeks, Kate Bornstein, and Elise Harris, Alexander claims that "it is time for a political and cultural change within our community" as he argues that we



shift “from asserting our identity to forwarding our values” (294). I seek to answer his request here. Many within his particular sub-field of rhetoric (new media) have begun to initiate such work, which I seek to extend, temporally, theoretically, and in terms of subject matter.

Although there are others who discuss lesbian radical feminists, and who have sought to fill this gap (see, for example, Rudy, Joeres, Taylor and Rupp, and Chesnut and Gable), many of these studies have not been explicitly rhetorical in focus. The few studies of feminist rhetorical historiography that focus on queer women’s contributions to rhetoric suffer from misrepresentations and synecdoche gone awry. Even those attempting to engage in more inclusive histories of women’s rhetoric suffer from these pitfalls. Ashli Quesinberry Stokes, for example, advocates the inclusion of Southern Women’s Liberation in rhetorical histories of feminist thought, noting the lack of Southern perspectives in narratives of the second wave. Following Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Stokes reasons that “if the second wave’s biggest challenge was violating women’s reality structures, scholars will benefit from understanding the rhetorical efforts of women who faced particularly recalcitrant realities” (92). In her discussion of Southern women’s liberation movement rhetoric, however, Stokes completely ignores the presence of lesbians, irrespective of the fact that she speaks in a quite confident and universalizing way about Southern women and claims to discuss a “mosaic of identity,” and Southern radical feminists’ attempts “to cultivate a broad collective identity” that might account for a variety of different perspectives (105). The omission of lesbian voices is confusing and striking for two reasons: first, lesbians were often at the forefront of the women’s liberation movement, in the nation as a whole in addition to in the South; and second, one of the five groups Stokes tracks down is in fact a lesbian group. Such failure to

mention the contributions and impact of lesbian rhetoric in her analysis thus functions as an erasing mechanism, since her discussion of “Southern women’s constitutive rhetoric” effectively misrepresents the movement’s work as an exclusively heterosexual undertaking.

As should be obvious from the above discussion, and as scholars of queer rhetorical historiography certainly already recognize, these kinds of elisions have real consequences, ranging from “mere” occlusion to more insidious homo-blaming. Helen Tate’s exploration of lesbian feminist constitutive rhetoric documents the possibilities inherent in the linkage of “feminism” with “lesbianism”—she argues that such a linkage provided a rhetorical site that had transformative potential. That is, the concept of lesbian, in the past linked with immorality and deviance, shifted toward a more affirmative construction that highlighted the public, political, and independent subjectivities available for lesbian women. Yet Tate ultimately draws her examples from only a few sources and she reasserts the heterocentric narrative of blame and bitterness that we find in Alice Echols’s much-cited history, *Daring to be Bad*. Tate ultimately concludes that this constitutive linkage resulted in failure: she claims that “the ideology of political lesbianism provided the rhetorical resources for antifeminism,” and faults lesbians for both the failure of the ERA and the “postfeminist cry, ‘I’m not a feminist, but I believe women should have equal rights’” (26-27). Even though Tate displaces the blame onto Phyllis Schlafly, such an argument, because it both over generalizes and privileges a hetero perspective, implies that the incorporation of lesbian perspectives provided the fire for the antifeminist backlash, directly led to the dissolution of the women’s liberation movement, and resulted in a more essentialist (and short-sighted) cultural feminism. Tate’s focus on the grand narrative of the women’s rights movement doesn’t consider more localized positive effects that were enabled by lesbian feminist groups and she

doesn't allow for the possibility that lesbian-feminist constitutive rhetoric might have been especially transformative in some time-space contexts.

In terms of productive future trajectories for queer rhetorical work, Gross, writing in 2005, advocates for more discussion of the way in which mass media decides when and how to include LGBTQ perspectives, while also directing us to continue our exploration of identity construction and gender nonconformity (522-524). I add to this scholarship strand as well. Keeping in mind the dangers of what Barbara Biesecker has called "affirmative action scholarship," I believe that we still need more recovery of historical "great figures" or what Morris refers to as the "good queer speaking well," but that it is also important to queer *everyday* rhetorical activity by describing what life is like for non-spotlighted LGBTQ people both past and present (while documenting how we contribute/have contributed to rhetoric). I agree with the assessment of scholars such as Michael Warner and Melissa Deem, who argue that the mainstream LGBTQ political movement clings to a sexual minority/sexual identity politics and relatively conservative "rights rhetoric" model that argues for assimilation, and I attempt to demonstrate an option for nudging the activist work toward a more revolutionary or radical focus. In order to enact such a mission, it seems imperative to me to look more through bi- and trans- specific lenses, while also continuing to transcend debates/collapse the binary between so-called essentialist and social constructionist perspectives and avoiding tokenism. In the future, I would also like to see more of a focus on more scientifically-oriented studies and other social critiques that identify, from a rhetorical perspective (as opposed to, or in addition to a theoretical approach), the epistemological foundations of heteronormative biases and the ways in which we might best intervene.

In examining queer women's collective rhetorical invention strategies, then, I situate my work as political, historical, and cultural-rhetorical. Ultimately, I seek to highlight the voices of the real women I study while helping forward the broader cause of social justice.

## **Method and Approach**

Recently, feminist historiography has enjoyed a robust tradition of examining the particular needs of women, both individually and collectively, who wrote and spoke in restrictive times and places (see, for example, the work of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Cheryl Glenn, Susan Jarratt, Malea Powell, and Wendy Sharer, among others). This growing body of scholarship has been driven by the recognition that our focus on the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition brings with it a corpus of definitions, practices, and values that serve to privilege canonical perspectives while excluding others. Our current attempts to write more inclusive histories of rhetoric imply one important assumption about our underlying motivations: scholars engaged in historiographical practices are acutely aware of *the rhetorical nature of history itself*. That is, our current social and political values are written into the historical narratives that we tell ourselves about what we do, who we study, and why it matters. Scholars work to enrich *the* rhetorical tradition by instead writing rhetorical traditions, because we believe that a better understanding of the historical scope and range of persuasive resources can offer a more robust understanding of how rhetoric circulates in our present context.

The recent work of scholars such as Risa Applegarth and Sarah Hallenbeck and have pushed our approaches in more interdisciplinary and posthuman directions, respectively. Applegarth's research brings social scientific subject matter and approaches into our field as

she also innovates fresh ways of examining popular topics such as genre. In her 2011 *RSQ* article, for example, she enacts such work as she explains the potential for “linking *ethos* with both material and metaphorical *locations*” (43). This kind of research approaches already valued subject matter through the lens of creative perspectives in order to generate fresh and productive methodologies, and the resulting scholarship is more broadly relevant as it provides a model for methodological innovation. Hallenbeck’s 2012 article, “Toward a Posthuman Perspective: Feminist Rhetorical Methodologies and Everyday Practices,” notes that “feminist scholars are now moving well beyond their early efforts to ‘recover’ women rhetors and ‘recalibrate’ or ‘rewrite’ rhetorical history,” as she echoes Jordynn Jack’s 2009 call that we look “simultaneously at rhetorics of spaces, times, bodies, and material objects ‘in order to construct more thorough accounts of the rhetorical practices that sustain gender differences’” (Hallenbeck, 10). Hallenbeck goes on to explain the upshot of such methods, which point us toward projects that explore the way that rhetorics of everyday practices “can alternately support, redirect, or undermine women’s and men’s deliberate efforts to bring about change, providing more than just a context to which a skillful rhetor must attend in shaping his or her words” (24). This attention to innovating methods that generate more inclusive and expansive understandings of rhetorical activity is important work because it attends to the impact of our scholarship within a socio-cultural context.

As Enoch and Jack as well as Carole Blair have pointed out, memory studies methodologies also offer insights and analytical tools to enable the continued emergence of more complex and inclusive rhetorical histories. Memory work, as Susannah Radstone has argued, “occupies the liminal space between forgetting and transformation,” and in many cases, it “seeks to move beyond the analysis of testimonies or texts and the illumination of

the forgotten experiences of others” (12). When it does, memory work itself becomes socially and politically enabling, insofar as it can engage new possibilities for revised understandings of our current context. Because memory studies provides an approach that emphasizes both the continuities and the elisions at work when we link the past with the present, it also provides a context for understanding the importance of the present as it impacts the histories that *will* be written in the future. This perspective takes seriously the notion that the study of the past sheds light on our contemporary rhetorical practices at the same time as it works both to construct new values and reinscribe old ones. A memory studies approach to writing rhetorical histories can emphasize the stakes: we are better able to conceive of new possibilities for the future, but at the same time, it also becomes clear that the continued presence of the past can also foreclose certain futures as it enables others.

Following these scholars, I propose what I call a “queer-promiscuous” approach to scholarship, and I advocate its usefulness for those whose work intersects with cultural rhetoric, collective invention, and social movement research as well as queer and/or feminist rhetorical history. I don’t feel at liberty to call it a “method” just yet, although I do attempt to go that direction in the conclusion, but for now I would like to describe the potential for this *orientation* to bring fresh perspectives to our current research. In part, I think that my reluctance to call it a method is due to my understanding that an “approach” is more flexible and might give way to more innovative adaptations as opposed to inflexible application and reproduction, which I associate with the term “method.” I suppose I think of my research method in a free-spirited sort of way that for me defies exact explanation, and yet I would like to explain the way I have conducted my research, so an “approach” simply seems like a more appropriate term for the time being. Regardless, I seek to revise our future by revisiting

the past, by contributing toward the building and maintenance of a more inclusive “toolkit” for incorporating a wider diversity of perspectives. Along the way, I also hope to advocate for the importance of more inclusive future work.

What does a queer and promiscuous approach look like? It is important to begin by clarifying that this perspective is neither simply queer nor promiscuous, but instead embraces the ambiguous overlap of these two perspectives. What is to be gained by deploying these *particular* terms in describing this approach to feminist historiography (aside from the fact that I think that these terms are playful and catchy)? Isn’t feminist historiography *already* both queer and promiscuous in many ways? Well, yes and no. Yes, we should continue to “look aslant” at our current histories by providing resistant readings of the rhetorical tradition and/or moving toward greater inclusion of both people and practices, times and spaces. But, in typical queer fashion, I’d also like to ask, as my ALFA women did, what might be gained by refiguring our *orientation*?

When I speak of a particularly queer-promiscuous orientation, I am not intending queer to merely refer to a “gay” or “lesbian” identity. Nor do I point us toward an inherently “homo” as opposed to “hetero” point of view. The term promiscuity does not indicate merely the inability to control one’s sexual impulses or desires. Nor does it direct us toward inherently indiscriminate sexual behavior. Rather, I wish to pull in a whole constellation of terms that can describe the orientation here. Included in this approach is a historical awareness of the ways in which the terms queer and promiscuous are inherently linked as both *deviant* and *pathological*. Such an awareness of the past brings with it an emphasis on the desire to unsettle, to baffle, and to confound notions of decorum and propriety. It is also entails an awareness of performance, play, and mischief. Such an orientation embraces

peculiarity, in addition to the desire to be subversive, and also villainous, suspicious, untrustworthy, and disreputable. A queer and promiscuous approach does not seek only to redefine the “norm”—rather, it seeks to *dislodge the grounding of normalcy*, to intimately engage with and inhabit multiple perspectives, to live vicariously through the desires of strangers, to simultaneously invite and affirm the variety of human experience.

To deepen this discussion, I will now draw on rather basic queer theory and discuss it in a relatively uncritical manner, because I believe it continues to have value, because I am trying to be both concise and communicable, and because the theoretical underpinning intersects with my subject matter well. While I am aware that Foucault and Judy B. would be excellent additions to this discussion, I would instead like to point us toward Michael Warner and Eve Sedgwick. Warner’s analysis in *The Trouble with Normal* articulates an important “ground rule” that might orient this perspective that I am calling queer-promiscuous: “one doesn’t pretend to be *above* the indignity of sex” because “sex is understood to be as various as the people who have it”—it is “not required to be tidy, normal, uniform, or authorized” (35). There is a special dignity in embracing the supposed shame that has been seen to accompany both queerness and promiscuity. According to Warner, “the paradoxical result is that only when this indignity of sex is spread around the room, leaving no one out, and in fact binding people together, that it begins to resemble the dignity of human” (36). By eschewing the limitations imposed by normalcy, by rejecting the social impulse oriented toward consensus, we can better see the way in which the fictions of “normal” and “dignified” work to *exclude* a diversity of human experience. Eve Sedgwick describes this project as the drive to embrace the “irresolvable instability” of definitions—it exposes and decenters the system of values that supposedly grounds our norms (10). Once we orient ourselves in a way that



confounds notions of social propriety, we can better articulate connections and affirm the circulation of *multiple* epistemologies. Such an orientation actively “forgets” the rules and engages in a kind of *amnesia* in order to *remember* anew what other options might be available. In doing so, we both affirm our own experience and also invite others in a project that disregards the need for “pre-set” categories.

A queer and promiscuous approach doesn’t judge—it is a way of orienting toward openness—it tries on different ways of looking at the world and spreads that knowledge around. It’s about embracing the label of the “bad queer,” as opposed to the “good gay,” as Warner explains, “the kind who has sex, who talks about it, and who builds with other queers a way of life that ordinary folk do not understand or control” (*Trouble with Normal* 114). The world-making project of the bad queer becomes a freer, more open life, because it isn’t accountable to the judgment of others who aren’t yet on board, and because that world-making project is also promiscuous, it enjoys recruiting others as well. Ideally, the queer and promiscuous perspective becomes a well-mobilized and connected network, through which ideas can spread like a contagion. Part of the fun becomes searching for “converts” who remain covert. Warner aligns the queer project with gay cruising, which cultivates “a love of strangers”—promiscuous queers can “directly eroticize participation in the *public* world of their *privacy*. Contrary to myth, what one relishes in loving strangers is not mere anonymity, nor meaningless release. It is the pleasure of belonging to a sexual world, in which one’s sexuality finds and answering resonance not just in one other, but in a world of others” (*Trouble with Normal* 179). Orienting in this way becomes a strength, because it celebrates openness and intimacy with multiple perspectives, and becomes a way of facilitating connections between public and private, bringing what is normally reserved for the bedroom

out into the public, making it visible to others, while also bringing many others from the public back into the bedroom, and enjoying multiple lovers in the privacy of the home. It's about looking around for others who may or may not visibly be a part of the insurgency, but enjoying a public intimacy with them when you find them, and recruiting others to join up in this mischievous and purposefully deviant world-making project.

A queer-promiscuous approach is inevitably antithetical to many of the ways that we are taught to do scholarship. On the other hand it is also very aligned and allied. Here was the main difference I felt to be true: where our scholarship and professionalization practices say, "conform, fit in, be normal," the queer impulse says, "conformity feels constricting, feels untrue to freedom and originality, and I want to be unique." It doesn't have an investment in itself, in many ways, doesn't understand its goals, because it wants to be different, doesn't care about fit in, doesn't care about whether or not it comes across as unruly or misbehaving or inappropriate to others. It understands that there are roles for many ways of being and doesn't want to remake other things in its own image and hates feeling like it is being made over or controlled. It wants things to be self-determined and free. A queer-promiscuous approach wants to "have sex" with lots of different kinds of projects in lots of different ways and understand the projects on their own terms and bring something creative and unique out of the result, highlight something about the project that the project didn't even know to be true about itself. Such an approach can be a mind-fuck, too. In a good way, but often also in an unraveling way.

My approach to writing this dissertation has been a conservative interpretation of what a queer-promiscuous approach might look like, insofar as it focuses on the values of personal integrity and openness, embraces the countercultural, tells stories, and extends

boundaries and limitations. I do wish it would have been more deviant and mischievous, I wish it would have jaunted across more boundaries, smashed through more limitations. But a queer-promiscuous approach ultimately un-does itself, unravels, and is self-destructive in many ways, many ways in which the ALFA women were not. Like the ALFA women, though, a queer-promiscuous approach says, “I want to be ambiguous” as it also desires for everything to be out in the open, as it aims toward personal and ethical integrity. There are many ways into knowledge, many ways to do what I am trying to describe here. My particular queer-promiscuous approach doesn’t seek to colonize, doesn’t seek to reproduce itself except as one option for inspiration and it has been my attempt toward performing method. And the ALFA women’s model is just one way of approaching social movement organizing, although it is an approach I believe in. It is a model that worked for their context and time, and that worked for them.

Because my study has also been archival in nature, I should probably connect my approach to the archive. In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida describes the archive as a prosthesis of memory—both an inscription and its residue, the simultaneous preservation of memory and an awareness of its fragility. The archival imperative is driven by the need to write oneself into history at the same time as memory is actively both created and destroyed, reworked and repressed, sorted as it is directed. Seen from a queer-promiscuous perspective, I believe that the archive becomes a more flexible tool for interpretation, insofar as it deconstructs any sacred or “pure” representation of history or memory. Instead, the archive comes alive for researchers: it inscribes and transmits memories, which enables it to be both destructive—foreclosing some possibilities—at the same time as it enables creative transformations of history. In the case of feminist and queer historiography, of course, we

often don't have such documents and must work creatively to construct not just what *might have been*, but also what *could have been*, in order to better understand the rhetorical possibilities for both the present and the future. But I'm also making the claim that even when we *have* documents from which to work, they can invite us to read them in a more subversive, playful, and confounding way, that we should strive dangerously or even scandalously to develop intimacies with our texts that fuck with social and perhaps even scholarly propriety. As Warner describes it, the queer world is "a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, [and] incommensurate geographies" (*Publics and Counterpublics* 198).

As I revise this project into a book, I plan to track down more former ALFA members, in order to offer them my writing, interview them, and obtain their feedback on my project. This final step is important, so that I can gain other perspectives on my project and fill in gaps that might not be documented by the text sources in the archive. I hope to provide a well-rounded and multifaceted view of the collective that accounts for many different aspects of collective rhetoric and memory. While a queer-promiscuous approach is obviously helpful in enabling us to take our research in more subversive, engaged, and connective directions, especially when we lack written artifacts and/or historical documentation of our subjects, we can also enact this approach even when we are relying on more traditional methods of research and in our teaching.

My approach has thus far enabled me to document the exigencies to which the ALFA women's rhetorical strategies responded. I have aimed toward highlighting the changes in their arguments as they addressed varied audiences, both within their own community and outside of it. I have attempted to articulate how cultural conditions might contain the

possibilities for meaningful inventive practices, while at the same time I have documented the process and experiences of this group for those who would emulate them in the future. My study therefore provides scholars with a new understanding of how politically oriented collectives invent arguments that directly impact the lives of real women.

## **Chapter Descriptions**

My dissertation is organized according to the rhetorical invention strategies ALFA engaged as they became relevant, depending on the available persuasive resources. I focus on several transformative moments that set the tone for ALFA's development as the organization grew and adapted.

"Inventing ALFA: Rhetorical Conditions Enabling Emergence" investigates the rhetorical situation that enabled the organization's emergence, beginning with a discussion of ALFA's first appearance in the local leftist newspaper, *The Great Speckled Bird*, and documents their activity up until they began producing their own monthly newsletter. I trace the lines of influence that converged to create the cultural scene of Atlanta during the 1970s and situate ALFA within the political context of the long civil rights movement, explaining how the national rise of the radical feminist and gay liberation movements, inspired by civil rights rhetoric, contributed to the members' revolutionary yet inclusive human rights approach to advocating for social change.

"Orienting ALFA: Name, Mission, Vision, Purpose" discusses the organization's pragmatic idealism and outlines the constitutive strategies that were central to enabling the group's collective identity and productive functioning in the early years. Here, I argue that the ALFA women's strategies created a physical and ideological space that became central to

their ability to negotiate within the restrictive cultural landscape. I analyze the rhetorical benefits of their committee structure, as they built an educational library oriented toward improving regional knowledge of women's health, sex education, and media literacy. I especially focus in on the importance of the formation of a temporary core membership group called Scarlett, and outline ALFA's audience-needs-based strategy toward moving forward. The first steps included: advertising their existence so other members would find them and so that they could craft an origins narrative, creating a statement of mission and purpose, organizing together with other groups that sought to serve the needs of oppressed people, writing a newsletter that they published monthly and that kept them on track as a group, developing a safe haven as a space that offered reflection and regrouping, beginning a library and archive of important movement literature for educating both themselves and others, and distributing a survey to their potential audience, to gather feedback about which needs the group could serve and how they might go about serving those needs. ALFA's orientation forwarded members' persuasive mission by providing a system that would advance the big-picture vision through small and concrete rhetorical goals.

“Inventing Political Education Process: Library, Archives, and Rap Groups” examines the Lesbian-Feminist movement nationally, which was actually composed of many groups like ALFA connected via serially published newsletters and correspondence. I analyze the strategies, educational material, and movement literature that shaped the movement as it evolved beyond the initial era. This chapter describes the particularly textual and archival nature of the radical lesbian feminist movement and its methodological underpinnings, and then it zooms in to examine the nature and rhetorical function of consciousness-raising rap groups. I explain the primary ways in which the women plugged

themselves into pre-existing knowledge, crafted revisions to that knowledge, and spread the information around to others who needed it.

“Living the Movement: Lesbian-Feminist Culture and Community” connects the ALFA women’s political activism to the social culture they built within the organization. This chapter describes the women’s program of what I am calling “lesbian literacy.” Because ALFA members felt that the majority culture was not ethical, they tried to figure out which better options might be possible, and experimented with their philosophies in their everyday lives to enrich their vision as they tried to live their political beliefs. They sought to infuse their politics into every aspect of their social culture, while at the same time they needed this social culture in order to do their education-oriented political activism.

“Negotiating Image: Outreach, Media, and *Ethos* Constraints,” I focus on a particularly transformative moment, from the late 1970s through the early 1980s, as politics became more infused with religion and the New Right began to argue that the political agenda and newfound power of gays and lesbians would endanger children and traditional familial structures and tear apart the moral fabric of the country. During this period of time, social movements nationally suffered the effects of backlash. The rhetoric that portrayed gays and lesbians as immoral turned out to be especially effective and had long-lasting consequences for the gay civil rights movement. This historic moment, catalyzed by Anita Bryant, resulted in a public relations battle: before Bryant’s “Save the Children” campaign, gay and lesbian rights groups had been gaining ground politically and some progressive legislation had been passed in a range of cities and states. Aside from sensational newspaper articles and “lesbian baiting” within the feminist movement, lesbians had primarily been working to overcome sensationalism or apathy. During this time period, however, much of

this legislation was overturned and lesbians were forced to engage a national rhetoric that more forcefully accused them of being a danger to society. This chapter analyzes ALFA's response to this moment of change, which would turn out to be significant in the long run: similar rhetoric continues to be effective well into the Twenty-First Century.

“Reinventing ALFA: Newsletters, Networks, and Diversity” focuses on debates about lingering social problems that were highlighted by the backlash inertia created by the success of the “Save the Children” campaign. I analyze the discussions that were facilitated by the newsletter communication networks during the 1980s, when appeals to identity-based narratives, the emergence of AIDS, and the rise of queer radical politics resulted in an internal crisis, on both the local and the national level. Now that ALFA members had developed a collective identity, social and educational culture, and image, they were able to address a broader range of concerns internal to the national movement. ALFA realized that even though the national gay and lesbian movement was rife with conflict and torn apart by the nation's inability to adequately address the problem of AIDS, they could continue to feel hopeful as they sought better opportunities, access, visibility, and non-judgmental acceptance for all people, helping their local community to be more responsive to the plight of those historically overlooked, ignored, and neglected.

In my conclusion, “Rhetorical Strategies and Actions for Political Education and Social Justice,” I outline ten strategies for social change and ten pragmatic actions for grounding the strategies in practices. Here, I synthesize the women's vision and process in a rhetorical invention-oriented manner, filtered through my own understanding of successful imperatives for advancing the cause of social justice through the kind of political education work the ALFA women were doing. I close with a more informal reflection on method and



directions for the future. That is, I attempt to further explain my method, relating my own story of what I have learned during the process of engaging with the ALFA women's approach as I wrote this dissertation.

## Chapter II

### Inventing ALFA: Rhetorical Conditions Enabling Emergence

Love... but not the kind with chains around your vagina and a short circuit in your brain...

– Rita Mae Brown, in *Rubyfruit Jungle*  
(Featured on a newsletter cover, ALFA Papers, Box 2.36)

A letter from “Vicki” that appeared in the local underground leftist newspaper, the *Great Speckled Bird*, on June fifth appears to have been a catalyst for ALFA’s formation. The *Bird* had recently been fire-bombed and was undergoing a transition of leadership, away from men and toward women: some of the women working for the newspaper had formed a “women’s caucus” to address their needs. Vicki’s letter describes the need for “women-identified” women to organize and thereby address the issue of sexism. She explains the perspective of women who might choose lesbianism as a way of enacting their political views as she advocates that the paper devote more coverage to lesbian content. Vicki ends her letter with the question, “What do you think?” indicating the need for something more, although she doesn’t quite seem to know what. She writes:

I don’t have much to do with men anymore, and for me that is a good thing. They have drained too much of my energy in the past—both personally and politically—and I don’t need it anymore. I’m a lesbian. Just to make that clear. And one of the reasons I stopped working with the *Bird* was because I wanted to be only with women. [...] I respect the *Bird* as it has developed, and understand clearly why it was the target of a firebombing. So this letter comes in the way of a reaching out, not a putting down. [...] Our womanly qualities make us the right people at this time to lead in every sphere of life. The liberation of women encompasses the liberation of all people [...] all women who are seeking to take control of their lives, and by doing so change the basic nature of the way we *all* live. [...] It was a distress to realize that at the rally two Saturdays ago there was no woman-identified speaker because there is

no organized woman's movement in Atlanta anymore. Women spoke, but none brought in the oppression of women. [...] the womanliness of the *Bird* has got to come more to the fore. That is something that will enlarge its scope, not narrow it. [...] Of course, who is straight today may be lesbian tomorrow, as I myself found out. [...] As we discovered in the early straight women's movement, and the *Bird* women's caucus itself discovered, straight white men have divided women by making themselves the focal point of life; in a similar way, they create an atmosphere in which it is very hard for lesbians and non-lesbians to be friends and work together.  
(*Bird*, 6/5/72, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 21)

In the weeks that follow the appearance of this letter, the *Bird* issues are filled with discussions of gender, sexual orientation, and disagreements about how best to enact a liberationist political vision. Vicki's discussion appears to have inspired others who may not have otherwise recognized themselves as lesbians, providing much of the energy for pulling the organization together into a specifically lesbian-feminist group. During this time, identifying as a lesbian was often articulated as a choice, as the term "woman-identified" was often employed to indicate that true feminists identify as lesbians. On the other hand, Vicki also represents the more radical feminist aspect of the organization, especially insofar as she blames men for the division more than many of the women did. Her letter here should thus not be taken as an accurate representation of the political views held by all ALFA women. Indeed, many of the women of ALFA were also "orientation lesbians," those who first sought out lesbian feminism or women's liberation because it helped meet a political and social need driven by their sexual preference. These women were probably brought into ALFA in the wake of the pride march, which took place shortly after the exchange of *Bird* articles Vicki's letter initiated.

What effect did Vicki's letter have, aside from igniting a contentious debate within the pages of the newspaper? I believe that it catalyzed the conditions that contributed to the formation of ALFA, although it is clear that stirrings of the need for the group to arise had

been happening for a while, and the original exigency articulated by the ALFA women varies. According to a newspaper article from 1972, the women saw themselves responding to the need for a specifically feminist group: “The long dry spell for Women’s Liberation in Atlanta ended this June with the formation of the Atlanta Lesbian/Feminist Alliance” (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 7). And yet in 1974 they explained that ALFA “was formed over one year ago to try to meet some of the needs of the *lesbian* community in Atlanta” (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 7, my emphasis). It is possible that this difference merely indicates the post-formation direction that the group took.

Still later, the women write: “The Atlanta Lesbian/Feminist Alliance (ALFA) formed in June of 1972 to try to meet some of the needs of the lesbian community in Atlanta, and to try to end prejudice and discrimination against all women, all gays, and especially lesbians” (Box 1 File 7). The original causes that the women rallied around included the fight against discrimination in the workplace and arrests for kissing in public, picketing the newspapers for not printing announcements about meetings, and the need to consciousness-raise, which they referred to as “rap groups,” where they theorized about their particular oppression. They also felt the need to be a social support system for one another. Their mission did not begin as uniformly political, but rather as women from many different groups (women’s rights, socialist, civil rights, anti-war, gay liberation) coming together because nobody else was discussing specifically lesbian feminist-oriented needs, and they realized that they were all of these other things, but uniquely lesbian feminists in particular.

An article published in the August 21<sup>st</sup> issue of the *Bird* publicizes ALFA’s emergence for the leftist community. The first article, titled, “Lesbians on the Move,” written by member Diana Kaye, tells an “orientation lesbian” story for others to hear. She explains

that after leaving the Air Force at the age of 36, she heard through the *Bird* of a Women's Center in Atlanta. She explains that she was mostly broke, and "very grateful to be taken in by a Lesbian collective." Diana, writing "for" ALFA, explains that

one of the visions of the Atlanta Lesbian/Feminist Alliance is a transition house to help women such as me make good their escape. We'd like to meet with other sisters, to share our visions and plans, to hear yours. Below is an outline of who we are, what we're up to. If you are either a Lesbian and/or a Feminist (and female), we invite 'you' to become a part of 'us.'

(*Bird*, August 21, 1972)

Here we see forecasted the debate between identification and division, which would continue to haunt the early years of ALFA's organization as the members struggled to define themselves while attempting to be inclusive.

The outline is in two parts, labeled "ALFA's FUNCTIONS" and "ALFA STATEMENT OF PURPOSE." In the functions section, ALFA claims:

We are a *political action group of gay sisters*. We are the large coordinating group for smaller consciousness raising group and an *umbrella group* for Women's projects and gay Women's projects. We will serve as a *communications center* for all these groups. We intend to *provide alternatives for ourselves and all sisters that will free Women to live outside sexist culture*. We aim to *reeducate* the non-homosexual community, society in general, by being *visible* and *vocal* at every opportunity. We aim to reach out to all sisters in order to establish solidarity. We intend to *work with gay brothers to further our mutual goals of gay liberation*. We intend to initiate demonstrations and public actions to emphasize our demands.

(*Bird* August 21, 1972, my emphasis)

The purposes section that follows it reads:

We believe in Women. We believe in Lesbians. To Lesbians, Women come first in every aspect of life. The worldwide oppression of Women by prevailing social and economic structures is reality to us. We recognize this but refuse to submit to it any longer. *We will lay down a basis for action. We call for an end to the heterosexual supremacy in government, culture, family, lifestyles*. We need, want, are actively seeking out the involvement of all Women—all Lesbians.

(*Bird* August 21, 1972, my emphasis)

In these early advertisements of ALFA's existence, we see a conflation of women and lesbians, an emphasis on actions and a recognition of the categories created by society and a desire to overthrow these categories, an attempt to overthrow the "divide and conquer" strategy of the patriarchy. While the group emerges as liberation-oriented and pedagogical, with several specific goals, the organization is obviously still very fuzzy in terms of their focus. On the other hand, ALFA does go on to enact many of these nascent goals, working to refine their ambitions while expanding their scope. It is apparent that the group is guided by an awareness of some movement activity, but the members are not yet plugged into a broader network, and they also didn't know what sorts of resources Atlanta women might need.

In the rest of this chapter, I account for the cultural forces that impacted the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance and outline the ways these forces influenced the way the organization emerged, while forecasting the rhetorical strategies members would eventually use to fight for causes related to feminist and lesbian civil rights as well as social justice more generally. ALFA created physical and virtual spaces for community building through various mediated communication technologies and regional outreach. ALFA's mission was also inherently pedagogical—they believed that positive changes would result from political education about social justice issues, and they worked to educate themselves along with their local community as they moved forward. ALFA eventually developed a model of activism that was enabled by communication networks that facilitated the transfer of strategies from the local to the national and vice-versa. Primarily, this chapter responds to the following questions: How and why did ALFA emerge as an organization? What social and historical conditions influenced the rhetorical situation that enabled this emergence? Why Atlanta—

what was the “ecological niche” that ALFA filled there, and how did the group come to find their home in this particular city?

ALFA stalled out repeatedly during their first year and a half of activity, due to a lack of organization and much in-fighting over their orientation. They fought over their name, with some members expressing reticence about using the word “lesbian” in their title, worried that it would scare off straight feminists who might otherwise be interested in working for their cause. They also wanted to form alliances with both straight and gay men, but felt the need to limit their group membership to women. Their debate over the boundaries of their group membership and mission almost devastated their organization. I argue that ALFA would have faded away completely if they had not received such an outpouring of encouragement in the form of hundreds of letters from their potential members and others who recognized the need for such a group. These letters helped shape ALFA’s eventual identity as they also made the exigency quite tangible. As ALFA members began advertising their existence in *The Bird*, and as they began to develop a sense of purpose and identity, women from across the south and even the rest of the nation wrote poignant letters that reinforced the need for their work. ALFA gained direction and focus as they responded to these letters in the form of a monthly newsletter and as they began to craft a mission statement—they were audience-oriented as they moved forward, relying on the material and rhetorical needs of their local and regional community to guide their activity. These letters reveal the conditions that gave rise to ALFA as they also reveal the key to the organization’s eventual success.

I emphasize several key strategies that ALFA embraced in order to cohere as a group and function in a productive way. In the first section, I describe the rhetorical resources

available from the “long civil rights movements” that the women referred to when inventing their own narrative history. They relied on *this* history of recent movements more than the history of lesbians in general, because ALFA women looked back to find that they did not know much about their own “foremothers,” but did feel a connection to the other groups of oppressed peoples who sought liberation in America during the 1960s. By telling this story of the shared historical context, I offer a critical overview of the social and political climate of the time as it intersected with gay liberation. Section two discusses the battles within feminism that led to the rise of the concept of “lesbian feminism” and that movement as a sub-movement within radical feminism. Feminists more broadly often sought to distance themselves from lesbians, and the history that has been written of this time often places the blame on lesbians for the backlash against feminism that ensued. Section three brings that discussion to the local level by focusing in on Atlanta in particular. Here, I emphasize the need for a “woman-identified woman” physical and ideological space, in order to demonstrate how Southeastern lesbian women recognized the need to come together in a way that protected them from the restrictive social forces they faced—the need to overcome the feelings of fear, isolation, and desperation that were the consequences of their marginalization.

### **The “Long Civil Rights Movement” and Liberation Legacies**

The women of ALFA explain in their first newsletter that while lesbians feel connections to other anti-imperialist movements and oppressed peoples, they have no history as a movement. As a result, they “borrowed” their history from what Jacqueline Dowd Hall calls the “long civil rights movement of movements,” (1235) and they especially articulated



ties to the Gay Liberation and radical Women's Liberation movements. In a way, the lack of a history enabled the ALFA women to write their own history, and in order to do so they relied on these "sibling" movements as a source of grounding and strength.

While ALFA's emergence was enabled by the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and their particularly Southern location, this relationship was reciprocal—lesbian rhetoric also affected Civil Rights Movement rhetoric and the South more broadly. That is, the rhetoric of these women arose out a tradition of civil rights that had not died by 1968, as many previous scholars have argued, but affected aspects of life beyond black America. the lesbian feminists of Atlanta extended civil rights ideas and values beyond the traditional "crest" of the movement during the mid-60s and thrust it forward into the 70s and 80s, using its empowering rhetoric to influence an even wider number of people. Nationally, this historical period was significant for the gay liberation movement in particular, because it immediately follows the bubbling up of small protests that led to the Stonewall riot (which has been referred to as the pivotal event that led to the increased visibility and power of the modern gay liberation movement). The gay liberation movement impacted radical feminism in a crucial way, because it helped encourage lesbian women to "come out" and be a more visible force in the movement. The continued fear of and suppression of their voices, however, created a volatile conflict within the broader women's liberation movement and led many lesbian feminists to form their own groups across the nation.

The concept of a "long civil rights movement" is relatively new; it encompasses the idea that the fight for civil rights during the 50s and 60s was not just an isolated moment of protest that established legal and social equality for black America. Articulated eloquently by Hall, an understanding of a long civil rights movement challenges our collective memory of

the movement as being confined to its “classical” phase, understood to begin with the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision and culminating with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, before its eventual decline. By limiting our understanding of the civil rights movement to this more ossified narrative of a triumphant decade led by a few notable voices, Hall argues that we both distort and undermine its impact, even as we elevate it as a period of special moral clarity. Such a historiography “prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time” (1234). Instead, Hall urges us to tell a “more robust, more progressive, and *truer* story” that recognizes connections stretching back to the New Deal that “inspired a ‘movement of movements’” (1235, emphasis in original). By placing the civil rights era in a more inclusive context, Hall argues, we both celebrate its impact and contextualize the efforts of those whom we have already elevated—the intent is not to diminish the leadership of Dr. King and others whose rhetorical savvy persuaded a nation, but instead to demonstrate a better understanding of the impact of the entire many “rhetorical situations” that preceded, occurred alongside, and continued after the grand narrative we already have.

While Hall’s argument admirably includes the grass roots organizing of impoverished workers and the efforts of women in its description of the “movement of movements,” it does not include any explicit mention of the lesbian and gay liberation efforts. We see that eventually the civil rights era inspired “legal protection of individuals from workplace discrimination” and that this protection “extended to a large majority of Americans, including not only people of color and *all women*, but also the elderly and the disabled” (1259, my emphasis). And yet there is a simultaneous failure on Hall’s part to recognize that “all women” is also a distortion of the real picture, insofar as the protections in place often

did not include discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Hall explains that a more inclusive understanding of “how the past weighs on the present” can “help cut through the miasma of evasion and confusion that cripples our creativity from the start” (1262) and yet in doing so she herself evades an examination of what scholars now refer to as the “birth” of the contemporary gay and lesbian liberation movement, which shares roots in the New Deal era, continued in a relatively underground way throughout the post-WWII period, and then erupted onto the scene during the late 60s and early 70s. Because Hall obviously intends to include this movement in the concept of the “long civil rights” era, I point this omission out not as a critique that undermines the essay’s overriding spirit or argument, but instead to demonstrate the extent to which our present blindnesses are both reflected in and perpetuated by our narratives of the past.

Despite these omissions in current histories of the LCR, the civil rights model actually influenced both the formation of ALFA and impacted its members’ understanding of the available means of persuasion. First, it is important to understand the situation of gay liberation as ALFA women encountered it. What we now refer to as the “modern” gay and lesbian liberation movement arose out of the “American homophile movement” of the 1950s and 60s. Historian Martin Meeker explains that the homophile movement, whose leaders primarily sought to build and facilitate communication networks linking geographically separated gay and lesbian men and women (but also linked them with heterosexuals and serious researchers seeking more knowledge about homosexuality), worked to resist the silencing effects of heteronormativity and were committed both to sharing knowledge and

developing pragmatic activist agendas (33). Homophile organizing activity took place across the nation, although it is still rather unknown to people not familiar with queer history.

This early version of LGBTQ movement organizing included the primarily male Mattachine Society, the lesbian-oriented Daughters of Bilitis, and the somewhat mixed-sex One, Inc. (Meeker 32). The work of these groups both indirectly and directly contributed to ALFA's emergence, as they laid the foundation for the "communication network" model that ALFA eventually adopted. Communication was a necessary antecedent to the recognition that gay and lesbian men and women were not as alone as it may have seemed, and these underground networks provided needed support and affirmation. It was necessary to remain under the radar both because the FBI and police sought to track and prosecute homosexual activity (with the help of legislation that outlawed bedroom behavior and public "obscenity") and also because same-sex orientation incurred such intense societal judgment. Thus, these early groups recognized the importance of facilitating communication between members of an otherwise invisible movement: without these crucial contact networks, gay and lesbian men and women would not have been able to contribute to the context that enabled the emergence of the modern gay liberation movement.

One model for ALFA was the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), which formed in 1955: historian Marcia Gallo explains that this organization, which had chapters across the country, emerged "as the modern U.S. civil rights movement gained momentum and was reaching widespread popular consciousness" (Gallo xx). It's helpful to remember that during this time period there *were* bars and other such venues that facilitated spaces where lesbians could meet, but that these spaces were not really "safe" spaces—they were also frequented by "johns seeking prostitutes, vice officers looking for violations, and tourists seeking a thrill"

(Meeker 77). The DOB fulfilled an early need for lesbian women to connect, but the women disagreed about the group's identity and initial vision. DOB members argued over whether or not they should include heterosexual women and gay men: some of them wanted a "supersecret, exclusively Lesbian social club" and others wanted to "take on a more public, activist stance" (Meeker 79). These debates set the stage for similar struggles that the ALFA women also negotiated. Ultimately, the DOB chose to focus on "finding a way out of the wilderness of half-truths and misinformation," emphasizing the importance of sharing information and knowledge, and creating more effective communication networks (Meeker 79). ALFA was familiar with the DOB and the rhetoric of their first newsletter echoed that of the first issue of the DOB's own publication, *The Ladder*, but they also noted the need for more activist organizing.

Despite ALFA members' complaints about the ineffectiveness of the DOB, these pioneers of gay rights contributed to the modern gay liberation movement in a more explicit way, helping transform the Stonewall riots into the Gay Liberation Front organization in New York, which is known as the "first" gay liberation organization. This key moment occurred in 1969, when the police attempted to raid the Stonewall Inn in New York. A two-week long riot changed the tenor of the earlier homophile movement and led to more widespread and open activism. Gallo explains that the DOB and Mattachine Society hosted a gay protest march in the wake of the Stonewall riots, and members from these groups, along with other protest participants, invented the idea of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in the exuberant aftermath of the march (151). It is somewhat misleading to point to the Stonewall riots and say that this event was the "beginning" of the gay liberation movement, because the DOB and Mattachine Society had established the roots that enabled the so-called gay liberation

movement to emerge (Gallo xxx). Yet it wasn't until the GLF formed that lesbians were able to see an example of what was possible, and the increased visibility of the gay liberation movement helped lesbian feminists to see that they were not as alone as they might have perceived. These examples of more visible organizing helped to demonstrate that gays and lesbians could, in fact, create spaces for further communication that could serve as a base for political activity. By recognizing the kairos and capitalizing on the preparation work that the homophile movement organizations had engaged in, the DOB and Mattachine Society helped shift the dominant rhetorical strategy from secret communication networks to a more overtly political agenda: gay liberation "came out," so to speak, transforming into an open and assertive movement. Thus, the Stonewall riots garnered national attention and the GLF organization that resulted from the riots served as a more publicized example of a group that others might emulate. These events inspired the formation of the Atlanta-based Georgia GLF, which in turn hosted its own march, and during the exuberant aftermath of that march, some of the women participants came together to form ALFA.

### **Challenges Inherent in a "Woman-Identified-Woman" Approach**

While gay liberation inspired a national lesbian feminist movement, lesbian feminists almost immediately encountered hostility as they attempted to work with straight feminists. This history is now rather ossified in our scholarship, as Alice Echols explains in her much-cited overview of radical feminism titled *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*. Echols includes lesbian radical feminists in a chapter titled, "The Eruption of Difference," in which she discusses the New York-based Radicalesbians and the Washington D.C. group, The Furies. Echols generalizes from the information she finds that focuses on

these two groups, so the upshot for our scholarship and our understanding of the realities of this time remains limited. Yet because Echols' work is so often read and referred to in the literature, her perspective is often taken for granted as representative and has become a part of the dominant narrative of radical feminism during the late 60s and early 70s, despite the notable lack of variety in the cases she relies on to make her argument.

Even though Echols's sweeping title includes the words "Radical Feminism in America," her research is limited to New York, Boston, Chicago, and Washington D.C. And even though the Boston-based Combahee River Collective was also a well-known and influential lesbian feminist group from the Northeast, Echols omits mention of this group, except to refer to them briefly in the epilogue, in the pages she devotes to women of color.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the "difference" chapter, Echols often dismisses lesbianism as "experimental" and "separatist": "there was certainly widespread experimentation with lesbianism," she writes, adding that it was often understood by heterosexual radical feminists as a "refuge from feminist activism" that may or may not have been linked to sexual desire for women (212). While it may have been true that heterosexual radical feminists viewed the new emergence of openly gay women as a temporary experiment, such a history overlooks the way in which lesbian feminists were consciously reworking the reception of the real sexual attraction they felt for one another into a political strength, as opposed to a moral aberration.

I dwell on Echols's observations because they conflict with so much of what I have discovered to be true about the ALFA women, and because I hope that in the future we will conduct more archival research or gather further evidence rather than continue to generalize

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<sup>7</sup> For more about this group and other feminist organizations who faced the unique oppressive conditions of racial oppression, see especially Benita Roth's *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*.

from these two groups' histories in a taken-for-granted way. The narrative we find here reiterates the stereotype that lesbians are asexual: in order to "legitimize lesbianism," Echols writes, the Radicalesbians "had to persuade feminists that lesbianism was not simply a bedroom issue," which they did "by redefining lesbianism as a primarily political choice and by locating the discourse within the already established feminist framework of separatism" (216). While Echols' intervention here makes an important point about rhetorical strategy, readers might be left with the misconception that lesbian feminists were not sexually attracted to women nor having sex with them. Unfortunately, Echols replicates the historical conflict as she brings it to the level of scholarship, implying that radical lesbian feminists are to blame for the rise of essentialist cultural feminism as the only strategic answer to the highly divisive debates about the place of same-sex oriented women in the movement:

By presenting lesbianism as the political solution to women's oppression, and by invoking essentialist ideas about female sexuality, lesbian-feminists managed to sanitize lesbianism. But, as we shall see, this formulation of lesbianism had serious consequences for lesbian and heterosexual feminists alike.

(218-219)

In her analysis, heterosexual radical feminism emerges as the victim of the lesbian feminist presence in the movement. She claims that "[f]or heterosexual women who did not come out [as lesbians], the situation was *perhaps worse*" than it was for lesbians because "heterosexuality was disparaged" and "heterosexual feminists were often *made to feel* like the movement's backsliders" (Echols 239, my emphasis). Here, we see that, regardless of the fact that the rest of the culture was incredibly deft at regulating sexual norms and gender roles, Echols claims that it was might have been worse to be a heterosexual feminist, because their sexuality was impugned by lesbians, calling The Furies' political stance "lesbian



chauvinism” (231), and blaming lesbians for driving women out of the movement and failing to organize around abortion and child care (240-241).

My research indicates the degree to which the ALFA women in fact rallied around “typically straight women” causes with as much fervor as any other issue—many lesbians were mothers—as it also demonstrates how the national movement literature actively advocated against lesbian chauvinist attitudes, even though some of the internal movement rhetoric indeed supports that particular point. At any rate, Echols’ analysis certainly indicates the degree to which the dynamic between straight women and lesbians was ultimately very unproductive and resulted in polarization within the larger movement. From my perspective, lesbian feminist groups like ALFA sought to work in the same organizations as heterosexual feminists yet felt themselves to be unwelcome and separated off into their own groups for self-protective purposes, preferring to work in coalitions with straight feminists instead.

According to Robert Asen’s 2002 article in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, oppressed individuals, after finding their interests and needs negatively interpreted by others, must first engage (mis)representations before they are able to assert their own viewpoint. Relying to Michael Warner’s and Nancy Fraser’s theorizing about publics and counterpublics, Asen argues that the dynamics of the public imaginary are such that they confer varying degrees of advantage to the dominant members of the public in three crucial ways: first, the representations as crafted by the visible and vocal dominant group hurt the credibility of members of the oppressed group; second, this marginalization works by “concentrating historical animosities in negative images”; and third, the result is an atmosphere that “constrains the choices of successive participants (358). In this case, even though the straight radical feminists had been marginalized by the system of the patriarchy, they also oppressed

the voices of lesbian feminists and characterized them in ways that impugned their credibility and the ability to craft a different interpretation. As a result, lesbian feminists faced the need to counter the negative images of same-sex attraction; prompted to greater degrees of openness by the gay liberation movement, they asserted their sexuality and linked it with their politics. Yet the lingering historical animosity toward homosexual orientation provided the heterosexual radical feminists with the rhetorical resources to craft lesbian feminists as ridiculously “separatist,” while distancing themselves by belittling lesbian sexuality as “experimental” and politically ineffective. Lesbian radical feminists, then, had few choices available to them except to work in their own way toward “liberation.” Facing marginalization in both the gay liberation movement and the radical feminist movement, lesbians ultimately chose to form their own movement that included a melding of politics and same-sex orientation. Many of the lesbian feminists formed coalitions with both gay liberation and women’s liberation groups, while also needing a space from which to articulate narratives that would counter those crafted by the more privileged groups whose voices controlled the discussion.

A more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the need for groups like ALFA to become “separatist” during this time period should emphasize the ways in which lesbians also worked toward the common goals of other oppressed groups. Such a history might emphasize connection and aligned interests, rather than “difference” and vitriol. For example, rather than positing the linkage of lesbianism with radical feminism as a failure upon which the failure of the ERA might be blamed, it would be helpful to look at the more widespread reasons why the ERA failed. It is also helpful to consider the *positive* impact that lesbians had on these kinds of causes. ALFA women passionately fought for the cause of the ERA,

working with straight feminists in a cooperative organization called Georgians for the ERA (GERA). In a footnote, Tate directs us to several sources where we may read more about the failure of the ERA. One of these studies, Jane J. Mansbridge's *Why We Lost the ERA*, explains that there were, in fact, many reasons why the ERA failed. Mansbridge explains that a multifaceted interplay of political and cultural forces at work. Rather than blaming lesbian feminism for the failure of the ERA, Mansbridge asserts that, at most, the STOP ERA campaign relied on fears that the ERA would disintegrate gender categories and thereby serve to legalize gay marriage. Instead of discussing the association of feminism with lesbianism, Mansbridge explains how the arguments surrounding the ERA centered around the supposed effects of the legislation, which were wildly exaggerated by both proponents and opponents (3). Lesbians *did* "Love the ERA," as Schlafly reminded the voting public (qtd. in Tate 22), and that position probably *did* make an impression on the homophobic opposition, but the rhetorical strategies employed were more varied than our narrative has indicated thus far.

### **Atlanta as the "Southeastern Lesbian Mecca"**

I was glad to see some of you in Tallahassee, made me homesick for the 'southern lesbian mecca' as I term it sometimes. I bow to the north four times daily and thank Her for Atlanta."

-- Alice from Florida (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 2)

John Howard, in his 1997 introduction to the "first book of Southern lesbian and gay history" explains that Southern history has largely ignored queer culture, while American lesbian and gay history has tended to focus on the East and West Coasts, excluding the South (4). While the work of Howard, Martin Duberman, and Donna Jo Smith have sought to recover some of this history, the lack of a more robust historical tradition documenting queer

activity in the South continues to impact scholars in *all* fields, and it is replicated in rhetoric and composition studies, where, with the exception of work that has discussed the rhetoric of the African-American civil rights movement, geographical biases have led to a dearth of scholarship specifically identifying the American South as a locus of interest. The local time-space that provides the context for ALFA was such that the women who came to form the group eventually achieved a critical mass of lesbian women who carved out a space for themselves in the Little Five Points neighborhood in Atlanta. ALFA members rented a house that provided both a space from which to organize and a home for an archive of information that they then redistributed to other lesbians in the greater Southeast.

The legacy of the civil rights movement combined with the rural position of many women in the South to create a disproportionately large lesbian community in the city of Atlanta. That is, the “white flight” phenomenon of the 60s opened a space for a lesbian community to inhabit. As Hall explains, this idea that we refer to as “white flight” also occurred elsewhere across the nation, but post-reconstruction policies had led to the unfortunate socio-economic positioning of many blacks in the South, making them especially vulnerable to the red-lining housing practices of the time. Hall points out, “what came to be known as ‘white flight’ was caused not just by individual attitudes but also by a panoply of profit- and government-driven policies. Local zoning boards and highway building choices equated ‘black’ with ‘blight,’ frightening away white buyers and steering investment away from black urban neighborhoods” (Hall 1241). Thus, a complex of local racial and economic forces in Atlanta had left the Little Five Points neighborhood “in transition,” as Chesnut and Gable explain, and the resulting lack of “established businesses, mainstream organizations, or tradition-minded civic leaders” contributed to the availability of inexpensive housing and “an

‘anything is possible’ view of the future” for Atlanta lesbians (252-3). Free from the judgmental eye of the mainstream, this neighborhood provided an opportunity for the influx of lesbians seeking to live communally in a socialist-inspired manner.

Yet another narrative of ALFA’s emergence explains the organization in the context of civil rights: “ALFA developed out of the women’s liberation and gay liberation movements of the early 1970’s when women who had been active in anti-war and civil rights work came together to work for their own rights” (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 2, circa 1988). They saw themselves both as arising out of but also dividing off from the multitude of other movements of the time. As Chesnut and Gable explain it, the living community enabled a critical mass of lesbians who’d been a part of other groups to form a unique lesbian organization; Chesnut and Gable point out that the Atlanta GLF had been “founded in 1971 on the model of New York City’s GLF, formed after the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion” (254). The 1972 Gay Pride march, sponsored by the GLF, inspired lesbians who’d been involved with the *Bird*’s women’s caucus (Atlanta Women’s Liberation), the Atlanta GLF, and others from the Socialist Workers’ Party to form the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (Chesnut and Gable 254). According to James T. Sears, the intermingling of lesbian women from these groups meant that “a bunch of women were becoming feminists,” collectively started living together, and began coming out (109). It was this collective recognition of same-sex desire and communal living situation, that combined with both their political awareness and the perception of sexism from the GLF and homophobia from women’s liberation groups that brought ALFA together into a unified organization.

The lesbian communal living situation of the Little Five Points neighborhood can be attributed, in part, to the influx of young leftist women who had come to Atlanta as

participants in the Venceremos Brigades. According to Chesnut and Gable, Atlanta had been one of the staging areas for the Brigades, composed of volunteers who went to Cuba to provide labor as support for Castro's government (277). These women, some of whom were not originally from Atlanta, but had stayed there after their Brigades work, joined forces with the women who worked with the underground leftist newspaper *The Great Speckled Bird* to form the short-lived Atlanta Women's Liberation (Chesnut and Gable 253). The formation of this new community, enabled by the vacuum of white flight and the influence of leftist political ideologies, quickly flourished and attracted other like-minded women. As Chesnut and Gable explain, this initial appearance of a lesbian community served as a catalyst and snowballed, leading many other lesbians to leave their hometowns and move to Atlanta from all over the Southeast, excited by the political and social opportunities a strong and public lesbian community would provide (252-5). By 1971, all of the elements for ALFA's emergence onto the scene were in place: the Atlanta GLF, also composed of men and women who were *Bird* staffers, overlapped with those women who were a part of Atlanta Women's Liberation, who lived together in a supportive and like-minded community that was in the process of articulating a specifically lesbian identity for itself.

In her study of Southern Women's Liberation groups, Ashli Quesinberry Stokes argues that many of the regional challenges that Southern feminists faced stemmed from the social construction of the concept of a proper "Southern Lady." Stokes points out that social pressure to live up to Southern Lady standards meant that Southern women faced a higher psychological barrier, especially when this consideration is coupled with "fundamentalist patriarchal thinking" that rooted women as the obedient wife in the nuclear family structure (96). Although Stokes omits a consideration of lesbian women in her discussion, the letters

ALFA received reinforce Stokes's observation that the social climate of the South might have been particularly recalcitrant for women who threatened the forces that worked to keep women "in their place." Stokes's analysis, while prescient in many ways, also illustrates the consequences of overlooking lesbian feminism in general and ALFA in particular. Stokes bases her claims about Southern women on a search of the Women's History Archive, and she finds only five SWL groups, one of which was the short-lived Atlanta Women's Liberation, and one of which was a lesbian group (out of Knoxville). Between the years of 1973 and 1974, other Southern radical lesbian feminist groups write to ALFA—one in Blacksburg, VA, another in New Orleans, LA, and one in Charlotte, NC to name a few. Thus, the absence of lesbian feminist voices from Stokes's analysis should not be taken as indicative of their lack of activity in the South. Rather than focus on why Stokes found it expedient to ignore the conditions that lesbian Southern feminists faced, I would instead like to extend her discussion by including some of the voices from a few women who wrote to ALFA during its first two years in existence. Reading these women's letters is encouraging in a way, because they convey a spirit of hopefulness, but it is also incredibly dispiriting, because the sense of desperation, isolation, and loneliness is so palpable.

And yet, by excluding lesbian women, Stokes misses the full extent of the way that these forces worked. As I will now explain, In fact, the correspondence that ALFA received can point us toward three important trends: Southern lesbian women felt 1) fearful and uninformed 2) simultaneously invisible yet also exposed, and 3) isolated yet inspired by the possibility of new narratives.

ALFA offices began to be flooded with letters from women all across the South. It is important to note, as Jacqueline Rhodes does, that the radical feminists were "distinctly

textual” as a movement. My reading here not only responds to Rhodes’s request that we examine the more radical voices of this distinctly textual movement that have thus far been left out, but it also responds to Saralyn Chesnut’s and Amanda Gable’s call for more studies of “lesbian feminism both as sociopolitical theory and *as the always-contested, always-evolving embodiment of that theory in the social practices and institutions of a specific community in a specific time and place*” (246, my emphasis). In the case of ALFA, this specific time and place is the Southeast. Many of the regional challenges that Southern feminists faced when articulating a collective identity stemmed from the social construction of the concept of a proper “Southern Lady,” Stokes explains, pointing out that social pressure to live up to Southern Lady standards meant that women in the South faced a higher psychological barrier than other women, especially when this consideration is coupled with “fundamentalist patriarchal thinking” that rooted women as the obedient wife in the nuclear family structure: Southern women “faced the problem of seeing themselves of agents of change” as a result of being conditioned into passive deference and civility (96).

The correspondence from the Southern women (including those who were married to men, single, and coupled with other women) who wrote to ALFA reinforces Stokes’s observations about the especially recalcitrant social climate of the South. The social, political, and religious forces often worked especially hard to keep women “in their place” psychologically. The letters I include here are all from the first two years of ALFA’s existence, and they attest to the challenges that ALFA members faced prior to and during their formation as they help us understand the rhetorical situation. We come away with a greater knowledge of why it became so important for the ALFA women to invent a space for



social change that would both provide solace and opportunity for discussion of particularly queer exigencies.

The women who wrote to ALFA indicate that they suffered as a result of loneliness, isolation, fear, and a lack of knowledge. A woman named Melissa writes,

I was looking thru my The New Woman's Survival Catalog and I stumbled across your organization. I wanted to cry. I have been an Atlanta resident since 1968 and I think if I had discovered ALFA two years ago, I never would've joined the Air Force. 'Coming out' in the service is almost impossible—especially in the Security Service overseas.

(ALFA Papers Box 3 File 2)

She sends words of encouragement and explains that she wants to join once she leaves the military. A follow up letter from Melissa, dated one month later, indicates that she has decided to be a part of ALFA even if it means that she suffers the consequences with her career. Her need to be a part of the group even from far away is a testament to the powerful effects of even symbolic connection. She explains, "I think I'll take my chances with the OSI and I hope you'll put me on your mailing list. Enclosed please find my membership fee. I've already waited too long" (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 2).

In some cases the psychological barrier of fear appears to stem from the lack of availability of information on lesbian feminism as a real possibility. Carol from Atlanta speaks to the power of her upbringing as she writes:

I have gathered as much courage as possible into my hand and am wielding a pen in revolution of everything I was taught as a child: I am interested in ALFA! [...] So—please let me hear from you soon so that I might finally (hopefully) 'find myself'—okay? [...] If you decide to write instead of call, please be discreet—Remember, I am still 'passing' and am, quite frankly, SCARED to DEATH!!!!

(ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3)

In Carol's letter, it's clear that she is not yet comfortable with her newfound sexual orientation and decision to try to be active in a lesbian feminist organization, but she also

feels like she owes it to herself to “find” herself, scared as she is of what that might mean for the rest of her life.

In addition to the psychological barriers Southern women encountered, they also appear to have been especially sensitive to recognizing the consequences of attempting to overthrow the status quo. Stokes paints a picture of a fearful climate in the South, noting that Southern women understood firsthand the reality of civil rights beatings, fire bombings, and the potential for “jail rapes along with state-sanctioned violence” (96). Indeed, the women who write to ALFA also had the police and the KKK to worry about. For example, Linda in Montgomery, Alabama writes to ALFA to plan a time for the women in Atlanta to visit, and her description of the situation sounds cautious, if strategic:

There is a real security problem involved with the snooping white cowboys around here. [...] Usually when there’s much commotion around the house pickup truck pigs drive around here looking a lot—I just don’t know them well enough to only ignore them—I’ll be in this house myself after June 15—for a couple of weeks. Now as strong as I feel I still got to think things ‘out’ when it comes to KKK possibilities. They already hate us with assumed heterosexuality.

(ALFA Papers Box 3 File 2)

Even though Linda appears to be strong and would like to believe that there wouldn’t be a real problem, it’s easy to sense how nervous she feels, as she refers to the KKK as “the snooping white cowboys” whom she doesn’t know “well enough to only ignore them.” She points to the force of heteronormativity with the inclusion of her last sentence, noting that her local Klan also appears to have included regulating sexual orientation among their roles. Clearly, the atmosphere is enough to force her to rethink the situation of having a large group of lesbians around to tempt those who would protect the established order.

Reading these women’s letters is incredibly dispiriting, because the sense of desperation, isolation, and loneliness is so palpable. Libby in Tennessee gives voice to the

desperation that results from her feeling of oppression. She writes, “I turned in my 2 week notice to quit at work and told my parents that I was going to Atlanta. Things were all right until they found out the women I had contacted were gay! (They still think I am straight.) I’m really going insane here and I need to ask for some more help” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3). It is clear that she felt a sense of inspiration after contacting ALFA women, but she admits the need for more support. Libby’s situation is a testament to the powerful difficulties created by a feeling of being alone and scared to reveal her orientation even to her parents, for fear that they will not understand. She asserts, “I was considering just telling them to fuck it and go on to Atlanta but they love me too much and they just can’t understand. I really need to move but I just don’t know what to do” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3). It is clear that she understands the need for a more empathetic environment, and yet she doesn’t want to alienate herself from the support of her parents. She ends her letter with a cry for help and an explanation that she needs other women who might understand her plight: “Please write soon I’m desperate! It’s been so long since I’ve met any women with any shit together” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3). Many other women who write letters also reflect her feeling of desperation and express the desire to move to Atlanta in order to escape an unhealthy environment.

Two different women from Montgomery, Alabama write to ask if the women in Atlanta can connect them with a local group. The fact that they knew about ALFA, and yet were unaware of any other lesbian women in Montgomery indicates the importance of visibility and the consequences of a lack of visibility. Carolyn writes, “are there organizations around Montgomery? What would be the procedure to become involved in ALFA? I would definitely travel to Atlanta if your organization is the only one in the area

(Box 3 File 2). Carolyn explains that she is a counselor, recently relocated from Iowa and would like to develop resources for lesbian women in her area, but needs to find them first. Carolyn also asserts the need to “be with some people every now and then who do not make snide remarks about ‘queers’” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 2). It is clear that she understands the power of even small comments that sustain the heterosexual norm and reinforce the traditional gender roles. Kay is an example of a woman in Montgomery who could use Carolyn’s help: “As a gay woman who has parted with my lover and live now with my unknowing family, I desperately need contact with others. Please sent me information on any any [sic] activities (including bars) in my area” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 2). As Kay’s letter indicates, lesbian women often relied on their families for financial support and yet did not feel like they could offer the kind of emotional affirmation they clearly needed. This isolation and loneliness, in other words, had both material and psychological consequences.

Many letters sound like they were written by women who felt an imperative to contact ALFA members even as these women also express the courage required to get in touch. Elaine in Atlanta writes that “for the last few weeks, I’ve had a kind of desperate need to talk to somebody, and the more I thought about it, the clearer it became it was you people I should be talking to” (Box 3 File 2). Elaine’s letter again indicates a feeling of desperation, and it sounds like a part of her struggle required the recognition that ALFA women might be able to speak to her experience. She explains:

After a lot of hesitation, I finally tried calling you yesterday, but the number I rang, which I got from THE BIRD, was out of order. So would you please contact me some way and tell me where your place is and what your phone number is and when is a good time I can come and who can I talk to. I feel lost and I think I need help (and I know I need someone to talk to) and telling myself I don’t need help isn’t working anymore.

(ALFA Papers Box 3 File 2)

Her short typewritten letter tumbles the words out onto the page and ends with a plea for communication and contact information. This kind of letter, expressing both “hesitation” and a recognition of needing help indicates the powerful force of failed attempts to assimilate into a heteronormative culture that does not recognize—much less validate—difference in sexual orientation. Or, as another write explains it: “I understand ALFA; for, I understand love. But, I sometimes forget about the rights of love to love. Just too much to swallow sometimes. I know” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3). The self-doubt and need for support that these letters assert reaffirm the intensity of the situation that Southern lesbian women faced. Mention the effect—the impact of reading the letters in the archive.

Yet, contacting ALFA comes to represent the turning point in each of these women’s lives; so at the same time as these women give ALFA members encouragement to keep going, they also tell them which direction the organization should go. They need ALFA to be “out-front” and to educate other women so that they can “save” themselves and others. They need ALFA to be flexible and open. Juanita from Kentucky writes: “I like your idea of ‘take what is valuable or interesting to you, and give what you can in return.’ It’s refreshing and encouraging to find a group of people who allow people to be and to grow in their own way and see value in what each has to offer” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3). Even self-identified straight white men write in to point out what they think is refreshing about ALFA’s perspective. A man writes in to explain:

I think that your cause is just mis-understood and most of the harassment which you must endure is due mostly to male vanity as most men think of themselves as God’s gift to womanhood—an idea which is absolutely foolish! Keep up your good work and face the world as it appears. Someday, workers and lovers such as yourselves will remove the stigma of being gay and then everyone can realize that love does exist between two girls. When that day arrives, you will have been the pioneers of peace and love.

(ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3)

These varied letters of encouragement helped the membership to understand that words like “unity,” “peace,” “love,” and “understanding” are important to return to.

One woman, Janice, describes in detail what she calls her “metamorphosis” from a married Southern woman into her feminist awakening: she explains that it took a gradual build-up coupled with a catalyst before she was able to overcome her passivity. Janice explains that she is very shy and discusses cutting off her long hair, buying everything in lavender, and trying to spread the word about ALFA to a woman she discovered reading a book that was supposedly written by Janice Joplin’s lover. Her decision split from her husband culminates in her decision to join ALFA. Janice writes:

Well, it finally happened—the straw that broke the camel’s back—so to speak. Last night my husband—yes, I’m married—hiss—to those that don’t already know me, got mad and threw a frozen package at me and said as he left, ‘At least I don’t run around with Queers.’ I answered quickly back (rather loudly), ‘Hell, your living with one.’ I also said, ‘They’re better people than you’ll ever be.’

(ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3)

As this letter makes clear, Janice has had a difficult time overcoming her reticence to talk back and join up with the lesbian feminists of ALFA, even though she has felt for several years that she was a lesbian. She is able to garner enough strength to own her sexual orientation and also turn the tables on her husband and defy him outright. Her letter often appears jubilant and is peppered with funny insights that appear to have arisen from her sense of satisfaction with finally breaking free of the gender roles and short-sightedness of others around her.

Janice’s letter reflects the observation that it wasn’t enough for a Southern woman who had a feminist awakening simply to see herself as an agent of change. Rather, women “realized that not only did they need to get members to act, but also that they needed to convert nonmovement women in order for their efforts to be successful” (Stokes 102).

Janice's evolution into a feminist with a queer politics becomes obvious as she writes about the other Southern women that she encounters and tries to "convert." She continues:

For the first time in my life I want to get involved. It's between quarters so I have a little more time to spare. I really want to help in any way I can even when school starts. God, surely I'm not the only gay woman at school—sometimes I wonder. It gets very lonely. [...] Anyone that knows me even a little knows I'm a devoted Women's Libber. I really get heated up about it. Especially to those poor brainwashed women who defend their stereotyped role dedicated to their 'man.' How could they be so blind? If that is what they want then it is their right, and they deserve it, but I tell them there are millions of women who reject the role and should have a right to be free—and not by men freeing us—God we'd never hear the end of it—but by us freeing ourselves!!!! If the men had any sense they would realize this would free them too. Poor fools!!

(ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3)

In her writing, Janice's use of the word "brainwashed" and emphasis on the need for freedom through the rejection of stereotyped roles reflects her understanding of an almost religious dogmatism—a desire to "save" the others by freeing them from their oppression, and a pity for those who have yet to see the light. This letter reflects a broader pattern of transitioning from ignorance into empowerment, and a desire to help other women understand not just that there is a solution to their loneliness and fear, but that the answer is the movement, and in this case, ALFA represents that movement.

The women articulate an overall narrative of overcoming and ALFA becomes central to this narrative in the move from loneliness to community and a sense of collective history, from desperation to empowerment, from ignorance to enlightenment, and self-actualization. These letters helped reassure the organization's members that they are making a concrete difference in women's lives, as they also offer productive feedback about what ALFA might come to mean to women in the future. The ALFA members are thus equipped with new strategic power: they know how to argue that they are not all of these things that others have made them out to be as they assert their ethical values and move forward armed with the

knowledge of the rhetorical resources needed to attract and retain members: we are strong, we've got our shit together, and we're not living in fear. "Here's a place where you can be who you want to be."

I'd like to close by pointing out that if it weren't for their strength in numbers, they might not have had the ability to come together and come out. Whereas many traditional "community" structures have an already-provided linkage, such as family, or neighborhoods, these women had to first understand themselves and then find one another, in a time when it was very intimidating to do so. I have chosen to highlight these documents because they foreshadow some of the issues that will continue to be salient throughout the time of ALFA's activity. They generated enough of a community and developed a thorough enough library of movement literature that their political education mission really fell out of that quite naturally. In many ways, even though these women faced a more difficult situation than we do now, they were also smarter, more organized, and more hopeful about it, and so we have a lot to learn from their advocacy work. I hope this has provided a sense of how ALFA responded to the needs of its members and formed into a group, as the women faced a daunting environment and developed an understanding of the major challenges they wanted to address.



## Chapter III

### **Orienting ALFA: Name, Mission, Vision, Purpose**

Give me an 'A'! Give me an 'L'! Give me an 'F'! Give me an 'A'! What have you got? DYKES! DYKES! DYKES!

-- Chant of the ALFA-Omega softball team (*AFLA Newsletter* No. 12)

Probably by now, you have received everything in the mail from religion to indecent proposals, but I assure you that this note is neither, but is intended as a letter of commending your two associates who had the courage to appear on a radio station recently. I wish I had your infinitesimal fortitude! However, for economic reasons, I dare not let my true feelings be known in public. As you probably have guessed, I am male, middle-aged and straight, but I can really understand a feeling of anyone who is in love.

-- Letter from Martin (ALFA Papers 3.3)

The above letter, written to ALFA during the first two years of her organization, indicates that the women were reaching beyond those outside of their desired demographic, and yet even these people came to be allied with ALFA's cause and wrote in with their support. It also indicates the wide variety of correspondence that ALFA received during these early years (indeed, his guesses about the kind of responses the organization received are very accurate, indecent proposals and all). Such feedback helped provide the members with the "infinitesimal fortitude" to continue their work was crucial to their ability to form into a productive group. Yet the members' desire to work with people like Martin also led to the heated debates that almost tore the group apart during the early years. The early organization didn't really know what it wanted to be for the first year and a half or so. At first, ALFA tried to be everything to everyone, imagining itself as an "umbrella group" that could provide a loose structure under which multiple sub-groups would operate. To some extent, this was the

eventual form that the organization would take, but only after the women realized that they needed to constrain the kinds of sub-groups that would be allowed to function underneath the umbrella. The decision to limit the membership possibilities and main thrust of ALFA's social change collective energy to women and lesbians gave the group structure even as it caused many to worry that they would be seen as anti-men or anti-heterosexual by those with whom they wanted to work in coalitions. A few women even disengaged from the organization as a result of the votes that limited their membership to lesbians and excluded men from the space of the house.

During the first two years of ALFA's existence, the organization struggled to cohere as a group oriented toward the same objectives. Two key moves that brought the women together (in addition to the decisions to narrow their membership possibilities): 1) the creation of a short-lived steering committee, and 2) the creation of an organizational newsletter. A third move—playing softball in the city league—brought ALFA a steady influx of members. The steering committee named itself “Scarlett” and the core group of women who formed it designated themselves in charge of the coordination and management of the organization, in order to pragmatically orient it. ALFA had been reluctant to establish such a committee, because it seemed to be antithetical to the members' political beliefs (too patriarchal, bureaucratic, and hierarchical); however, it had become obvious that the organization would have floundered had it not been for the creation of this sub-group “whose purpose is the creation of a structure that will help ALFA move in the directions she sees fit, by acting directly upon the goals and objectives set up by the membership” (ALFA Papers Box 6, Newsletter #1). Scarlett began self-producing ALFA's monthly newsletter, and both of these actions worked in a performative way to help members overcome the lack of

previous organizational structure and the differences that had served to divide them, as they organized and invented the shared history of the group. This steering committee eventually gave ALFA a strong sense of shared purpose as the newsletters helped them craft a narrative that reinforced their missions as it offered them a guideline for the future and a self-published and distributed assertion of “group identity.” By the summer of 1974, the organization’s “out” softball teams, one of which was named the ALFA-Omegas, brought greater visibility and publicity to the group, attracting even more members. As Elizabeth Knowlton explains in a document titled “How to Start a Lesbian-Feminist Organization,” ALFA’s numbers grew to over one hundred by the end of that summer, and it was during this time that the organization began to mobilize in a more wide-reaching manner (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 19).

In the rest of this chapter, I discuss the members’ work to constitute and orient around a recognizable and functional collective identity. I focus on the particular challenges that ALFA faced as the members established themselves as a specifically lesbian-feminist social movement organization and innovated a structure for their group and move it forward in a way that would respond flexibly to the needs of lesbians in the greater Atlanta region. They identified a coherent guiding name, mission, and vision as they also experimented with this theory in their everyday lives. Ultimately, the women of ALFA aimed toward integrating their principles and ideals with the need for pragmatism. They also attempted to change their local culture, and yet recognized that compromises were necessary because they were embedded within the hierarchical power structure they sought to change. I highlight the strategies that the members found successful and I also describe the challenges they faced during this crucial process of articulating their mission and enacting their objectives.

Primarily, this chapter responds to the following questions: What were the most pressing needs that the group worked to address? How did they prioritize their goals? How did the members negotiate difference from within the group, in order to articulate a mission, choose objectives, and move forward in a productive way? Which strategies did ALFA members employ in order to cohere successfully, and what were the outcomes of those decisions? While answering these questions, I provide an account of ALFA's foundational first steps. In a time when most radical feminist groups died out after a year or two, and in a place where gender role subversion was particularly threatening, it is impressive that ALFA was able to come together at all, much less continue functioning for twenty-two years. I argue that in order to come together effectively, the members needed to unite in purpose and name, while also creating both a physical and ideological space for invention. These first steps were more difficult than they may sound, because many lesbians in the South during this time were either passing as straight and/or unaware of their own sexual orientation. What's more, they also did not know of or feel much of a connection to a history of other lesbians historically (instead, they felt more closely allied with other new social movements such as women's liberation and gay liberation). Thus, the ALFA women struggled with the freedom that came with the novelty of their situation—while it may seem liberating to have the opportunity to invent a history, ideology, and purpose for moving forward, it also presented unique challenges. Within lesbian feminist organizations such as ALFA, radical feminists continued to experiment with organizational structures and critique inflexible traditional systems of power and institutional oppression in ways not reducible to our current descriptive models.

## **What's in a Name? Negotiating Composition and Objectives**

ALFA struggled with the limitations imposed by the very practical need to organize into a coherent and cohesive group, because they didn't want to claim special identification with any one cause or movement. Instead, they wished to be aligned with a new approach, rather than any one identity. ALFA members disagreed and debated about the vision of their organization and as a result encountered difficulty when articulating a mission and aims. They eventually discovered the importance of metacommunication, which enabled the women to move forward while working with their differences. The members went back to the root of their agreements in order to overcome their problems. In this section, I trace the difficulty they encountered as they worked out the name and the membership constitution.

Theoretically, the women did not look to identity-based or minority-based rhetorical strategies, although they borrowed from and allied with such groups. They did not ascribe to individualist nor separatist philosophies, although they borrowed from and allied with groups that saw through those perspectives as well. Instead, they continued their attempts to make their philosophy match up with their pragmatist understanding of their own set of local realities and joined up with those who seemed to be traveling in a similar direction. In the newsletter they documented their work as they continued to look for ways to unify with others without losing themselves along the way. While they did not exclude academic perspectives, ALFA members did not prioritize them above other epistemological systems, and instead read and theorized in accordance with an underground style, approaching the system that Jose Munoz describes in *Disidentifications*, wherein their politics of gender and sexuality were ethically oriented toward the service of enabling practices of freedom, rather than assuming any "natural or inevitable" coalition with other groups (178). The women

sought to transform their own neighborhood and they worked with other individuals and organizations in the city and region; they allied with other people who were also working according to this approach.

The newly formed ALFA debated about the name of the group and wondered what a “lesbian-feminist alliance” would mean. Sears explains the debate in member Lorraine Fontana’s words:

Should this be for *all* lesbians, and therefore not just lesbian-feminist? Does lesbian-feminist alliance mean lesbians *and* straight feminists allied together? That was the biggest question. After all of this discussion, it was agreed that this was going to be a *lesbian* group but that there isn’t a litmus test—you don’t have to pull out your lesbian ID card!

(110)

The easy-going narrative painted here glosses over what appears to have been a more contentious divide, however, with more at stake than simply a name. Many of the women saw themselves as more aligned with feminist ideology than the male-centered gay liberation groups, and so they wanted to be open to all women, even in *alliance* with them, at least in spirit, if not group composition. On the other hand, they also appear to have been very influenced by the “woman-identified,” or specifically lesbian-feminist philosophy as articulated by the Radicalesbians several years earlier. While some have characterized the woman-identified philosophy as lesbian separatist in nature, ALFA was reticent to call herself “separatist,” preferring instead to recognize connections with both gay and feminist groups while also asserting their divergence from them.

Letters from two of the members tell the story of the issues that surrounded their decision to assert themselves as a specifically lesbian group. As Peggy explains in a letter sent to ALFA:

I think that in splintering ourselves off into factions we lose power and effectiveness as far as liberation and change are concerned. I love women but I love a lot of men, too. I am not too concerned about men's liberation but I am concerned about all gay people's liberation. Some gay men have some gripes about the laws and freedom that I don't have but basically all gay people are put down by society for the same reasons. There are a great many things we should be fighting together to change (that women alone may never be able to change). So I question us being as exclusive as we already are. (I vote to allow any woman who has enough nerve to come to an organization with lesbian in the name to come.) I hate to lose the more radical lesbians but if my sentiments are honored by a majority of ALFA those women will have to compromise for unity's sake or go off and talk politics among themselves and maybe someday all women will feel like they do but I doubt it and I am not so sure it would be a good thing if they did. Love, Peggy.

(ALFA Papers Box 1 File 7)

Nancy Jane explains her position against the further narrowing of the group in a list of well-organized points, concluding in the argument that *anyone* who wants to be a part of ALFA should be allowed to do so. While she acknowledges that she understands that lesbians need to “work together for unity,” she also voices her opinion that further segregation is unproductive:

- 1) Society has always forced us to segregate; to further help society keep us segregated is ridiculous [sic].
- 2) I personally refuse to alienate myself from the rest of society. Society at large may be responsible for my oppression, however there are great many more homosexual people who are deeply concerned about the oppression of all people.
- 3) Non homosexuals who involve themselves in an organization of this sort do so only because of their interest in helping us. They are stronger than we, who have recognized our oppression & come together to help each other, because they do not even share the same oppression.
- 4) Non-homosexuals (I refuse to call them straight as I feel many homosexuals I know could be termed ‘straight’ by me) involved in our organization could be very helpful. They could communicate our ideas and goals to some of the non-homosexual community that might not be receptive to a lesbian. They further illustrate to society that we are not so strange that we need to be segregated; they, after all, are working with (?) us.
- 5) Probably the most important reason for wanting non-homosexuals to be a very integral part of our organization is that we could be denying the right to experience a way of life to an open minded person who either does not know their sexual orientation or simply is interested in knowing more about lesbians.
- 6) If we are indeed fighting for our right to be free from segregation, [inserted: then] to segregate society from us is contradicting—what's more, I personally feel that

it will not work. There are two [sic] few lesbians willing to work in an organization so limited. I certainly have my doubts about aligning myself to such an organization.

(ALFA Papers Box 1 File 7)

We can see that the women of ALFA were invested in the idea that to identify as a lesbian was itself a political and constitutive rhetorical move, yet their “separatism” should not be taken as an assumption that they were “better” radical feminists than heterosexual women, nor were they uninterested in working for heterosexual women’s causes. They did not believe that lesbianism was the only proper way to be a radical feminist. According to one ALFA member who considered herself to be primarily oriented toward women in terms of sexual preference, “to be a real lesbian feminist means that you love all people...but that’s the feminism part of it. The lesbian part of it means that everybody only has so much energy, and I want to give my energy to women. Because that is my priority in life” (Cragin 301). If you are a marginalized person, it becomes very important to be able to turn “inward” and gather your strength so that you can overcome the things that have oppressed you, and then after that you can lead by example and inject your values into your everyday life.

The difficulties of forming and defining the composition of the group are replicated in ALFA’s attempts to articulate a mission. Especially in the beginning, the women conceived of ALFA as a supportive “lesbian nucleus” from which to draw strength, and didn’t really have an overt mission or a defined philosophy. An article that appeared in the *Bird* notes that members voted to restrict the composition of ALFA to lesbians. It then explains that the members continue to “reach out to all women. We support the Women’s Liberation and abortion repeal movements” (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 7). The article points out that they were working toward developing a “women’s center,” newsletter, and telephone counseling services for “helping sister Lesbians,” and concludes with the following words: “As Lesbians



uniting our strengths are infinite. Join us” (Box 1 File 7). At this point it becomes apparent that the women need to work together to sort through their oppression and yet they are having trouble doing this.

That first October (1972) saw a lot of activity. An article written by Lorraine that appeared on the ninth explains:

there is a new women’s group in the city—the Atlanta Lesbianfeminist Alliance (ALFA). It was originally organized when a few gay women split away from the predominantly male Georgia Gay Liberation Front. Alfa [sic] is a lesbian organization, but just as importantly, the women in the group consider themselves feminists (women come first and are of primary importance in our lives). *Our aims and purposes are still evolving, through discussions at our weekly meetings.* The original statement of purpose (see *Bird*, August 21) has been changing, and when it is rewritten, we can hopefully print it in the *Bird*. *We find that there are so many directions that we can and want to take, that it requires some discipline to concentrate our efforts into the few things we see as primary.*

(*Bird*, 10/9/72)

The article outlines the major projects that ALFA began to take on: 1. getting a house and calling it a women’s center, 2. building up a library on women’s literature, and especially lesbian literature, 3. gay women’s counseling and CR groups, 4. softball and football, and 5. artistic musical interests. An October 23, 1972 article published in the *Bird* notes: “We feel a need to communicate with each other about the many personal and political experiences that we as lesbians and women encounter. Our solution (only a partial one) was to set aside the first hour of our meetings for business matters, and to use the rest of the time for a discussion period—a more informal rap session about our feelings and ideas” (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 7).

ALFA members began keeping minutes of their meetings around this time. This development indicates that they began to see themselves as a more formal organization. Two very formative events occurred at this point: several women spoke with NOW about their

group, and some others attended a Gay Conference in Athens, GA. It becomes clear that the women recognized the need to figure out how to tell others about who they were and what they would do. The minutes from the meeting that took place immediately thereafter (November 13) document this discussion. They tentatively agreed to be an educational and social group that would provide a library containing information about feminist and gay ideas. They also strategized about “what we do at ALFA” and “who should we say we are,” but at the next meeting postponed further discussion about their direction until the December 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting. At this point, they listed the following suggestions:

- a. to discuss relevant topics at meetings, b. to work for support within the group, c. more outside political action (speaking etc.) formation of speaker’s union, d. to divide into committees with a certain financial limit, to take care of own funds and functions, e. political discussions in smaller groups, and f. discussion of goals and directions.

(Minutes Dec 3, 1972, ALFA Papers Box 7 File 1)

The members once again postponed a more concrete discussion of “specific goals, purposes, places for energies” for the following meeting. At this point in time, it becomes clear that the meetings were a hassle—lasting too long, and with too many different perspectives and priorities, especially concerning their political aspects. The following statement appears with an arrow next to it that reads, “The Point: all women and women whose socialist, feminist, capitalist etc. political ideas are destructive to the basic women-lesbian goals of Alfa should exert their political energies elsewhere” (Minutes Dec 3, 1972, ALFA Papers Box 7 File 1). At this next meeting the women finally agreed to simply agree that their main goals and purposes concern both lesbians and women, and that they will focus on education and communication. The group decided to have one business meeting a month, worried about “how to talk and be with straight people in good ways” and broke into the following committees: library and literature, speakers, correspondence, financial, and media (Minutes

Dec 10 1972, ALFA Papers Box 7 File 1). Although it was not enough to hold ALFA together on its own, the move to set up a committee system turned out to be an innovation that would greatly improve group stability.

It is at this point that we see the statement of purpose that emphasizing the lesbian composition of the organization:

We believe in women: we believe in Lesbians. To Lesbians, women come first in every aspect of life. The worldwide oppression of women by prevailing social and economic structures is reality to us. We recognize this but refuse to submit to it any longer. We will lay down a basis for action. We call for an end to the heterosexist supremacy in family, culture, government, life-styles. We need, want and are actively seeking out the involvement of all Lesbian women.

We are a political action group of gay sisters. We are the large coordinating body for smaller consciousness-raising groups and gay women's projects. We would like to serve as a communication center for all women's groups. We intend to provide alternatives for ourselves and all sisters that will free women to live outside sexist culture. We aim to reeducate the non-homosexual community, society in general, by being vocal and visible at every opportunity. We aim to reach out to all Lesbian sisters to establish solidarity. We intend to work with gay brothers to further our mutual goals of gay liberation. We intend to initiate demonstrations and public actions to emphasize our demands.

(ALFA Papers Box 1 File 7)

As we can see from this statement of purpose, ALFA agreed that they sought to subvert and transcend the gender and sex role categories and enact their politics via a radical redefinition of the possibilities. Their ultimate goal was to work toward ending or transcending heterosexism and a patriarchal system of norms. Now the members decided to embrace their lesbian-feminist stance. Even though ALFA struggled with that definition, and disliked the way in which the term might be intimidating to some women, they ultimately embraced such an orientation, as long as they created the space to orient toward action and ally with others. Because the members saw themselves enacting their politics in everything that they did, and thus also agreed to define themselves as political, social, and educational all at once, while

creating a structure that enabled women to participate in the aspects that interested them most, even as the three were mixed together within each group activity.

With this revision, ALFA members were able to be more productive for a period of time as they engaged in their various actions, with the organization as a central nucleus and their house as a collective invention space that provided a haven. The women sent letters to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution protesting the newspaper's unfavorable portrayals of lesbians, demonstrated when they received no response, attended the gay pride celebration, held an open house, and also spoke to more outside groups. ALFA also began to build up their library at this point, floated the idea of a newsletter in February, and agreed that their committees would be ongoing and meeting regularly. The meetings were still rife with conflict, however, in part because they had chosen to operate using a consensus system. So on April 15, the women once again agreed to meet to discuss their direction further. During this meeting, the member taking down the minutes inserts a "Chairone Note" that reads "I think this meeting is absurd—unreal. The women decide to table a structural discussion another two weeks and instead discuss the Atlanta Anti-Imperialist Coalition, which meant to unite various area groups that sought a societal restructuring. There was evidence that when some of the women presented information about ALFA to the Unitarian Church that "a few men asking questions were pigs others weren't" and the minutes note that "if rehearsed things should be stuck to" and that "speaking positions shouldn't be used for personal things" and "people should not be publicly attacked unless discussed before" (Minutes April 15, 1973, ALFA Papers Box 7 File 2). In bold, the minute-taker notes: "NEED TO BE MORE POSITIVE!" and the next line reads "Lorraine needs to quiet down."

ALFA reflected the composition of its individual members insofar as it was a centralized organization for the women's work with other groups, such as the Georgians for the ERA, the *Bird* and its associated New Left politics, and the Atlanta GLF. Another letter from Vicki, published in the *Bird*, explains that she is upset about the omission of a discussion of lesbians in the discussion of the Atlanta Anti-Imperialist Coalition on International Women's day. She argues that "lesbianism must be understood as a profound threat to the stability of an imperialist structure" and goes on to write that "Hardly anybody likes lesbians—really—except lesbians. And we are learning to depend on ourselves and build a movement to change our lives. But all of us are not 'just' lesbians, we are a million other things besides: students, workers, mothers, daughters, wives and ex-wives, black, Cuban, and Indian. We support other struggles *because we are a part of them.*" (ALFA Papers Box 2 File 21).

So where did the need for "unity" and "strength" come from? The same letter from Vicki explains this aspect as well. It is apparent that even though the *Bird* sought to print the "underground" news, lesbian women continued to fight for coverage and struggled to become visible to others. (Title is "Lesbians Ignored") Near the end of the letter, she explains, "As lesbians, we get slapped in the face continuously, and it takes a lot of energy to have to keep on reminding people not to forget about us. [...] And we are acceptable only until we start to identify as lesbians and demand to be recognized as such" (ALFA Papers Box 2 File 21). Note how she equates invisibility to being "slapped in the face continuously," as she expresses the frustration accompanying the feeling that acceptance is only possible with passing as hetero.

A June 20, 1973 article that interviews member Lorraine Fontana echoes Vicki's observations. Fontana explains that "Women who are lesbians in this city are much less visible than male homosexuals. There is a lot of fear because of the fact that lesbians have been ignored, lesbians have been put out of existence" (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 7). She continues by reaffirming the strength gained from dividing away from the men: "ALFA first broke off from GLF simply because of the inability to work with a predominately male group with men who some women considered sexist even though they were gay. By defining ourselves as an all-women's group, we don't have to explain why we don't have men" (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 7). In practice, ALFA's "separatism" was necessary for lesbian feminists because when among straight women and gay men, they found their needs constantly pushed to the side. In the case of ALFA, the women worked to build physical and virtual spaces where they could develop their own political theories and experiment with the ways in which they might put their utopian vision of a more ethical world into practice, but they continued to work together with a wide variety of people to forward their goals.

In the same article, ALFA tries to describe a mission. Fontana claims, in an interview that ALFA has political goals, and yet she believes their main purpose is educational, while providing the space for social support.

ALFA is not a political organization in the sense you are talking about because there are too many different women with different ideas. We want all lesbians who consider themselves feminists to be in a group that is supportive. Through that we'll exchange ideas, educate people and raise our own consciousnesses. We are political in the sense of being feminist and being in a gay movement. We have no line. We're not for a feminist version of socialist society. I have my opinions and so do others in ALFA. We've been mainly educational. It's a minimal but important step in bringing about the end of sexism, racism and classism. It's amazing how many people have crazy ideas because they never heard or saw a lesbian. We want to show them how many different people there are who are called lesbians. [...] We're there for help and support as well as for educational purposes toward straight people. We're there to help ourselves.

Yet it becomes apparent that the ALFA members were not unified in terms of their vision, and continuously tried unsuccessfully to articulate a unified understanding of the collective's organization. Meetings were long and contentious, mainly, it appears, because there were so many other directions that the women felt pulled in. What becomes apparent by August of 1973 is that they needed a better strategy for getting things done—the strategies that they had were simply not working, in part because they were reluctant to actually take that step to declare definitively what it was they wanted to do. Most of the “real work” was carried out in committees and by individuals who didn't always speak for ALFA.

It is clear, though, that ALFA's members were united on their mission to educate and facilitate communication. The library committee actively worked to gather information and stock the library, while the correspondence committee began to write back to the women and organizations as letters poured in from across the country, from those who read in the *Bird* and the *Amazon Quarterly* that ALFA existed.

### **Developing a Mission and Vision**

During the August business meeting the women in attendance agreed to tentatively set up a “steering committee” made up of five women, plus a closeted sixth. This “steering for-lack-of-a-better-name committee” (which would develop into Scarlett) decided that they would discuss the name of the organization, their relationship to closeted women, figure out the group's areas of concern, how to split up responsibility, money issues, and especially the goals (underlined three times)—“what is the “purpose” of ALFA,” that is, and figure out a new location for the house, because the “house appearance keeps women away” (Minutes,

August 18, 1973, Box 7 File 2). They agree to get a post office box to better manage their correspondence as well. This creation of Scarlett and improved structure that accompanied the group led to the newsletter, which provided a stable and ongoing outlet for their organizational revision, because they used the newsletter to record their narrative, writing themselves (literally) into existence. This newsletter served the rhetorical purpose of holding together ALFA in a literal way, and worked as a “draft” constantly in progress that reminded everyone what they were working with and toward. It was collectively written by group members and reinforced by the response of their audience, both within and outside of the organization. Both the formation of Scarlett and the production of the newsletter worked in a performative way to help members overcome difference, as they organized and invented the shared history of the group. This steering committee eventually gave ALFA a strong sense of shared purpose and the Newsletters helped them craft a narrative that reinforced their missions as it offered them a guideline for the future and a self-published and distributed assertion of “group identity.”

It looks like ALFA probably would have simply broken up, like many of the women’s and lesbian’s groups of the time, after about a year and a few months of activity, had it not been for these rhetorical-structural moves. Instead, we see that “Scarlett” meets twice over the next few days. Below, I quote at length from the first few Scarlett meetings, because they reveal some of the anxieties that drove the initial debates and strategic moves that oriented ALFA’s eventual direction. During the first Scarlett meeting (August 20, 1973), the women seem to be frustrated by the lack of progress at the recent ALFA meeting as they get down to business. The tone is pragmatic and full of questions, as the women discuss the degree to which Scarlett should be open to other members:



Sunday ALFA meeting was a bummer—all slightly agreed.  
 Corinne—‘criticism and self-criticism’—right on!  
 Lorraine—should be out-front, ‘radical,’ political, together  
 Tamsi—what is scarlet going to be—decision-making? suggestion structure for whole group? [...]  
 Vickie—S is mechanism for emergency/immediate decisions—that have to be made in middle of week (between meetings)  
 Should S meetings be open to all ALFA people?  
 Notice of S meetings and topics on bulletin board at ALFA house or office  
 What are (will be) basic responsibility will S have areas? [...]  
 All present list areas they are most interested in—try to reduce to 6 (underlined twice) areas—so each of us can do one.

(ALFA Papers Box 7 File 2)

During the second Scarlett meeting (Aug 24, 1973), the women focus on ALFA and her greater purpose, settling on the idea that they need to increase the diversity of their membership and connecting the word “culture” to its more literal meaning—as a starter that grows itself in a petri dish:

Vickie read her letter to Ms about their lack of Lesbian articles—will be added to, revised and sent in for ALFA.

Discussion on structureless groups from Ms article—relating it to ALFA all should read it and try to implement suggestions.

‘goals + purposes’ discussion:

Vickie: want powerful organization with millions of lesbians in it / concretely take on things that will make significant changes / work on all ♀’s issues as a lesbian group—make ♀’s movement R to us

Tamsi: most sensible structure—ALFA itself doing out-front, political (radical) actions—and also having all different levels of participation and give many ♀ a space and chance to develop their potential

Lorraine: agree with Tamsi about out-front image of ALFA etc—but *conflict is how to reach all the closet/apolitical/working-class/bar lesbians with this image?*

Other focuses are necessary—ask these ♀ what they want from ALFA

Corrine: alternatives to ♀ who are isolated and oppressed—something for everyone—service organization—deal with and serve needs of lesbians (problem here is this takes much \$ and resources in general).

*ALFA should be like culture-starter-feeder in petri dish—have substance and materials that is there to help any culture grow and develop in its own way.*

November—planning meeting of National Committee to organize March on Washington by gay people next year. Should get together with other lesbians from Southeast region and discuss this before we send reps up there—will bring this up Sunday

Tamsi has not been able to contact MCC [Metropolitan Community Church] men about labor day week end convention and invitation to women to come to ALFA house.

(ALFA Papers Box 7 File 2)

Through the creation of Scarlett and the pragmatic action-oriented forward movement the steering-for-lack-of-a-better-name-committee enabled, ALFA was able to inhabit a special niche by recognizing the local needs and potential of their orientation. Eventually, they found the metaphors of “culture” (in the scientific, ecological sense as well as the more metaphorical sense) and a connected network to be productive for describing their goals. The women who composed Scarlett were eventually effective in their goal of serving as a culture “starter” for the greater ALFA organization, insofar as they initiated the *ALFA Newsletter*, which attracted more members and also carried news of important causes and events beyond Atlanta, even prompting some women to relocate to the city. During the course of the following year, ALFA’s participation in the community softball league would also generate further growth during the following year, so that the teams, too, would be culture starters. ALFA’s development is somewhat aligned with how Warner describes the contexts of queer world making as dependent on “parasitic and fugitive elaboration through gossip, dance clubs, [and] softball leagues” (PC 203), in addition to the more visible contemporary method of being “out” and marking oneself as such through the display of rainbows and the flouting of gender and sexual norms.

The third Scarlett meeting (Sep 7, 73) appears to have been a brainstorming session about what Scarlett should be in relation to ALFA:

A. Scarlet/ALFA Relationship:

“*S is hub of wheel*”—Marty—got to have spokes to make it complete

Corinne—agrees, committees or small groups around specific interest has failed in past because of lack of leadership

Lorrain—need for communication with other ALFA people about Scarlet and decision-making mechanism.

Ideas for Communication: newsletter→announce agenda of next meeting, etc / telephone / bulletin board at house

Scarlet is: functional/operational tasks

Executive committee which carries out the decisions of ALFA as a group

Overseeing group—keep it together with an overall view

Coordinating group and facilitating group

Must be responsive to all of membership—checks and balances—present set-up is due to present circumstances—these will change and Scarlet should change with it—we happen to be able to work towards getting ALFA ‘on it’s feet’ (we have ‘energy’ right now to expend on ALFA whereas other people don’t right now).

Levels of participation—membership

Membership fees and dues

\*Membership fee (set) and commitment to participation

benefits (?) to membership?

free library privileges

voting power in ALFA

reduced rate for literature, leather goods etc

\* logo needed for newsletter—‘contest’ idea for 1<sup>st</sup> newsletter and 1<sup>st</sup> open meeting

\* receiving device for phone so that when no-one is there, there can be info given

(ALFA Papers Box 7 File 2)

Their wheel metaphor helped Scarlett understand how they might give the organization structure. Significantly, ALFA has already begun to build a library of information, a major priority of the group even in the early days, and they would go on to extend the wheel metaphor to the organization’s larger purpose, visualizing ALFA as the hub with many spokes that connected into larger national movements and they impacted and worked together with others in Atlanta, the greater Southeast, and also other parts of the country. In order to build their network of connections, they relied on methods both public and private, and borrowed techniques that the older “homophile” movement used, while also incorporating more public and visible tools.

Below we see Scarlett’s (here spelled with only one t) discussion of the Newsletter, from Sep 8, 1973, titled: “last night’s meeting continued”:

1.) newsletter

people to write it: Corinne, Martie, Tamsi                      printing—Tamsi  
person to call and get addresses for newsletter  
things to be included in 1<sup>st</sup> newsletter:

- a. suggestions about function of Scarlet \*-- job divisions we have set up for ourselves
- b. membership—fees, dues, work commitment, benefits of membership
- c. logo for newsletter contest
- d. telephone answering device (Tamsi will look into prices)
- e. J-C anti-trust suit brought by Bond, et al Can ALFA file amicus brief.
- f. Thanksgiving weekend→Urbana Convention Atlanta Women's World →explain in newsletter
- g. Introduction and energy statement
- h. Atlanta Anti-Repression Coalition—description of group and Q to be discussed at meeting write it up by Thurs—Marty will type it and then we'll discuss it next meeting
- i. letter to Ms
- j. the Underground
- k. look for new location for AFLA—roaches and rats are pushing current (?) residents out

2.) Vicki: statement of direction with newsletter?

*there are organizations (feminist + left-political) already for us to 'fit into' if we so desired—but no organized lesbian/gay movement  
∴ our preliminary task is building us—what is a lesbian organization? etc., so that in future being a rep. from ALFA will mean something—have a center i.e. push off ERA, AARC, etc → put LESBIANISM in middle and put a circle around it—this temporarily means leaving parts of ourselves 'hanging off the side' until we get ourselves more together.*

(ALFA Papers Box 7 File 2)

The women here are discussing how they will relate to other groups, strategizing how they would like to be perceived by outsiders in the future, which was, indeed, part of the impetus that drove Scarlett to organize in the first place. They then discuss all of the administrative issues, especially the library, finances, and agree that they will try to get the back issues of the *Bird* for its previous articles on ALFA, so that they can begin building an organizational history and narrative, for internal purposes as well as outreach needs. During the next Scarlett meeting, to be held September 25, 1973, the committee continues their discussion about their purpose:

SCARLETT—open to new members and have open meetings? starting now  
maybe we should just have any and all people really interested in helping to  
'run' ALFA come to weekly meetings—all others will participate on the level  
they see fit (except all will pay whatever dues the 'membership' decides up,  
etc). [...]

for next newsletter (#2)

1. correspondence
2. list of periodicals and papers we get
3. financial situation / \$ in bank / \$ needed to move
4. Announcements [from below: next meeting / GERA meetings / AARC meetings /  
MCC schedule
5. Who's [underlined three times] doing what in ALFA—'names' of Scarlett  
members
6. Decisions from ALFA meeting: membership / scarlet / questionnaire

(ALFA Papers Box 7 File 2)

These notes are followed by still more discussion about what Scarlett should be—it's as though some the problems with getting AFLA together have simply been transferred to the micro-level, turning Scarlett into a business meeting while still debating about what it should do. However, a small group of "untogether" people is much easier to manage than a larger one, and thus they work through their major problems relatively quickly. In the meantime, ALFA has published their first newsletter. All of a sudden within three weeks of forming Scarlett, they have a newsletter, a more finalized rough-draft for the organization's direction, and they have negotiated with the broader membership to send out a questionnaire that will help determine future directions and figure out who their audience is going to be. ALFA decides during this time to move to a new space, rather than take up space in the home of the several members living communally. For a while, the organization is homeless, but they quickly find a location and begin the work of setting up a library and archives. The Scarlett group decides to take the initiative during the next ALFA general meeting (held September 30). The notes from this agenda follow:

Explain how Scarlett feels meeting should go

1. 30 min. for 'specifics' and rest (1 ½ hr.) for ALFA reorganization talk

2. 1<sup>st</sup>—who has gotten newsletter

do people feel there are other things to talk about?

what should be the 1<sup>st</sup> topic of discussion?

Suggestions: SCARLETT—Division of Labor

ALFA Direction

Membership

\*date of next meeting?

should Rosmary (i.e.) [closeted member] be in SCARLETT if most ALFA members

can't even meet her?

discussion of SCARLETT ensued.

SCARLETT as Shitworkers—not policy makers

plenty of planners. not enough doers

project organizers—use Scarlett (their talents) to carry out general membership directives

#1 ♀ things that keep some women out of ALFA:

appearance of house → dress of members

of benefit to gay people as a whole

try to get \$ from straights not closeted [?]

how do we reach all these women [accompanied by a drawing with the caption: "oh just that?"]

activities w/o association with ALFA name (don't frighten people, put them up tight etc)

1<sup>st</sup> priority=power=getting more people

to attract people to begin with

most of these ♀ in the closet don't feel they are oppressed

but do want to associate with other lesbians

who has to change?

ALFA and our direction [political is 'social']

or ♀ → rid of fear, want to be able to be out.

survey? to give to gay ♀

(ALFA Papers Box 7

File 2)

It is apparent that ALFA continues to struggle to organize into a productive organization, even under the leadership of Scarlett. The women don't know whether to be primarily political or social, don't know how to attract potential members, and aren't sure what the Atlanta lesbian community wants.

After the members started producing a newsletter, however, greater publicity and sense of purpose seem to emerge autopoetically. They began to engage their audience in the

creation of new goals and they used others to help show them what was needed and how they might best facilitate connections. Scarlett comes to the conclusion that it might be possible to determine the needs of ALFA's potential membership by distributing surveys to local lesbians, hoping that this move might prompt others to contribute toward reworking and refining their perspective.

*From Scarlett Meeting Oct 1, 73:*

- agreement on importance of finding out what other lesbians consider important—why would they be attracted to ALFA, etc
- idea: get a place that can eventually be used for a self-supporting 'business'—coffee house? restaurant?—also can be used as meeting place, for dances, movies, etc.

[...]

- questionnaire → report from people writing it up

(ALFA Papers Box 7 File 2)

By the time Scarlett meets in early October, they have come to the conclusion that they will also condense the information gleaned from the surveys into a report that they will distribute to the membership so that they might better articulate the needs of the community and thus provide ALFA with more direction. The members of ALFA wanted their approach to become more widespread, as they promiscuously received and redistributed their information and tools around like a contagion, but they were unsure how to go about enacting this desire. The organization doesn't appear to gain inertia until they focus on pragmatic actions and practices, and so ALFA finally begins to achieve some cohesion and direction as they focus on writing a narrative history and publicizing the drafts of the organization's mission, vision, and purpose in their nascent newsletter. The feedback from the surveys would prove to be both hilarious and illuminating, as some of the women explain that they are turned off by the ALFA women's hygiene and living conditions, yet they also describe more productive requests for what they might like to see a lesbian-feminist organization do. Both the

questionnaires and the newsletters brought greater attention to ALFA's existence, and so they probably also served the rhetorical role of recruiting more women.

The newsletter will appear monthly and serves as a connecting source of permanence and as a narrative continuity. The first newsletter, from September of 1973, explains the situation:

In a Sunday meeting a few weeks ago the frustrations we've all felt over ALFA's inability to get herself together were verbalized. It was suggested that a core group of persons be formed who had time and personal energy to work on that task. Everyone discussed the idea and their own feelings. Out of that meeting came a group of 6 women who've been calling themselves 'Scarlett'. (Throughout this newsletter you will hear this name used.)

We saw our purpose as to try and get ALFA back on her feet, but this was a pretty nebulous concept to try to hold onto. [...]

ALFA's decisions, goals, purposes and overall directions must be reached by consensus, (not 5 or 6 people who happened to wander in at meeting time) and they must directly meet our needs.

We see Scarlett as a core group for coordination/management, whose purpose is the creation of a structure that will help ALFA move in the directions she sees fit, by acting directly upon the goals and objectives set up by the membership.

By coordination we mean the sense of knowing when it's appropriate to have things happening. By management, being responsible for seeing that things are handled in effective ways and on schedule, By structure we mean ways of getting tasks done in effective, creative and powerful ways. [...]

Following are some things, that we must deal with now or at some time in the future. Certainly we can't resolve all of them at the next meeting, or in the next 5 meetings, but by putting them before you we hope to give you time to think about them and have your opinions formed when they do come up.

#### **About the General Direction of ALFA**

This is a general statement about ALFA which all six members of Scarlett agree with. It is offered as a way to think about ALFA so that our discussion will be focused and productive as possible.

All of us in ALFA have many varied interests. Personally, and therefore politically, we may identify very strongly with women, and therefore feel tied to the feminist movement; we may identify very strongly as gay and therefore feel tied to the gay movement (i.e. men and women); we may identify as an oppressed person, and therefore see our links most closely to a movement of third world and working people; some of us, perhaps, do not see ourselves so politically at all; some may identify ourselves strongly as counselors, artists, and spiritualists. *These categories are not meant to explore every possibility, simply to indicate that we are not only lesbians, but many things.*



*However, because we are lesbians, we carry that with us into everything we do. And once other people know, they carry it with them into their relationships with us. [my emphasis]*

Individual members of ALFA have participated in coalitions of organizations which have/are working on things not having to do with lesbianism. Sometimes we represent ALFA, and sometimes we are there just as individuals, who are known to be lesbians and members of ALFA. The coalition of groups working on the Equal Rights Amendment is one example. Picketing for the United Farm Workers is another, and just recently a new coalition has formed to fight repression, composed mainly of black and left-wing white organizations.

These feminist, black and Marxist groups already have histories and ideologies and a certain amount of 'respectability' to them. *As lesbians we have little history as a movement except for the last few years; otherwise there are only isolated incidents. There is no national lesbian organization besides the Daughters of Bilitis, but DOB has not developed an ideology and a plan for action and it is not providing that kind of leadership now. [my emphasis]*

Existing groups are small study groups, rap groups, small action groups, and newspapers and magazines around the country.

*We have to figure out new forms which arise organically out of our particular oppression. How do we do that? What does that mean? For one thing it demands a lot of effort and energy. We are treading on unknown ground. We are making our history (herstory) at this moment. [my emphasis]*

We are potentially strong, but in organizational terms we are weak. ALFA for example has been quite un-together this past year. What we have managed to do, and we have done a whole lot of things, we have done because a few individuals, not always the same ones got them done. We have entered coalitions from a position of weakness.

*We are talking about power, and changing the relationships of power that now exist. That means not only changing attitudes, but concrete situations. [my emphasis]* It also means changes not only between us and the State, but between us and other oppressed groups, be they women, blacks, chicanos, working people... Lesbians must be recognized as people and as a force. And we are the only ones who are going to bring that about. It is amazing how vigilant we must be in our own self-interest—among those whom we definitely count out.

So we would like to suggest that our task as ALFA members is to build a lesbian organization, to build lesbian power, and that for the time being, we must zero in on that and let other concerns hang off the edge. Otherwise, we will drain off lesbian energy. We will have to find other means to participate in those other concerns, either as individuals or in other organizations.

(ALFA Papers Box 6 File 1)

Here we see the emergence of the ALFA women's rhetoric of unity, pragmatism, and emphasis on not just lesbians but lesbians-plus, and an indication of a unique need for leadership as a movement and as an organization. Scarlett ends up being a short-lived group,

and encountered some resistance because the women had closed it off from the rest of the membership, but it was necessary at that moment in their emergence, because they were frustrated by the lack of coherence and unity. The women also announce that they will be holding a logo contest, urging the membership to “bring in your creations” so that “by our next edition we can have a symbol to go along with our words” (*ALFA Newsletter* no. 1, ALFA Papers Box 6).

By the time the group produces their second newsletter, we see that they have made Scarlett into an “‘open’ group” and they explain that they are developing a survey to discover what lesbians in Atlanta might need and want from their organization, and they are interested in figuring out “what would attract them to ALFA, what are their interests, how we can work with them, and get to know them” (*ALFA Newsletter* no. 2, ALFA Papers Box 6). The idea is to look to their potential membership to see what directions ALFA might take. At this point they have also sorted out issues of membership and they have a post office box to facilitate communication with others. Their third newsletter features the new symbol they have chosen—it is two women’s signs (♀ ♀) united together and sort of looks like two people touching heads and holding hands. This symbol is featured on the front page of the newsletter and it takes the place of the “A” in ALFA. By the time the fourth (December) issue of the newsletter appears, the women have written a new description of the group, and feature this iteration of a mission statement at the top of the first page, in a section titled “About Us”:

ALFA welcomes all lesbians to relate to us and become part of us in whatever way you can. We do not exclude anyone on the basis of her race, religion, politics, economic status, occupation, or degree of openness. We want ALFA to reflect the diversity of the lesbian community. Some of us can afford to (and have made the decision to) be out front—there are certain things that can be accomplished by these women. Others of us can’t afford to be out—there are other things to be accomplished by these women. Relate to ALFA in whatever way you can, taking what you see as valuable and interesting to you and giving whatever you can in return. At this point

your ideas about what ALFA should devote its time to are most valuable and needed—come to a meeting, meet other women, speak to your needs, give suggestions, or just call us. [...]

To find out more about membership in ALFA call us or write to us—we need help now so we can move toward a stronger Lesbian community and lesbian liberation.

(*ALFA Newsletter* no. 4, ALFA Papers Box 6)

Finally, they have developed a sense of purpose and vision that will serve as a working draft to carry the organization forward. The questionnaire responses and letters they have received thus far have taught them the value of a receptive and encouraging tone, openness and desire to indicate acceptance of all lesbian women, as the writers also articulate an effort to serve their needs.

### **Finding Structure: Creating Physical and Virtual Innovation Spaces**

ALFA corresponded with women all across the South, and even in other areas of the country, most of whom learned about them through the *Great Speckled Bird*, and who requested copies of the newsletter and the literature that ALFA distributed (such as their own collectively-written “Sleeping Beauty, A Lesbian Fairy Tale,” and other mimeographed publications and newsletters such as “Amazon Quarterly” and “Lavender Woman”). Members corresponded with women in prison in North Carolina, South Carolina, and even Iowa. They also received letters from men in prison, primarily because *Bird* writers advocated for the rights of prisoners and these men related to the cause of the ALFA women.

This outpouring of response helped reassure the women of ALFA that the organization was moving in the right direction. For example, Elizabeth in Florida explains, “Thank you for sending the ALFA Newsletter. I think that it could become the media for the Southeast, particularly for those of us who sit on the fringes with our job not allowing us to

go to gay bars and surrounded by couples—singles seem to pose an unspoken threat” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3). Other women asked for information about how they might start their own group in other parts of the south, especially the rural parts, while still others discussed what the group had done that seemed especially relevant, providing ALFA with ideas for future orientations. As an example of this, we see Jo from College Park, GA, affirming her interest while also explaining what she would want from ALFA: “Last month when Rita Mae Brown gave her talk and reading I attended. This was my only attendance at an Alfa activity. I was amazed at the large number of women there and I realized what a square I am. the world around me is very square so please be discreet with my name, address, and phone # which I’ve include in this letter. Before joining and making monthly pledge I need to attend a meeting and see if I can fit in the group. Am very interested in joining a rap group—have lots to rap about. Please contact me—phone or mail.” One man from Ohio writes, “We wish Unity with all oppressed people, to better understand the fight you’re fighting in Atlanta and for you to understand our fight from behind prison compounds... I do agree 100% with your last statement ‘As Lesbians uniting, our strengths are infinite. Join Us.’ You’re fighting same cause as we are ‘the Power Structure which refuses to accept us as human beings because of our likes or dis-likes’” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3). Another man imprisoned in Florida writes, asking for a copy of the newsletter, explaining that “Although I’m a male and currently incarcerated I have some very beloved close friends who are Lesbian who would be interested in your news if I pass on the information” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3). From Juanita in Kentucky: “I like your idea of ‘take what is valuable or interesting to you, and give what you can in return.’ It’s refreshing and encouraging to find a group of people who allow

people to be and to grow in their own way and see value in what each has to offer” (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3).

ALFA women had thus invented a history and a physical, psychological, and literal space for future invention. They eventually settled on a committee structure that enabled women to devote their energy to causes where their talents would best be put to use, and this non-hierarchical structure would provide the necessary foundation for their organizing work in the future. While the ALFA women might be called “separatist” or “essentialist” in nature, they were not engaging in politics of resentment, even though they sought to overthrow the oppressive patterns, because “*Ressentiment* cultivates a morality of reaction instead of rumination. While *ressentiment* encourages people to immediately react to stimuli, the noble morality is characterized by the ability to slow down, to discipline one’s emotions, and to chew over stimuli before acting” (Engels 309, referring to Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment*, which is a state of hostility toward the perceived cause of suffering that includes feelings of resentment but goes beyond that to make suffering constitutive and produces a new moral code for which the word “NO” is the creative deed—this moral code “teaches its adherents that they are victims and calls of them to hate anything and everything that is different,” reacting, rather than affirming, and assigning a scapegoat against whom you seek revenge rather than transcending the definitions and embracing an identity distinct from one built upon a victim model.

Ultimately, one important key to the organization’s success and longevity was their committee structure, which was not top-down, traditional governance. ALFA came to the conclusion that it would function as an umbrella group—the women bought a house and created a space for larger group meetings and for a library, which was central to their

educational mission, and this physical space held together their organization. They then developed committees, which would work to forward the goals that their members prioritized. The committee structure spread out the work amongst the members and it was very simple in its philosophy: if a committee did not have engaged members and energy, then it died. Committees formed in response to immediate needs, which enabled them to be flexible and responsive to new rhetorical situations. For example, the house committee ensured that the bills were paid and that they had a space out of which to operate. The organization also created a social committee, which fostered a sense of community and helped the members see ALFA as a family, as it also provided replacements for traditional practices and rituals, from which they had been excluded.

### **Enacting a Non-Hierarchical Pragmatic Utopian Orientation**

For the purpose of organizing, ALFA came to construct her identity as composed of radical women-loving-women, and eventually decided that they would be an “umbrella” organization that both facilitated other smaller organizations, and as a group, they also participated alongside allied groups who oriented in a similar way. The members would continue to struggle with this question that Eve Sedgwick asks in her retrospective introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*: “What would make a good answer to implicit questions about someone’s strong group-identification across politically charged boundaries, whether of gender, of class, of race, of sexuality, of nation?” (60) The women of ALFA found an answer similar to the one that Sedgwick identifies, namely, they wrote a narrative, “of a directly personal sort” which served to open “channels of visibility” and offer tools that worked to “begin unknotting certain overdetermined impactions that inevitably structure

these arguments” (60). That is, in order for ALFA to move forward while also being aligned together with other causes, they oriented their perspective by writing a narrative of the group that articulated their purpose and method in a particularly queer and promiscuous way.

Of course, the ALFA women didn’t call their approach that, but, as Sedgwick explains “to identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identification *with*. It also involves identification *as against*; but even did it not, the relations implicit in *identifying with* are, as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal” (61). The members were highly self-conscious of both the limitations and potential inherent in identification both with and against, and in order to deal with the troubles of identification, they chose to rally around the two points of convergence that they most shared, namely, radical feminism and a women-loving-women philosophy, but they also wrote into their narrative an explanation of what this meant and the tools that they saw as most relevant in serving their allied causes. As the women themselves put it, you didn’t have to show your “lesbian card” but you *did* have to be willing to align with a bunch of queer dykes. Identification with/as was both rewarding and costly for them, but they worked write a narrative that allowed for slippage and enabled them to feel vicariously invested in others to various degrees. In doing so, the women of ALFA oriented with what Sedgwick calls the imperative “to rupture or vacate” the space of the closet (63). They honored the need of some to remain in the closet, but worked toward the goal of exposing the restraints imposed by that closet, educating others and recruiting them to work toward this goal as well, and these women saw their lifestyles as inherently political. Ultimately, ALFA as a group embraced the

other movements and groups that shared the queer-promiscuous imperative, and they disregarded the aspects of these other movements and groups that were not useful to them.

ALFA made the liberation movement connection to eradicating all oppressions, not just the two particular ones that they explicitly organized around. But perhaps what is most notable is that they actually followed up on this commitment in their practices—devoting energy, time, money, and educational resources to causes aimed at ending racial and economic oppression, while they educated and advocated for the differently-abled, people living internationally under oppressive regimes, and they recognized how concern for the natural environment and natural resources was linked to social oppressions. Since there arose a pragmatic acceptance that change sometimes happens more slowly, the community also chose to support many reform-based liberal feminist and identity-based minority-model gay causes, even though many of them philosophically disagreed with these approaches. Even though they disagreed with the approaches, it did not mean that they disagreed with the causes that these groups supported. Some of these causes included the movement to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, protests against Anita Bryant, and gay rights marches.

According to my assessment, the women of ALFA operated according to an investment in a radical critical utopian philosophical ideology, based on the idea that freedom from dominance is enabled by political education practices that permeated and implicated multiple axes of both public and personal life. That is to say, in the tradition of other radical liberation organizations that originated at the end of the wave of new social movements that swept America during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ALFA women critiqued traditional institutions of power and engaged in activist and educational work that sought a revolutionary restructuring of our social and political sphere as they attempted to build more



ideal new models within their own organizational structure. They operated non-hierarchically and made decisions according to consensus, organized and attended conferences with other lesbian feminists, radical straight feminists, and gay liberation groups, engaged in local and national political education outreach, and produced a collectively self-published newsletter tracking their activity.

ALFA's approach to social change intertwined the social and cultural with the political and the educational. It was both idealistic and pragmatic and thus struck a balance between an all-or-nothing revolutionary attitude and an understanding that change takes time so you do what you can with what you have to work with. Their flexibility meant that they could adapt to changing environments, and the culture within the community they worked to build held them together when they came to feel (realize?) that the conditions for lesbians and feminists had not actually transformed the way they had hoped when they initially formed—indeed, the social conditions first grew better and then grew worse in many ways, according to their perceptions. But they had been able to adapt and stick it out through their disillusionment because their structures were sound.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Inventing Political Education Process: Library, Archives, and Rap Groups**

I have read every book I could find on Gay Liberation within the repertoire of regional Southern Universities' libraries. (Such a deplorable lack of literature!!!) At any rate, I have gathered as much courage as possible into my hand and am wielding a pen in revolution of everything I was taught as a child: I am interested in ALFA!

-- Letter from Carol (ALFA Papers Box 3 File 3)

ALFA correspondence, such as the example above, reveals that the lack of resources about lesbian feminism serves in some ways to proscribe lesbianism as a real possibility, contributing to the depth of the psychological barrier that must be overcome before the women are able to articulate a queer sense of self. In order to do so, they needed not only the support and community that the ALFA women provided, but they also needed better information, in order to understand what it might mean to be a lesbian. This kind of information was not being provided by a mainstream heterosexual majority. Books and "lifestyle" information were often hidden away or simply unavailable. What's more, it was challenging to locate women who might direct them toward such resources, since many were passing as straight in order to avoid harassment. The lack of publicity about lesbian issues also meant that many women who might otherwise come to understand themselves as queer could repress or deny it as an option for self-identification. Thus, the need for spreading information accompanied the work of building a movement.

The ALFA women began to self-consciously work to build an archive that might help flesh out a history about women and gay southerners, a group of people who had largely been

written out of previous histories. Much of the literature that ALFA collected was activist in nature, but a recurrent theme or niche within the library information was also material that might be characterized as “so you think you’re a lesbian, what now?” Such literature was not really an instruction manual format so much as it was an opening of options. The underlying idea was “whatever you want to be, however you want to express yourself, find that way.” Thus, the movement literature that the ALFA women collected emphasized a liberatory rhetoric as it also sought to educate and offer strategies for advancing social justice. The members recognized that one of their primary roles in providing lesbian literacy could be to fill in the gaps in geographical perspective that were not being met at the national level, and to personalize their holdings so that they were most relevant to its local community.

In terms of their political education work, it is important to note that during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the model for education was deeply politicized, influenced by Paulo Friere and Maoist notions of social critique that were very powerful. First published in English in 1970, Freire’s words described the ideology that guided many of the revolution movements of the time and the Marxism-influenced critical utopian ideas he discussed were very much “in the air” at the time that ALFA’s inertia began to build. Liberation organizations during this time valued the free exchange of cultural ideas as well as political strategies, seeing education as a “practice of freedom,” as bell hooks describes it. This context oriented the ALFA women’s approach to political education and grounded the way they engaged with the movement literature.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss ALFA’s educational activities in a variety of spheres, while also situating its work within a broader local and national historical context. The audience and purpose of their lesbian literacy activities was three-fold: 1. the ALFA

women themselves had small group “rap” sessions during which they gathered together for CR purposes, and they also provided a library and archive of literature and information related to women and especially queer women; 2. they helped to raise awareness among heterosexual audiences, cultivate allies, and form coalitions with other similarly-aligned, but not necessarily queer-oriented, groups; and 3. ALFA women kept a newsletter in order to redistribute their information and activities to other lesbians and allied groups across the Southeast (and throughout the rest of the country, to a smaller extent), in order to spread knowledge and happenings to other women not within the local area. The newsletter also functioned as a forum for working out internal discussions regarding outreach concerns they encountered, both at the local and national level.

ALFA enacted much of their political action by spreading information. Educating both themselves and the broader public became a method for affirmative resistance. That is, ALFA women sought to move out of the binary between reactive and affirmative. Their resistance was not just about saying no to the victimization, but it was about saying yes to alternative possibilities and ways of being. In other words, they were not attached to their marginalization, *per se*, even though they called themselves “downwardly mobile” and self-identified with all oppressed peoples. Because they were stereotyped and discriminated against by others, they were actually victimized, but they tried to refuse that role and transcend it. They recognized their position and understood the need for what Spivak has called “strategic essentialism,” but they saw the strategy of education as having the potential to counteract the way in which they might otherwise be reifying essentialist categorization and further marginalization. Thus their mode of self-education via consciousness-raising, combined with their highly-organized system of exchanging educational materials—both

within the queer and feminist movements and redistributing that information to the heterosexual majority—became a way to resist the misinformation and homophobia in a way that affirmed a collective identity that provided wider options for inhabiting their larger socio-economic and political time-space. Political Education within ALFA primarily manifested in the form of two concrete literacy practices: members built an archive of movement literature, which they reviewed and critiqued within the context of their newsletter and the physical space of their library; and members formed consciousness-raising “rap groups,” in which they discussed a more personal understanding of heterosexist oppression and related their experiences to what they were learning as they engaged with the movement literature.

### **Movement Literature and the ALFA Drive to Archive**

In this section I track the way in which the process of political education spread—I discuss the movement literature and provide analysis of the philosophies that motivated lesbian feminists nationally during this time as I highlight the educational material that influenced the ALFA women’s approach to political education. Along the way, I examine the organization’s process of building a library and archive. When we study the reciprocal exchange and distribution of new information about sexuality and its travel through a newly constructed or altered network of people, we discover a collective rhetorical invention function that specifically relates to personal identity: this process impacts how “individuals encounter ideas about identity and then articulate their own,” as Martin Meeker puts it (11). That is to say, in constructing a network and distributing sexual literacy, the people who take part in the process also construct a new sense of self, both personal and collective. These

political educational practices thus enabled the ALFA women to feel a sense of belonging to the national lesbian feminist movement and community, as they also negotiated locally relevant personal, developed a collective understanding of what it meant to be lesbian feminist, and spoke back to the larger movement.

Within the group, ALFA members built their own critical utopian ideal of the democratic sphere in order to provide a model for harnessing the potential for politically educated citizens to negotiate a more equitable future. The women—simultaneously participants and creators at the national and the local level as they engaged with movement literature and theories—worked to open up an understanding of the options, priorities, and challenges facing lesbian-feminists. Rhetorically, these literacy practices functioned in what Nancy Tuana has called a “liberatory” way, insofar as they went “beyond establishing warrantability of knowledge claims,” working instead toward the goal of uncovering “the power dimensions of knowledge practices” (13). As they engaged with the movement literature, they asked the following kinds of questions: “Why have we felt as though we should be ashamed of who we perceive ourselves to be? How has the dominant identity narrative been constructed by our inherited patriarchal and heterosexual tradition and what are the functions of this narrative as it impacts our lives? How do we inform ourselves in a more affirmative way, in order to counter the impact of institutionalized and internalized misogyny and homophobia?” The women recognized the limitations of their situation and were therefore both realist and idealist as they engaged the national movement theories and participated in internal political education practices. In order to effectively address stereotypes and educate others, ALFA members worked to continually educate and reinvent themselves, which meant that along the way they cultivated the self-respect, dignity, and

confidence they would need in order to effectively educate others. This foundation worked to ground ALFA's outreach strategies and would eventually guide the members to influence long-term persuasive progress.

ALFA's lesbian women's center housed a library and archives, which they eventually incorporated as the Southern Feminist and Lesbian Archives (SFLA). The members conceptualized this space as an information hub that would provide political education connections between the national and the local. They ordered information from the KNOW press, gathered various newsletters from across the country, ordered fiction and non-fiction literature, and made these materials available to those women who needed them, seeking to rectify the lack of lesbian literacy within the community. Once the lesbian-feminist movement became more visible, it faced a renewed onslaught of political propaganda from social conservatives who sought to reify old myths and stereotypes. Thus, the movement literature also functioned as a continual counter-argument to the confidence-eroding attacks, and women could return to it to refresh themselves and rewrite a more affirmative vision of the future when they needed to. ALFA women felt their oppression as a constant bombardment that wore away at their sense of self and purpose, but by cultivating a theoretical and physical space for greater understanding and tolerance under the guise of internally focused civic education, the organization created a more productive environment for the political education grounding of members and potential members.

ALFA women were very self-aware as they built their library of movement literature and documented their own personal histories—they felt as though it was their duty to systematically locate, recover, and archive information about lesbians for themselves as they also worked to preserve such knowledge for the benefit of future generations. In the

newsletter, ALFA women were urged to think first about the archive before they threw out anything. Elizabeth Knowlton, the lead librarian/archivist asked them to “remember the archives. If you’re in doubt about its usefulness, send it to us anyway—it may fill in a gap in a collection or just be the item some sister needs”; Knowlton explained that they would respect confidentiality requests as she encouraged them, “Don’t discount anything: anti-Lesbian materials and the old Lesbian novels are precious records of our survival against the odds and are astonishingly hard to acquire” (*Atalanta* 8.8, ALFA Papers Box 6). By the mid-1980s, the library and archive had been incorporated as SFLA and the official collection policy explained:

We collect books, periodicals, and private papers by and about women with an emphasis on lesbians and the gay South. We also collect small press and individual publications by and about radical and progressive Atlanta groups with whom lesbian feminists are likely to make coalitions. Our aim is to collect women’s writing that cannot easily be found elsewhere. We do accept major feminist books but actively solicit those by women’s presses. Our large collection of periodicals contains many women’s liberation and gay titles that ceased publication many years ago as well as current magazines and newspapers.

(Southern Feminist Library and Archives, ALFA Papers Box 2, File 13)

So a special focus of SFLA became locally and regionally relevant women’s and lesbian publications, and one of the primary goals became the preservation of materials that were difficult to find in other venues. Women who were ALFA members in the metro area could check out two books at a time from the library and they could keep the books for a month; periodicals did not circulate, but they could make copies of newspapers or magazines that they kept in the library (ALFA Papers Box 2, File 13). Fiction and poetry rounded out their collection, so that ALFA women could read literature about characters with whom they might more closely identify.



While the library initially functioned to serve the pragmatic needs of the local lesbian-feminist community, it evolved into a more explicitly scholarly and future-oriented venture, as the organization's members realized the importance of their role as historians:

We've been trained in patriarchal schools to think that history is what kings and generals make. It isn't. It's you and I going about our daily work, struggling to build our lives and culture in a hostile world. It's the small everyday items that will make history come alive for the women who come after us, who will look to us for their heritage as we look to the Amazons and the Suffragists.

(*Atalanta* 8.8 ALFA Papers Box 6)

ALFA members worked to build an awareness within the organization that the political education work they did was important, and they explained that their lives would matter to future humans, even if it sometimes felt as though they were fighting an uphill battle in their present lives. The emphasis on the small everyday items and examples of materials that brought their experience of life to light is also noteworthy both because we see how they were themselves participating in feminist historiography. The newsletter lamented the loss of "much of Sappho's work," which had been "destroyed by time and Christian zealots," and mourned the lack of information about women-loving-women during the Medieval period, and blamed "male identified historians" for ignoring or denying "the women-loves of Emily Dickinson, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Bessie Smith" (*Atalanta* 8.8, ALFA Papers Box 6). The ALFA women recognized that social progress does not work in a linear manner and reminded one another that it was up to them to preserve their collective history and these reminders functioned rhetorically to generate a sense of urgency. ALFA members had worked hard to recover information about the history of women-loving-women, and they didn't want their feminist historiography to be as lost to future generations as it was to them.

Thus a major goal of the archive was an attempt to provide a vast collection of material that might function as insurance against erasure from historical records so that the

existence, struggle, and strategies of lesbian women—both present and future—might not be forgotten. What’s more, they hoped that future generations would not have to reinvent persuasive strategies if they could help make it possible to look back into the historical record to discover which lines of argument had been successful. Within the newsletter, members were informed of the function of the archive as they were reminded,

It is up to us to save our voices and our presence from extinction. One of the purposes of state and regional archives is to make it harder for another Burning Time to erase us from the record. The more deposits of materials we can provide, the harder it will be to burn us out again and the more strength we can draw from that evidence of our history.

(*Atalanta* 8.8, ALFA Papers Box 6)

In these appeals, the hopeful and optimistic tone is tempered by the worry that future historians will continue to elide the contributions of lesbians. We also see an underlying anxiety that the work they had done might not really matter if there were not enough accumulated records or evidence of it, should the social progress gains be reversed.

SFLA is situated as one major archive among others also “working to preserve our southern Lesbiana,” as it encourages the women to “put it in your will that one of the archives will get your books, letters, journals, files” so that “your family won’t burn them or throw them out” (*Atalanta* 8.8, ALFA Papers Box 6). The above appeal in the newsletter closes by listing the addresses of other lesbian-oriented archival collections, and acknowledges the efforts of women in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri. The cumulative effect of the article is powerful because the reader is made to feel that any item might be valuable, and that the archive is the only safe place for lesbian-related materials. The reader feels the weight of the consequences of lesbian feminists failing to preserve lesbian history: the cold indifference of male-supremacist historians and hetero-patriarchal educational practices will lead to erasure, irrelevance, and continued struggle for future women.

In order to help guide members through their library of movement information, ALFA created a “Suggested Reading List” of books and materials available in the SFLA library. The list included a wide variety of genres and selections. The category “Fiction—Lesbian” highlighted some classics, mixed together with personally relevant novels: *The Well of Loneliness*, by Radclyffe Hall (1928) is an example of a “classic,” while books like *Sleeping Beauty: A Lesbian Fairy Tale*, by ALFA women Vicki, Ginny & Gail, and published by the local Sojourner Truth Press (1972), *Rubyfruit Jungle*, by Rita Mae Brown (1973), *The Cook and the Carpenter*, by June Arnold (1973), and *Riverfinger Women*, by Elana Nachman (1974) were a few of the most celebrated fiction books among the members, who returned to these books over and over again (Suggested Reading List, ALFA Papers Box 2, File 17). One of the ALFA houses had been named Rubyfruit Jungle, and the rumor among the organization’s women was that Rita Mae Brown, who visited ALFA before writing her book, had paid them homage by naming the novel after that house (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 19). Rita Mae Brown returned to the group for readings and so she developed a special rapport with the women.

In addition to the difficult-to-find publications and ephemera, a special focus of the library and archives was to build a repository of the most influential feminist and lesbian feminist movement literature, some of which was available through traditional publications outlets, but much of it was also self-published by other organizations and distributed nationwide through KNOW press, which was a non-profit organization that served as an intermediary. ALFA members tried to make it known within the city and region that women could come to their library and access these otherwise often difficult to find texts, operating under the idea that if they could make the knowledge easily available yet discreet, they could

offer support and relief to those who needed it. The category “Non-Fiction—Lesbian” highlighted *Love Between Women*, by Charlotte Wolff (1971); *Lesbian/Woman*, by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon (1972); *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, by Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love (1972); *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, by Jill Johnston (1973); and *Flying*, by Kate Millett (1974). Because the process of coming out, even only to oneself, was often a traumatic and shocking experience, one key narrative that emerged was the proliferation of personal accounts of discovering one’s own love of women. As ALFA’s monetary resources grew, SFLA added more pamphlets written by other organizations: “Coming Out to Your Parents,” for example, a booklet published by Philadelphia Parents of Gays, documented “the six stages of understanding (shock, denial, guilt, anger, personal decision-making and true acceptance)” and featured “specific ways young adults can assist their parents in each of these stages. The booklet begins by raising 12 questions that need to be considered before coming out to your parents” (*Atalanta* 12.8, ALFA Papers Box 6). These kinds of books and pamphlets would have been something like required reading for women across the country who joined lesbian feminist organizations throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s as women began to see themselves as lesbians sexually (although many of them continued to link the sexual with the political and vice-versa).

In the category “Feminist—Relevant,” we find the more radical feminist texts like *Les Guerrilleres*, by Monique Wittig (1969), *Sexual Politics*, by Kate Millett (1970), and *Amazon Odyssey*, by Ti-Grace Atkinson (1974), recommended alongside liberal feminist texts like *Our Bodies Ourselves*, by the Boston Women’s Health Collective (1973). Those interested in seeing the connections between gay men and women were recommended *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, by Karla Jay and Allen Young (1972), found in the

“Homosexual” category. This book was very influenced by radical Marxist ideology as well as the student and anti-war movements. They had a large collection of poetry, and in their list of recommended “Lesbian/Feminist Magazines & Newspapers,” members were encouraged to read publications from all regions of the country: *The Furies* (out of print, Washington, D.C.), *The Lesbian Tide* (Los Angeles), *Amazon Quarterly* (Oakland), *Sisters* (San Francisco), *Lavendar* [sic.] *Woman* (Chicago), *Ain’t I a Woman* (Iowa City), *Cowrie* (New York), *Wicce* (Philadelphia), and *So’s Your Old Lady* (Minneapolis). Through these publications, important news and ideas traveled from one lesbian feminist community to another.

For ALFA, the KNOW press was especially influential as a source for feminist and lesbian literacy materials. KNOW was founded in 1969 by Pittsburgh NOW members “who believed that you can’t have a revolution without a press—and bought one” with the “original intention” of publishing a newsletter, but found that its main niche would be “to reprint feminist articles” and sell them to organizations and individuals “at only slightly over the cost of the materials (ALFA Papers, Box 12, File 1). KNOW began to operate on a larger scale by January of 1973, right around the same time that ALFA picked up inertia, although ALFA began ordering materials from the press as early as the fall of 1972. In addition to distributing literature important to the women’s movement, one of the main objectives of KNOW was to “construct an information network to be used to propagate social change” and their tag line was “Freedom of the Press Belongs to Those Who Own the Press” (ALFA Papers, Box 12, File 1). KNOW published a list of “reporters you can trust,” a news bulletin, updated lists of feminist periodicals, special publishing projects, and a bibliography titled “Books of Interest to Feminists,” which helped guide ALFA members through the range of

materials available. KNOW, like ALFA, also categorized its list of publications in order to better showcase how each piece might be relevant or fit various organizational needs, and they also grouped together related materials that they would send as a packet. This incredible resource empowered women involved in the women's liberation and lesbian feminist movement by facilitating the transfer of information that might not otherwise have been distributed, and they did so at affordable prices, serving as a critical hub in the political educational publication chain.

The works that ALFA collected highlighted the more radical branch of the women's liberation movement and featured a special focus on lesbian liberation. However, debate surrounding lesbianism as an identity category came to the forefront nationally, and the educational materials reflected this, stressing that there were many options; there was no "right" way of being a feminist or lesbian feminist, even among the radicals. While most women within ALFA imagined lesbian feminism as an outgrowth of their sexual orientation and their sense of personal identity, the literature directed toward heterosexual and questioning women emphasizes the idea that sexuality was not necessarily an immutable identity that one was born into. Instead, one's sexuality could also be a choice, a natural extension of one's political beliefs, as one option among many. This kind of literature emphasized that women might choose to enter into sexual relationships with other women because they were tired of devoting energy to men who didn't respect them or because it was a demonstration of their love for women. The essay "Lesbianism and Feminism" was recommended for the latter kind of women because it diplomatically attempts to explain lesbianism as a choice, in a way that wouldn't alienate straight feminists:

The consideration of lesbianism as a personal option grew out of very different reasons. For many feminists there had always been a logical, theoretical connection

between the elimination of sex roles and the possibility of loving other women. With some this became a reality when they met a woman they were attracted to. For others, lesbianism has meant a freedom from male relationships in general, a release from the task of looking for that elusive 'special' man who wasn't a male chauvinist. Other feminists saw a love relationship with a woman as a positive thing because they felt other women would not encourage the passivity and submissiveness that they had previously found themselves falling into with men. Most important of all, perhaps, women found that there were other women to love in their own right as persons.

(Koedt 247-248)

For many women, a feminist awakening had preceded their sexual experiences with women, while others felt allied with lesbian feminism because it spoke to their pre-existing sexual desires for women. Thus, every feminist could potentially be a lesbian, and for many lesbians, their sexual orientation was a way to achieve consistency between the ideology and the practice of feminism, which was how they often explained it to heterosexual feminists.

The ALFA women's policy toward accumulating library contents, method of writing up suggested reading lists, and attitude toward spreading information about sexual literacy in the newsletter and within the archival materials indicate that the organization emphasized what I would characterize as self-determined and incremental lesbian feminist radicalism. That is, the members ideally wanted everyone to be politically educated and "out-front," in terms of openness, visibility, and political presence, but they knew that wasn't possible for every member to do. The organization thus provided information that might enable each woman to do what was possible within her own specific material situation. Many women were financially dependent on family members, leaving marriage situations, or limited by their employment situation, which meant that some members couldn't be as visible or open in the public sphere as they might have wanted. For these women in particular, the ALFA library and support information could offer the solace and support that they otherwise lacked. Other women were not sure where exactly they stood on the sexual orientation continuum,

and were trying out various manifestations of identity. Within the revolutionary texts, we see the same pattern as well. There are multiple ways to come into awareness of oneself as a lesbian or as a feminist who engaged in lesbian practices, the literature explains. Even Abbott and Love's rather radical lesbian polemic *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, for example, contained information that emphasized the available options: "A few women do try Lesbianism, but that is not the only sexual alternative. There are also bisexuality, masturbation, asexuality, and revolutionary heterosexuality" (154). So, while much of the literature was liberation-oriented, there were also plenty of apolitical pieces that they recommended, in addition to information that was more reform-minded than revolutionary. The main goal of the ALFA members' sexual literacy political education program was to provide support and open up the women's sense of the possible, as they offered models and education that might enable individuals to better choose what fit best for their personalities and lifestyles.

In order to foster ongoing awareness of updated materials, women wrote book reviews and also discussed timely news from other periodicals in their newsletter. For example, Knowlton, writing in 1980, explains that she is not a fan of much contemporary lesbian fiction because she prefers books that "provide more than relationships and sex" and feature a wider diversity of lesbian experience:

We are all hungry for lesbian fiction... I am sorry that I feel so luke-warm about 'modern' lesbian novels. Not every book can be *Patience & Sarah*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, or *Lover*.... One reason I still reread *The Well of Loneliness* and so quickly forget these newer books is that Radcliffe Hall provided more than relationships and sex in her novel. Although she is snobbish and classist, she creates a variety of places, atmospheres, characters (straight & gay) and ideas. The new novels are full of explicit sex which does not 'assert' our sexual freedom (see Melanie Kaye in *Sinister Wisdom* #13, p. 31) as much as deaden it.

(*Atalanta* 8.8, ALFA Papers Box 6)



Here, Knowlton critiques Hall's snobbery and lack of character diversity in terms of class as she praises the other kinds of character development and situational variety that the book features, taking contemporary novels to task for focusing more on "explicit sex" than developing characters and ideas. Knowlton also manages to slip in a reference to a review in a newsletter from another lesbian feminist organization (which they had on file at SFLA), so this example also reveals how the women facilitated the spread of information developed within one network to another. The letters featured in the beginning of the ALFA newsletters demonstrate that women in other organizations were also reading reviews such as Knowlton's and passing her ideas on to other women within their network as well.

To counter the mainstream culture's exclusive focus on heterosexuality as the most moral and valid way of being, the movement literature and theory featured a lot of first-hand testimonials about what it was like to "come out" of heterosexuality and into lesbian awareness. Perhaps more specifically, the transition might be characterized as a letting go of a heteronormative ideology in order to imagine the freedom inherent in the options provided by the lesbian feminist community. Anne Koedt's interview of a new lesbian couple in *Notes from the Third Year*, titled "Loving Another Woman" highlights the need for multiple narratives in order to foster the kind of sexual literacy awareness provided by a community educated about sexual orientation possibilities. For example, one of the interviewees attests that when she first made the move to sleep with another woman, "the same move that with a man would have been automatic, was tremendously difficult...and exhilarating. Although we did sleep together, it wasn't sexual; just affectionate and very sensual. After that evening we started sleeping together sexually as well" (Koedt 87). Such testimony reassured the women

that it was normal to feel scared or anxious about exploring a new understanding of sexuality, but emphasized that these feelings did not negate the legitimacy of the experience.

Koedt's interview also seems oriented toward the purpose of making it easier for open-minded straight or questioning feminists to empathize and perhaps try out what it might mean to overcome an internalized sense of shame or fear regarding what a change in sexual orientation might mean for their lives. The testimonial continues:

I guess it was also a surprise to find that you weren't struck down by God in a final shaft of lightening. That once you fight through that initial wall of undefined fears (built to protect those taboos), they wither rapidly, and leave you to operate freely in a new self-defined circle of what's natural. You have a new sense of boldness, of daring, about yourself.

(Koedt 87)

The interview reveals how the major obstacle that many women faced was recognizing that they had previously been trapped by a socialized heterosexual sense of morality, and that when they made the attempt to break free, to "operate freely in a new self-defined circle," it was frightening yet empowering. The literature's emphasis on the importance of being open to new options thus provided a supportive counterpoint to mainstream culture and dominant attitudes, which were more preoccupied with pathologizing or ostracizing women who did not fit neatly into heterosexual norms. One of the goals of the lesbian feminist movement, then, was to feature narratives about women who were able to overcome their fear in order to open up new possibilities for their lives and make it easier for women who might want to be lesbians to move beyond socialized shame.

In an essay titled "Gay is Good," which appeared in the ALFA-recommended gay liberation collection *Out of Closets*, we see the theme of overcoming shame put in terms of transcending the "internal violence" of the societal message that homosexuality was immoral. The author explains that she feels as though her identity is thoroughly linked with her sexual

orientation as she explains that she experiences “straight society’s unconscious guilt” like the weight of a terrible secret she must carry:

Understand this—that the worst part of being a homosexual is having to keep it *secret*. Not the occasional murders by police or teenage queer-beaters, not the loss of jobs or expulsion from schools or dishonorable discharges—but the daily knowledge that what you are is so awful that it cannot be revealed. The violence against us is sporadic. Most of us are not affected. But the internal violence of being made to carry—or choosing to carry—the load of your straight society’s unconscious guilt—this is what tears us apart, what makes us want to stand up in the offices, in the factories and schools and shout out our true identities.

(Shelley 32)

The words in this essay echo ideas that appeared in the ALFA newsletters, especially during the earlier years; these themes are common in the gay liberation literature the members read. While many lesbian feminist activists at this time wrote about their experience as a choice—wherein they had chosen to love women because it was a way to live their philosophical orientation in their personal lives and experiment with their theories and analysis in practice—gay liberation literature often connected sexual orientation to an immutable sense of identity, and many ALFA women related to this feeling as well.

The ALFA women also shared their experiences with texts that were meaningful to them personally, keeping in mind that others might relate to their stories and learn from their experience. The process often occurred in a way that was individually tailored and non-judgmental, in a mentorship fashion, and this passage of lesbian literacy took place both in person and in the newsletter. For example, one woman writes in *Atalanta*:

When I accidentally came out as a Lesbian to my mother, Sandra was at Charis [the local feminist bookstore] the next day with a hug and the book I needed to send her. When I went in to Charis to buy *Gyn/Ecology*, Kay said, “Be sure you get to the Third Passage; the first two are a little tough, but she brings you out of it in the Third Passage.” Months later (maybe years Crone-logically) I bought *Three Guineas*; when I did Linda smiled a little and said “I read *Three Guineas* after I read *Gyn/Ecology*.”

(*Atalanta* 12.11, ALFA Papers Box 6)

Here, we see how knowledge passed firsthand from woman to woman, through publications, transferred through a mentorship process of lesbian literacy that provided solace, support, and important resources for those who struggled with the transition from assumed heterosexuality into open lesbianism/lesbian feminism. The women not only guided one another through the range of available literature, but also provided support and encouragement regarding *how* to read the materials. The above passage closes with the observation that when she returned to Atlanta from incarceration, she had believed “that jail was fine, being in Atlanta was what I couldn’t handle. Then I made it to the third passage of Gyn/Ecology and things have been looking up ever since” (*Atalanta* 12.11, ALFA Papers Box 6). It is apparent that this woman has been through a lot, from “accidentally” coming out to her mother in what was likely an inopportune and unexpected moment, to landing in jail, but we can see how the guidance from her fellow lesbian feminists combined with feminist movement literature to offer her a sense of new possibilities for her future life direction.

Abbott and Love frame the process of moving from heterosexuality to lesbian feminism as invention, liberation, and creativity, as an example of self-reflective identity work and action through reflection and open dialogue. The authors explain the process of coming into lesbian awareness as both difficult and laudatory. They provide queer women with a script to protect them from judgment and discrimination, warning that heterosexuals may resent the freedom of choice that lesbians have exercised, because it might reveal some truth about their own lives that they are reluctant to face. “Lesbians, especially Lesbian activists,” Abbot and Love argue, “are taking their lives into their own hands, being responsible for themselves. They live, not so much according to a list of rules, but by the dictates of mind and spirit” (228). Educating oneself about options that subvert the

heterosexual mainstream and choosing to live in a way that does not conform to societal norms means that one must necessarily invent new rules. Instead of living in a reactive or unexamined way, then, lesbians become inherently creative and perpetually self-affirming. Put in terms of *pathos*, the enthusiasm that the authors express is contagious: readers want to join in and experience the exciting possibilities that emerge when lesbianism becomes a lived philosophy. It's unclear whether or not the theory follows the practice as a justification of pre-existing feelings of love for women, but in much of the lesbian literacy materials, the theory and practice of lesbian feminism interact in a reciprocal exchange as a praxis that creates new possibilities for both self- and collective-identity.

Lesbian feminists encouraged one another to invent new traditions at the same time as they discovered the liberating effects when they let go of the old ones that no longer seemed relevant and/or appeared to be ethically suspect. Repeated within the literature, we find the idea that there are many ways to be a lesbian or a lesbian feminist: the focus on ethics and identity as both personal and collective invention practices that lead to social change is cumulative and powerful. The beginning of "In Amerika They Call Us Dykes" (the chapter in the ALFA recommended *Our Bodies, Ourselves* that most explicitly addresses lesbian concerns), helps women understand the range of possibilities by featuring multiple perspectives about coming out, with women speaking in the first-person about the process of opening up their love lives to women. Like Koedt's essay "Lesbianism and Feminism," this specific piece seems aimed toward encouraging connections and understanding between heterosexual and homosexual women: the authors speak not only to lesbian feminists, but also address the heterosexual readers in order to explain what it is like to be a lesbian. It closes with a consideration of non-monogamy, with one woman writing:

I want to be very close to several women—live with some of them, sleep with some of them, and love all of them like family. I want the same amount of security and warmth that a couple can give each other, but I want it spread out to more than one woman. [...] If I'm sleeping with more than one woman, maybe I can control my jealousy and my desire to own my sexual partners. I know it will be very hard to build free but long-term love relationships among a group of women, but the possibility keeps me going.

(“Lesbian Liberation” 69)

Here we find a commonplace attitude about non-monogamy among lesbian feminists: in a monogamous heterosexual couple arrangement, they explained, it was a limitation for couples to feel like they had “ownership” over one another because such trappings were suspiciously tied up with patriarchal, capitalist, and heterosexual traditions. As the women moved forward to let go of past traditions and invent new ways of inhabiting the concepts of lesbianism and lesbian feminism, they relied on the ethics that emerged out of the movement literature to guide their future philosophies and behavior. Readers come to understand that the process of discovering ways of relating to other women can be both confusing and liberating because moving away from old expectations about relationships meant that women felt freer to question *all* preconceived notions they had about relationships. That is, once one aspect of their previous sense of reality began to unravel, the women applied their same rigorous questioning to other aspects of their lives.

### **Rap Groups**

This questioning mainly occurred within the context of consciousness raising “rap groups,” during which the women were able to understand the systemic roots of their oppression, analyze its causes, and transcend the righteous anger they felt when they began to realize that their life experiences had been repressed from mainstream culture except when framed as perverse. Because by the 1970s the term “consciousness raising” (often shortened

simply to CR) had already earned a negative rhetorical connotation, mistakenly thought by many to be group therapy or even merely “bitch sessions,” some liberation groups had begun referring to them as rap groups instead. In the KNOW materials, one woman writes that CR “has been called the heart and cornerstone” of the feminist movement, yet the process remains “somewhat mysterious,” in part because even those who praise its results are often “vague, even contradictory about how it is accomplished,” as she argues that it can be prone to failure unless an intentional procedure is used (Tennov, ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). It becomes clear that while the practice of CR has been often studied, it appears to have been put to different use within groups. In a 1971 essay that ALFA ordered from KNOW, scholar Jo Freeman explains that the rap group is “essentially an educational technique” that “spread far beyond its origins” to become “probably the most valuable contribution so far by the women’s liberation movement” as a tool for social change (ALFA Papers Box 12, File 5). In this particular essay, we see a direct link connecting the spread of information and practices with social change. Freeman, who bolsters her credentials in the beginning of the essay by including her affiliation with the Political Science Department at the University of Chicago, also makes an important point that is not acknowledged enough in the literature: originally the idea of CR was invented by Black Power groups—“much in the public consciousness when the women’s liberation movement began”—to facilitate a collective and contagious understanding of how “what was thought to be a personal problem has a social cause and probably a political solution” (ALFA Papers, Box 12 File 5). Ultimately, the ALFA materials suggest that rap groups were a small group educational practice originally innovated by the Black Power movement and so widely used that they formed a central component within most liberation movement organizations, yet they continued to be contested in nature and

appear to have been most successful when they proceeded according to a particular set of guidelines.

Although ALFA did not keep minutes about what happened during rap group sessions that they later published in the newsletters, it is also possible to deduce ALFA's rap group techniques based on those advocated by other groups whose examples they followed. In particular, ALFA members often promoted "The Woman Identified Woman" essay, written by the Radicalesbians, and in much of the ALFA women's writing it is easy to see the influence of this short-lived yet visible and well-timed Washington D.C.-based organization. In an essay published in the ALFA-recommended gay liberation collection *Out of Closets*, the Radicalesbians explain their philosophy in a way that links their overall approach to group organization with their rap group practices:

We are against hierarchical structures because as women we have experienced firsthand that hierarchy is a fixed status system. (Those with power and privilege, i.e. men, assume leadership and use it to perpetuate their advantage.) We want an organization that encourages growth and fluidity. Therefore, we do not have 'leaders.' We experiment with forms that promote the participation of everyone in decision-making and actions. Some of these are consensus (sense of the meeting) instead of the vote, the lot system of assigning responsibilities, and a preference for meeting and rapping *with* small groups of women, rather than speaking *at* them in auditoriums and lecture halls. The quality of our exchanges with women is more important to us than reaching large numbers with stale rhetoric. We believe that we must live by revolutionary forms while we struggle against sexism, racism, and imperialism; that part of the revolution is our anti-authoritarian life style; that the revolution is process not goal.

(292-293)

Because the ALFA women mainly agreed with the other elements of group organization and community construction that Radicalesbians advocated—non-hierarchical meeting process, experimentation with modes of collective decision-making, smaller groups oriented toward active participation, and attempts to live according to revolutionary rather than traditional principles—it makes sense that ALFA members would also adopt Radicalesbians' approach



to rap groups. In the above quote it is also apparent that the women believed that they could politically educate women in a more meaningful way with smaller groups than according to what Freire would call the “banking” system of education. In the rap groups, the women displaced their self-blame onto the systemic power structures as they intellectualized their experiences.

It is also rather easy to infer ALFA’s rap group methods from the KNOW publication materials the organization promoted. Three essays in particular contain special instructions on how to run successful rap groups, and there are several underlined words and sentences within these essays. One titled simply “Consciousness-Raising,” written by the Women’s Collective in Connecticut, begins by pointing out the many thing CR groups are *not*, and the word “not” has been underlined, as well as the sentence: “We women have not had enough attentive, respectful audiences in our lives” (ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). So it is likely that ALFA women agreed with many of the guidelines advocated by this particular collective, at least in part because they believed that everyone should deserve the respect and acknowledgement that their perspective had been heard. The authors explain that the groups should *not* be social nor action-oriented, that they should *not* be used for therapeutic, religious, nor even explicitly political purposes, but instead primarily meant to help understand “one’s self in relation to one’s society” for the purpose of recognizing “what it is to be a woman in a patriarchal society that oppresses women” (Women’s Collective, ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). So the main rhetorical objective that the ALFA women sought to accomplish was likely related to identifying ways in which their particular oppression was linked to systemic structures that were common to most women, whether lesbian or not.

The Women's Collective essay also goes on to advocate neutral ground, childcare facilities, an inclusive atmosphere, positive encouragement, respectful attention to every woman who wants to speak, no authoritarian leader, and the freedom and flexibility to stray from the guidelines when necessary as well as sometimes picking specific topics for discussion. (Box 12 File 5). Again, the emphasis is on the positive possibilities that arise when the conditions for personal and collective invention are not stifled—CR groups are supposed to flow in a free and non-judgmental manner, they explain. Women are discouraged from giving advice, criticizing, pressuring, using “put-down terminology” that might allow “-isms” to creep in, and not blending gradually into other functions (ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). Each of these discouraged actions also match up with ALFA members' professed guidelines in their mission and purpose statement as well as in an overall assessment of their writing in the newsletter, so it is likely they attempted to follow these particular guidelines.

Ideally, the process of CR groups enabled women to come together in order to exchange their personal experiences in order to bring to light the ways in which their socialized roles as women had interfered with their ability to be free from dominating or oppressive forces. According to the KNOW materials the ALFA members collected and promoted, rap groups made real the “ugly truths of female existence” that the women had already been aware of and yet would not be consciously aware of, made “fully real and conscious” only after their experiences had “been spoken of with others” (Tennov, ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). There was thus a performative element involved in discussing their experiences and relating them back to the cultural forces that had socialized the women—their personal realities were made more real after they shared them with others and listened

to others in return. In one of the CR essays, Dorothy Tennov surveys the movement theories that discuss rap groups and comes to the conclusion that, among the well-circulated literature, some organizations stressed “political action and group solidarity” while others were “concerned with growth—intellectual and emotional—of the individual,” while for others the emphasis was more on “intellectual awareness” (ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). Despite their differences, most groups were small in number, ranging from 5-10 women, and most sessions were structured so that each participant took turns sharing their personal understanding of oppression and relating it to larger power structures in order to see the systemic way in which their particular experiences were both shared and the result of societal causes. The critical element was the way that rap groups provided a space “to speak out loud about things formerly locked away in guilty half-consciousness” in order to discover the common nature of problems that had previously been internalized as personal (Tennov, ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). CR participants were thus able to release some of their pain and anger as they absolved themselves of socialized guilt. The groups were successful in part because each woman found that she was not alone in her experience and thus could “come to understand that our problems are imposed by external forces” and see that it was not individual women who were blameworthy, but that they “were failed” by the patriarchal and heteronormative culture (Tennov, ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). Thus, the rap sessions served the rhetorical functions of being simultaneously cathartic, educational, and analytical.

ALFA’s archival materials indicate that the rap groups were important spaces for theory-building, that they were both contagious—an end in themselves insofar as they produced knowledge that would easily spread to those the participants interacted with—and a preliminary step to more concrete political action. In her KNOW publication essay, Freeman

explains that the rap groups served two main purposes: (1) “bringing women together in a situation of structured interaction” to serve as a communications network for the spread of movement information, in order to counter the strategy of keeping people down “as long as they are kept divided from each other,” and (2), to “become mechanisms for social change in and of themselves. They are structures created specifically for the purpose of altering the participants’ perceptions and conceptions of themselves and society at large” (ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). So the rhetorical function of the CR process brought results because it promoted group solidarity and facilitated a new sense of self and purpose at the same time as it spread movement knowledge. What’s more, the outcomes, while preliminary to more overt political activism, could also have the potential to change society even if the women involved did not go on to join other movement activities. Freeman goes on to note that the successful rap group experience “is both irreversible and contagious” insofar as “one’s view of oneself and the world is never the same again, whether or not there is further active participation in the movement” (ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). The process of CR as it was practiced within ALFA thus probably discouraged allegiance to any one ideology or political dogma, but instead furthered the rhetorical outcome of invention and learning, encouraging the women to perceive their world through fresh eyes and to teach one another as they spread their new sense of possibilities to other women they encountered.

In a 1973 study of “radical revolutionary” consciousness raising groups, communication scholars James W. Chesebro, John F. Cragan, and Patricia McCullough identify four stages of the CR process, using the participant-observation method of studying a gay liberation group as the main example. Chesebro et al. explain that the process they observed was common among most radical revolutionary groups, and the CR sessions were

tape recorded for later study, during which the researchers categorized the process into four stages on the basis of “themes,” as well as “functional and rhetorical characteristics” (139). The authors explain that the participants first provide evidence that they have been oppressed because of their particular “cultural and life-style commitment” as they participate in “a sharing of the public rhetoric of the national” movement (139); next, members gain group identity by articulating an “enemy” and discussing oppression within the larger member community (141); then, the group identifies old values of the establishment world, assess the effects of the old values, and create a “new vision” for the new community (142); and finally, they test their own consistency by assessing their own group’s “revolutionary openness” in an attempt to “remove all forms of oppression from within and from without,” and agree to broaden the revolution by supporting “the liberation efforts of unrecognized oppressed groups” (145-146). As Chesebro et al. explain it, radical revolutionary groups were engaged in a process of developing individual and collective identity through informal theory related to their everyday experiences. That is, rap groups moved to the level of articulating an ideal collective philosophy and new system of morality as they also identified other groups who might also be subject to similar forces and thus allies against the establishment.

Another rhetorical outcome of consciousness raising was to help women see how the stereotypes they had been socialized to accept might be turned around and converted into strengths. As Abbott and Love put it, “One answer to the dilemma of what emerges in consciousness-raising is a self-determined morality” (219). The resulting state of enlightenment and self-awareness is framed as a more enlightened moral state. A woman who has not questioned her socialization, then, can become a woman who is operating in a state of false-consciousness, unable to exert free will or intentional ethical practices. But

some of the movement literature, especially when put in terms of lesbian (as opposed to merely feminist) consciousness raising, exhibited a tendency to take on a self-righteous tone of superiority implying that woman-identified-women are more enlightened than everyone else. Obviously, this argumentative line was *not* very successful when put to heterosexual women or others who were not a part of the women's liberation movement community—a holier-than-thou attitude was not particularly ideal for promoting connections and fostering understanding, and when heterosexual feminists felt that queer women were relying on this epistemology as a basis for justifying their role in the movement, they resented the implication. Yet this line of reasoning was crucial to helping lesbian women counter the discrimination, resistance, and homophobic attitudes they encountered on a daily basis. It was key to helping them gather strength, feel confident, overcoming past guilt about not fitting into their expected roles as women, and it led to a feeling of belonging to a new, more accepting community. Instead of believing the “lies” they had been conditioned to accept, gay women could repeat to themselves that they were taking the road less often traveled, and that if others took such a path, it would help society to open up to other possibilities for negotiating the formation of individuality.

One way to understand how this perspective could emerge is to consider the importance of the process of self-education in countering the majority culture's negative attitude toward gays. By sharing powerful conversion experiences via personal narrative, women also had to separate from and temporarily disown or resent the ways in which they had been socialized to repress or deny a potential for loving women. Writing about the rhetorical outcomes of lesbian consciousness raising, Abbott and Love advocate against

proselytizing or trying to convert women into a gay lifestyle even as they formulate the end result as a higher state of self-awareness, a more “mature” state of being:

Consciousness-raising has been called a conversion experience from self-hatred to self-respect; it can also be called an intellectual awakening from ignorance of society’s conditioning to awareness of the possibility of resistance; a moral transition from unexamined conventional morality to individual principles; a maturing process from dependence to independence; a recovery from sickness to health, from apologies to endorsement. To sum up, one could even say that it is a reconditioning experience designed to shed layer after layer of trained negative thinking and free the vital self which oppression has so effectively buried.

(219)

Contextually, this prose follows on the heels of arguments meant to negate the oppressive forces of socialization outlined in the previous chapters of Abbott and Love’s book—they have just spent two hundred pages writing about the ways in which “society” has built up a system of institutions that condition women into heterosexuality, framing gayness as a either a disease or an immoral choice. In order to help women gain confidence, then, lesbianism comes to be an identity option that provides a solution to the “real” sickness—society’s traditional institutions. Instead of being the immoral outcast, the lesbian becomes the self-determined savior of morality. Instead of being sick or deviant, lesbians become society’s cure. Instead of feeling ashamed, or believing charges that they are psychologically immature, lesbians can reassure themselves that they are in fact *more* mature, because they’ve had the strength to question their psychological conditioning.

### **Political Education as Radical Liberation Strategy**

It just may be that the Lesbian, far from being an odd kind of woman—tolerated, at best, by society—is a catalyst to a new culture. Far from being sick, she may be extraordinary, even heroic.

-- Abbott and Love, 238

While it may seem like a rather arrogant rhetorical move to claim that lesbians can be the saviors of our culture, positing them as the heroes of a new era, this gesture was necessary emotionally and mentally as it also inspired lesbians to actively work toward making that claim a reality. Although the idea that lesbian feminists are the cure to society's ills, the more enlightened women of the future, was often present in the literature, most of ALFA's educational information stresses that these kinds of attitudes are ultimately unproductive when dealing with audiences external to or new to the movement. The KNOW articles emphasize that, while society may have "brainwashed" women into certain unhelpful thought patterns, the women's liberation movement was educational in nature and not meant to indoctrinate women into self-righteous savior lesbian-bots. Dorothy Tennov's "Open Rapping" essay, in particular, explains that the egalitarian nature of the groups should facilitate reciprocal learning, where new members also educate the veteran members, so that when a woman "takes our time to tell us how fortunate she is that she has never been discriminated against, we do not disagree with her experience" because if the women "demanded that she accept what appears to her as dogma, even if she stays, she will not learn" (ALFA Papers Box 12 File 5). In other words, if women join the groups only to find that there is a required dogma or political philosophy that they must adhere to, women are ultimately less likely to participate. Tennov also stresses that, despite the implications of the term consciousness raising, it is fallacious to think of the process in a teleological fashion, where one's consciousness begins at a low point and gets raised to an ideal high point, where more experienced members have climbed to a "higher" level. Rap groups, the lesbian literacy information explains, is ideally both an end in itself as a pathway into movement attitudes,



and also preparatory and educational in nature—a step that precedes outreach and that informs women of their identity options and the possibilities for political solutions.

While it was sometimes difficult to effectively counter the discrimination the ALFA women faced in their daily lives without feeling superior as a result of their intense self-reflective work, the women frequently reminded themselves that their role was to offer freedom from controlling indoctrination through education and sisterhood and they soon recognized how expressing strong political preferences might discourage new members from sticking around. For example, the members sent out questionnaires within their first two years of organizational activity in order to discover why women who had come to the house did not return, and found that the main reason was that they “felt different from most of our members because of their life style and political persuasion” (*ALFA Newsletter* no. 6, ALFA Papers Box 6). Thus, while group solidarity and increased levels of confidence were important, the women realized that it was self-defeating to repeat the authoritarian coercion they encountered through the mainstream culture. At other times, it seems, the wide variety and flexible options the group provided seem to have been a source of struggle. One particular piece reflecting on the “herstory” of the organization explains that ALFA’s “flexibility and lack of firm structure, coupled with a broad range of political ideologies and lifestyles, has resulted in a series of occasional traumas or crises” (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 19). The members’ high level of collective self-awareness seem to have effectively countered these “occasional traumas or crises” that arose as a result of differing political views and wide range of possibilities for inhabiting a lesbian feminist identity.

Political education within the organization was based on the philosophy that only those who were free from forces of dominance could participate in persuasive action, and

that only those educated about their options and the way that the forces of oppression worked could truly be free. Political education within ALFA was thus both preliminary and an end in itself, contagious, and a process that combined both theory and practice into an ethically consistent mode of personal identity. The members' lesbian literacy strategies offered an inventive, creative, liberating, and freely chosen way of joining and participating in the movement. With an emphasis on egalitarian and not authoritarian modes of absorbing, sharing, and contributing back to the nationwide practices, the ALFA women were able to internally educate without indoctrinating, and open their membership up to those who needed the resources that their library and rap group spaces provided.

Ultimately, the political education materials available in SFLA and the practice of rapping together in small groups led to a focus on openness, an awareness of multiple options for sexual liberation, and a connection between identity, community, and ethical integrity as important strategies to move from an unquestioned heterosexual socialization and into a new sense of possibilities as a lesbian feminist. In line with the radical feminist movement influences, the philosophy and rap group practices anthropomorphized "society" and gender role expectations as the "real" enemy, rather than scapegoating men and/or heterosexual feminists and kept in mind that they were working alongside other revolutionary groups, rather than competing with them for limited political resources. By reminding one another how the traditional institutions of power limited them, ALFA's lesbian feminist political education strategies meant that the women who joined their community were able to maintain unity, motivated to seek broader-reaching political solutions to their feelings of discrimination, and able to feel a sense of belonging to a nationwide lesbian feminist movement as they invented new ways of inhabiting that identification.

## Chapter V

### Living the Movement: Lesbian-Feminist Culture and Community

That space that we dykes have made for ourselves is not only a political movement with an organizational form, it is also a community. This is one of the characteristics which most distinguishes lesbian-feminism from straight feminism.

-- Vicki G. (*Atalanta* 8.12, ALFA Papers Box 6)

ALFA explicitly connected political activism and education to community and culture because the members realized that their social activities had both attracted new members to the organization at the same time as they provided a kind of glue that held the members together. The women know that their social and cultural events have been a powerful tool for attracting new members. In a reflection in the newsletter on the importance of community and its connection to attracting women and holding the organization together, one woman writes, “[s]ocial events at the ALFA House, like the weekly coffee house, have drawn a lot of womyn. Sports activities, particularly her softball teams, have been central to ALFA and have involved hundreds of womyn either as players or fans” (*Atalanta* 8.12 ALFA Papers Box 6). As a result of the debates that received positive feedback in *Atalanta*, moreover, they have realized that specific political causes were also included within a cultural sphere. So the women consciously worked to provide spaces and activities that fostered a sense of familial community.

One of the organization’s outreach statements explains that the group’s social functions were not merely auxiliary to their overall purpose: “Our social activities are not just to give us something to do; our goal is to create a sense of sisterhood and support and to form

a strong community from which to operate in challenging the larger society and its systematic oppression of us” (ALFA Papers Box 1 File 19). Part of the focus on community, then, was a result of the women’s realization that in order to advocate effectively for political change, they needed a strong connection to a feeling of lesbian sisterhood and the support it provided. Member Vicki G. claims that the connection between political movement and community was especially compelling to lesbian feminists because lesbian-identified women had often lost other support systems: “It is clear that in part, this community we have developed is our family. So many of us have strained ties with our blood families either because we feel we cannot be open with them about our sexuality or because we have been open with them and they have cut us off” (*Atalanta* 8.12, ALFA Papers Box 6). Vicki G., a leader within the ALFA community, was not alone in her description of the organization as a community that could provide a substitute for blood ties—her observation is representative of the larger pattern in the newsletters and other organizational materials.

As they developed a unique culture and community, the ALFA members were likely influenced by the ideas of the Black Arts Movement, whose pioneers intertwined politics, morality, and art, which inspired many of the strategies of the nationwide lesbian feminist movement. These ideas were very much “in the air” as the wave of new social movements swept the country, and they were most widely adopted by lesbian feminist communities in particular. Most influential from 1965-1975, BAM artists “contended that there is a close relationship between morality and aesthetics”; they fused political ideas with community and attempted to transform the consciousnesses of ordinary people by exploring the link between “critical consciousness and social intervention” (Dyson 62-63). The idea was that in order for a social change movement to truly uplift an oppressed group of people, it must enact a shift

in values that would fuse with the culture and lifestyles of those who sought freedom from traditional forces of dominance. This philosophy brought “social struggles for self-determination and political liberty” into black artists’ vision of the future, “spurning the heroic individualism of European models of artistic endeavor in favor of the collective roots of artists who express the values, beliefs, ideals, and perceptions of the communities to which they belong” (Dyson 62). By “living the movement,” political change could more easily spread and impact the lives of those who came into contact with movement participants. Lesbian feminists who engaged in political education thus often connected cultural change to the more explicit rhetorical purpose of spreading activism-oriented information: the development of critical consciousness was not enough without its social intervention counterpart.

Another philosophy influencing ALFA’s strategy for building culture and community in a way that would work symbiotically with the organization’s lesbian literacy practices is also apparent in the writings of Paulo Freire, whose observations describe the inseparability of education, culture, and practices of freedom. Since many of the organization’s members proclaimed a Marxist political leaning and supported the Cuban revolution and other countries’ political revolutionary uprisings during this time, it is likely that they were influenced by the philosophy Freire advocates in this text. In addition to the obvious influence that Marxist ideology exerted on the group’s members and actions, we find further evidence in two active sub-groups of ALFA, the Daughters for the Second American Revolution (DAR II) and the Atlanta Socialist Feminist Women’s Union and Dykes, both of which met at the ALFA house and provided a space for the women to explore lesbian feminist socialist political philosophies (ALFA Papers Box 7 File 23). “Originating in

objective conditions,” Freire writes, “revolution seeks to supersede the situation of oppression by inaugurating a society of women and men in the process of continuing liberation. The educational, dialogical quality of revolution, which makes it a ‘cultural revolution’ as well, must be present in all its stages” (Freire 137). When Freire discusses the “educational, dialogical” qualities of revolutionary movement, he is referring to the need for public discourse to negotiate new terms for social justice realities, which is why liberation activity becomes cultural as well as political. Members realized that if their ethical principles were open to question and charges of hypocrisy from heterosexuals they came into contact with, they stood no chance of persuading them that lesbians could be respected or trusted, and so they worked together as a community to find strategies to practice living intentional and consistent lives as they exchanged advice for lifestyle choices that would represent lesbian feminists well in the broader community.

By meshing their politics with their everyday lives, members were better rhetorically positioned to uplift lesbians and women in a wider-reaching, more holistic way. To the ALFA women, an infusion of politics with the idea of “living the movement” in their everyday lives meant that they not only actively worked to build a supportive community, but they also attempted to live their lives with lesbian feminist integrity, insofar as they sought to match up their daily actions with their political philosophies. Politics, lifestyle, and community were inseparable for many ALFA women: “the kinds of living arrangements that people make and the kind of lover and friend relationships that womyn have are part of the lesbian-feminist politics and affect the whole spectrum of political work we do” (*Atalanta* 12.8, ALFA Papers Box 6). As a result of this intertwined sense of activism and culture, members self-consciously created spaces to foster lesbian feminist art and music, educated

one another regarding informed economic consumption choices, held workshops and formed sub-groups that focused on lesbian health and wellness, and made other lifestyle decisions based on their women-centered and feminist political underpinnings as they explored new ways to build personal relationships and as well as influence a new generation of more lesbian-accepting children. Some of the women recognized the importance of religion in a well-rounded life, but were disillusioned by the patriarchal and heteronormative values inherent in many of the traditional religious systems, and so they began to explore alternative spiritual rituals as well, recovering older philosophies that centered around goddesses, pagan, or Wicca practices, or focusing on nature and the changing of the seasons.

Lesbian feminists in ALFA also celebrated the sense of unity that a focus on community and culture enabled:

There is strength and support in this powerful womyn-bonding of our communities. But like every other aspect of lesbian/feminism, the contradictions are ever-present. Working through them can be a source of energy for us. The community and organization are not the same thing, but there is a strong interlocking relationship.

*(Atalanta 8.12, ALFA Papers Box 6)*

Even when disagreements arose regarding how to live their values in their lives, the work of sorting through the contradictory elements gave them energy. This energy also better equipped members to represent lesbian feminists in a positive way when among men and straight women as well. For example, their softball leagues provided the opportunity to be visible and safe at the same time, to interact with non-lesbian or closeted women while still within a supportive community. The women thus felt that ALFA's culture helped provide the strength to encounter difficult situations as a group, a couple, or individually.

It becomes clear that part of the rhetorical function fulfilled by building a strong social community was simply the ability to feel accepted and gain a sense of normalcy.

Within the neighborhood, as well, ALFA members had been able to successfully build more fulfilling lives:

I do not mean a vague sense of community. I mean that hundreds of ALFA dykes live within block of each other. We run into each other not only at lesbian-identified events, like the womyn's bars, social gatherings at each other's homes, political meetings, and concerts, but at the local supermarket, health food store, inexpensive Chinese restaurant, bookstore, Laundromat, karate class, feminist therapy center or lesbian chiropractor.

(*Atlanta* 8.12, ALFA Papers Box 6)

The feeling of community was thus especially powerful when it extended to the broader neighborhood. Essentially, the ALFA women had been able to build up a “critical mass” that reassured them when they ran into one another in their local living spaces and gave them that crucial confidence when engaging with citizens of the general public. In the rest of this chapter, I focus on the concrete ways in which the organization devoted effort to “living the movement” in an everyday way as the members sorted out how to make their individual and collective lifestyle practices consistent with their political and educational principles. In the first section, I discuss the social and artistic culture the ALFA women created in a small group way, and focus on the health and wellness discussions that contributed to their community cohesion. In the second section I explain how the visual-rhetorical humor culture they created within the space of the newsletter functioned, and I close with an examination of how their economic decisions and interpersonal relationship choices arose as areas of debate that extended their sense of community into the public and political sphere.

### **Inventing Culture—The Role of Art, Sex, and Spirituality**

We first see ALFA women working in a more self-conscious and formal manner to build community as the organization's inertia picks up, with a “Weekend Retreat” in late



1974. At this point, ALFA is quickly adding many members, in part because the organization's openly lesbian softball team attracted attention that summer. Twenty-three women gathered together at a country house not too far from Atlanta:

The first evening all 23 of us crowded into the living room, on couch, chairs, and floor, to tell coming out stories. 23 coming out stories! Can you imagine? Every woman thought that her story would be a bore, but it was clear from the response that when you've heard one, you certainly haven't heard them all. The room almost exploded with passion, fear, suspense, confusion and joy as we told stories until quarter of 2 in the morning.

(*ALFA Newsletter* no. 14, ALFA Papers Box 6)

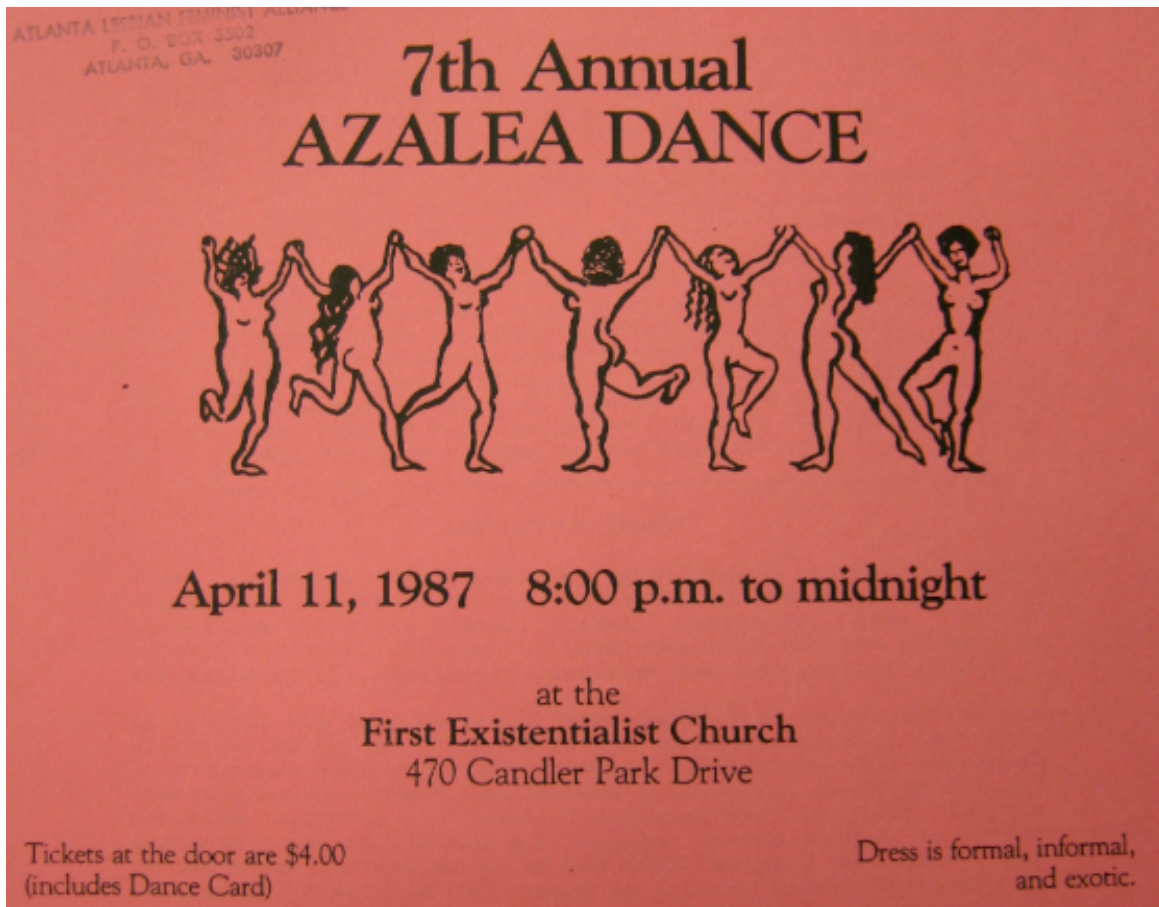
In this newsletter summary of the weekend's events, we see that the retreat began by providing each woman with an opportunity to tell her own personal narrative of what it was like to make the move from being raised in a heterosexual lifestyle to realizing that they were different in terms of sexual orientation and sexual expression. While the newsletter doesn't go into more detail about the content of the coming out stories, it is clear that the members who participated were moved by the unique experience of sharing with one another what it was like to move from a denial of lesbian orientation into self-acceptance and new awareness, which was as confusing and scary as it was fulfilling. The account of the retreat goes on to highlight some other activities and concludes that the women "only 'scratched the surface' during the experience," adding that they were able to brainstorm ideas for groups that might organize around the following topics: "larger social issues that affect us, our sexuality and how it affects our relationships, poetry workshops, our oppression as lesbians and how to deal with it, etc." (*ALFA Newsletter* No. 14, ALFA Papers Box 6). Some of these topics provided fodder for rap groups, while others generated energy that would form the foundation for action-oriented political groups as well as more explicitly cultural groups.

Retreats happened on a semi-regular basis, and worked in conjunction with the annual Gay Pride events and ALFA birthday celebration to hold the larger community together socially. But the energy for the invention of ALFA's collective culture often originated within the sub-organizations that formed up along the way. Among the cultural cliques that arose during the years, the emphasis was on writing, music, theater, and dance. Shortly after the retreat, the women created a Poetry Collective, which held workshops and readings, and in 1975 they self-published a book of lesbian and women-centered poems by ALFA women, called *Rewarding Amazons* (ALFA Newsletter Aug. 1975, ALFA Papers Box 6). Many of the newsletters during the 1970s showcased the ALFA members' poetry. The members put together a songbook as well, and eventually a sub-group called Womonwrites formed. Womonwrites was a lesbian writers' conference that was popular during the later years of the organization (ALFA Papers Box 7 File 23). ALFA women helped form and sponsor the woman-centered Lucina's Music, a production company that held its first feminist concert in November of 1976 (ALFA Papers Box 6 File 4). Lucina's Music was a women-oriented production company, and a part of a broader lesbian feminist trend that would direct attention and resources to women's music. Lucina brought singer-songwriters Cris Williamson and Meg Christian to the city before they became celebrated as pioneers for being among the first self-identified lesbian musicians (ALFA Papers Box 7 File 23).

"Coffeehouse" productions began at the ALFA house, with a group of members who called themselves the Boogiewomen. The coffeehouses featured food and entertainment in the form of song and theater, adding to the energy for Red Dyke Theater and WomanSong Theater, two "freewheeling theater groups" (ALFA Papers Box 7 File 23). The Boogiewomen later turned into the Boogiewimmin, ALFA's social programming committee,

which was one of the most long-lived committees in the organization. One of the most popular events that the Boogiewimmin sponsored was the Azalea Dance, held yearly during April. The Azalea Dance meant a lot to the ALFA women because it fulfilled their need for a woman-only dance; it was a way to offer a counterpart to the socialization into heterosexual culture that the women felt had ostracized them (see Figure 1, ALFA Papers Box 6 File 13).

The celebration of naked women's bodies that we see in this particular flyer was not atypical fare, in terms of patterns that emerge when we look at the artwork found in the newsletters and flyers. The cover of *Atalanta* and the drawings inside often featured both sensual and sexual innuendo. Usually the representations attempted to be inclusive of all kinds of women's body sizes, ethnicities, ages, and included differently-abled women's bodies as well. While it has been a stereotypical assumption that lesbian feminists during this time were asexual, primarily lesbian for political reasons, or merely sensual as opposed to sexual, the ALFA materials suggest otherwise. On the other hand, the focus was not exclusively on nakedness or sexuality, either. That is, the artistic representations also incorporated enough variety of scenes and situations to provide a well-rounded representation of possibilities for lesbian lifestyles.



**Figure 1: Azalea Dance Flyer**

Discussions about sex within the organization did lead to the invention of an ALFA-specific sexual culture: the women's overall attitude was to embrace, promote education about and expression of lesbian sexual desires as a part of a healthy sense of sexuality. Sexual health and wellness and sexuality became a lesbian feminist movement concern that ALFA members saw as cultural yet inextricable from the organization's overall educational mission. In her 2006 *Hypatia* article, Nancy Tuana explains why women's health is connected to epistemology and the political sphere. Feminist health activists, she explains, worked to uncover the way that knowledge about women's bodies had been ignored, withheld, denied, and suppressed by traditional frameworks in a way that worked to oppress the very women the medical profession purported to help. By reexamining traditional

medicine and “undermining the production of ignorance about women’s health and women’s bodies in order to critique and extricate women from oppressive systems often based on this ignorance,” the women’s health movement staged “epistemological resistance” that worked to “augment women’s lives, and to transform society” (Tuana 2). The ALFA women obviously shared the approach of the women’s health movement when it came to critiquing *most* traditional institutions, which they saw as particularly hostile to lesbian needs and concerns. So Tuana’s observations are especially applicable when considered in terms of women-loving-women sexual health and sexuality.

The newsletters featured multiple health awareness messages aimed toward educating the members about sexually transmitted infection and vagina-related health. From about the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, it is possible to open up one of a range of newsletter issues and find an article in the style of a public service announcement. Sometimes these discussions are funny and accompanied by entertaining drawings. The Trichomoniasis PSA, for example, features a hand-drawn Protazoa that doesn’t actually look much like the real thing but gets the point across (ALFA Papers Box 6 File 4). Information about AIDS begins to appear in the early 1980s, when at one point the women wonder if they will be next, until the focus shifts to political answers and ways that they can support their gay brothers, at which point the sexual health information returns to educating the women about such things as Herpes and how the virus works.

Because lesbians were often either misunderstood or judged and shamed when they sought information about sexual health and sexuality from the traditional institutions, they took the initiative to self-educate or invent the needed materials themselves, and they conducted workshops that they often opened up to women in the community at large. The

ALFA members who were health professionals or whose vocations intersected with sexual health education assumed leadership roles in this area. For example, two of these women decided that they would like to create a forum for sharing information about lesbian sexuality, with the organization's participants forming the experimental first audience. The first test workshop took place in 1976 and was well-received by the member who reviewed it, explaining that it was oriented toward getting together with other lesbians "to explore their own sexual experience in an environment where the fact of their lesbianism was taken for granted and did not need to be explained, defended, or protected" (ALFA Papers Box 6 File 4). The member goes on to explain that the supplementary materials and quality of the discussions had been the highlight, and that she had emerged with a better understanding of her body, herself:

Aided by films and honest discussions, thirty-some lesbians from all over the southeast shared and explored their individual and relational sexuality: differences, fears, joys, and problem areas. As one participant, I found my own sexual self-understanding clarified. My fears lessened as I confronted them and learned that I was not so different after all.

(ALFA Papers Box 6 File 4)

It sounds like these workshops were especially able to help women gain a vocabulary for talking about sex, encourage them to feel more comfortable doing so, and enable the realization that they weren't as abnormal as they'd imagined. The discussion helped them see that they shared similar concerns and fears, but weren't aware of what they had in common since they hadn't been talking about it. What kinds of concerns and fears? It's lesbian sex, there can't be much to it—they've already got the same parts, right? Well, some of the women likely didn't even fully understand how their own parts worked. Even when they did understand, many of them had probably internalized hetero- and male-centric values and views about sex and sexuality. I'm not trying to make light or to judge, here, but rather to

point out how the sense of shame, silence, and general lack of information or healthy representations in the public and even medical-professional spheres left many lesbian women in the dark about what happened in the dark. The lack of information, discomfort with discussing sex, or a reluctance to admit ignorance, likely meant that ALFA women doubted themselves and/or were afraid of the unknown. Newly crossed-over or inexperienced women were especially reassured when the air of mystery surrounding lesbian sex and sexuality was “clarified,” as the member above puts it.

By 1977, they had begun to conduct the citywide workshops, which helped to raise funds for ALFA as they gave back to women who weren’t organization members or who were lesbian-curious (or merely curious and not scared of lesbians) and wanted a women-only space for learning about and discussing women’s sexuality. 25% of the workshop money went back to ALFA and the workshop leaders noted that they were willing to accept women on a “pay only as much as you are able” basis, advertising the workshops as fulfilling the purpose of “finding new ways of owning our sexuality as lesbian women” as they look back on past sexual experiences for the purpose of “getting in touch with our sexual needs; coming to understand the sexual myths which have shaped our values; fantasy; body image” (*Atalanta* 5.5, ALFA Papers Box 6).

It is clear from the advertisement that eradicating myths and transcending a heterosexual understanding of values was an important component that opened doors for discussion during the test workshop. What myths and values? Well, the main one they probably started with was clearing up the idea that lesbians don’t have sex at all, or if they do, it’s not “real” sex, or it’s boring, etc., and then they probably used the topic of “fantasy” to discuss about the range of possibilities, not limited to normative values. This might have

meant they also talked about alternative styles of sex (there are some articles about non-vanilla and BDSM variations as sexual options in the newsletters later on) and non-monogamy (which was one thing the ALFA women, like many lesbian feminists, talked about and tried out a lot during this time, as I will discuss in the third section of this chapter). The flyer adds, “Some sexually explicit films will be used” in a way that looks and sounds like a warning (*Atalanta* 5.5, ALFA Papers Box 6). It is possible that this “warning” tacked on at the end was sincere, a genuine warning to those who might be made to feel uncomfortable or offended by the possibility of watching “sexually explicit” material. But I offer my own educated guess that the workshop creators, based on their experience with their test audience, recognized and intended that at the rhetorical level it would more realistically function as a bonus that would attract more women to attend.

As the years progress, we see the ALFA women quickly grow have a very comfortable and laid-back sense of their sexuality. In flyers and drawings in the newsletters and on the covers, it is clear that the culture within ALFA has become one of acceptance of their sexualities and their bodies. In *Atalanta* reviews and debates about sex and sexuality, we see what I would characterize as a healthy celebration of sex that comes across as “liberated.” As imprecise and overused as that word is, it seems most appropriate and was also obviously the women’s goal. This comfort with talking about sex comes across in an ALFA member’s 1984 review of *First Time: Sexual Fun on Cassette for Lesbians* (Sumaje Tapes, Philadelphia, PA, 1983), which begins with the line, “Get out your vibrators, women!” (*Atalanta* 12.9, ALFA Papers Box 6) The reviewer goes on to explain that she is especially happy to see that the cassette tape “manages to be sexual and fun without the exploitative quality so prevalent in made-for-men ‘lesbian’ porn. All the scenes are realistic



and possible. It is obvious from the beginning that this tape is made by and for lesbians” (*Atalanta* 12.9, ALFA Papers Box 6). In the review, it is almost possible to see the author’s eyes roll from impatience with the previously available sources of lesbian sex materials: even when cultural items are supposedly meant for women, they are really meant for men, and this is especially true when it comes to sex, even when her sexual desires have nothing to do with men and their desires. In this case, “exploitative” probably refers also to the more general tendency to filter lesbian sex through the male gaze and turn them into objects to be used, without considering women as humans with desires of their own.

Thus, the need for more liberatory epistemologies carries over to this particular need as well. It is a major understatement to say that this ALFA member is enthusiastic in her gratitude for this resource. We are told that one particular section, called “Speechless,” is short but deserves special mention; even though it contains only sounds and no dialogue, “It is VERY REAL!” (*Atalanta* 12.9, ALFA Papers Box 6) Her enthusiasm here demonstrates her frustration with the fakeness involved in the other available resources, and probably relates back to her annoyance with made-for-men “lesbian” porn. The author of the review explains that half of the tape is stories read aloud “kind of like lesbian bed time stories,” some of it funny, and she adds a small critique: the tape feels somewhat choppy (it has an “uneven quality”) because “we are still unsure of what is erotic for Lesbians” (*Atalanta* 12.9, ALFA Papers Box 6). Her final observation about “still” being “unsure of what is erotic” for lesbians is interesting insofar as it illustrates the extent of her preference for items made for and by women. Despite the fact that there is already lesbian sexually explicit material available, since it hasn’t been made by and for women in a more widely available way, it therefore doesn’t really count. The appearance of new options is exciting because it opens up

a sense of fresh possibilities for erotic preferences. Indeed, her review probably started a discussion about it, especially since we see her obvious preference for the *very real*.

The ALFA women's sexual culture fostered a special kind of bonding among members that contributed to the overall health and wellness of the organization. These lesbian feminists weren't shy, ashamed, nor embarrassed about their sexual desires, yet they didn't obsess over it either. Rather, sex was acknowledged as an important component of their lives in a way that was unique to their community and culture—insofar as women having sex with women were the primary axes of oppression under which their group had identified—but it was also just one component of their richly varied lives and one aspect of their varied oppression.

The ALFA members' focus on health extended from the artistic/creative and sexual realms and into a more holistic understanding of health and wellness that also included spirituality as a concern. The women discussed the shortcomings of the religious traditions they had been raised in, explored new alternatives to religion and some practiced a unique lesbian feminist form of spirituality. They would gather to look at stars as well as partake in rituals informed by a naturalistic and woman-centered spirituality. One newsletter article features a poem-reflection on their last visit. It repeats that “rituals are muscles which move societies” and encourages women to leave behind their old rituals that define their roles as cooking meals and taking care of children and working a nine-five job, “male (death) culture” that involves worship of a “male got tear up earth pollute air” and “kill animals” (ALFA Papers Box 6 File 4). Instead, the women write, they seek to foster “womon rituals” wherein they “enter goddess circle invite goddesses write the names of Goddesses, chant our sound, become a sound new to the crickets around us. share wine and fruit. get high on being

together feeling specialness of womon spirit of our ritual. radical—from the root. roots of patriarchy are rituals. roots of new womon culture rituals. examine rotting death rituals pull them out (ouch!) send shoots from new seeds” (ALFA Papers Box 6 File 4). What the women are describing here is their radical ethical approach to spirituality. They sought to eradicate the roots of patriarchy from its dominance over their lives, in order to create new rituals and spirituality that might be “untainted.” Rituals and spirituality were the aspects of religion they wanted to keep, because they knew that these elements served their basic human needs.

The ALFA women read and reviewed books they felt to express new understandings of feminist spirituality. One woman reviews Stone’s *When God Was a Woman*. In this book, the reviewer explains, Stone tells a “herstory” of Goddess worship:

A practical result of a new theory and herstory of women’s spirituality is the vision it can offer to women who are now struggling in traditional religions over such issues as ‘allowing’ women to be priests. After reading Stone, and Anne Kent Rush’s *Moon, Moon*, one friend realized how grindingly, inexorably oppressive male religions have been to women, and dropped out of her Episcopal communicant class, which is at least one soul saved. *There is still the great power of eternity in traditional religions, in rituals which reflect enduring patterns, which appeal to the yearning of our finite selves for that which is beyond time.* That yearning is not satisfied with the temporary unity of a socialist-feminist study group or a house meeting or a battered women’s shelter. Now that we have resurrected our heroines, our martyrs, our goddesses, and begun again to build a world for women, we want to feel that it will last longer than a political coalition. Sometimes we live beyond our time in our music and sometimes in our poetry and sometimes through ritual. *How miraculous it would be if we should create a ritual which would reassure us by its cycles, yet contain in its symbolism the turmoil of our struggles and joys as women and as lesbians, so that we could go from the ritual in unity with one another, in strength with ourselves, and in hope that some of all this will endure.*

(*Atalanta* 5.7, ALFA Papers Box 6, my emphasis)

In this discussion, we see that the ALFA women value the traditions of religion, as well as the yearning for some sort of eternal life. The women have realized that, even though they do not want to suffer the oppressive ways they have felt religion, blaming it on patriarchy, they

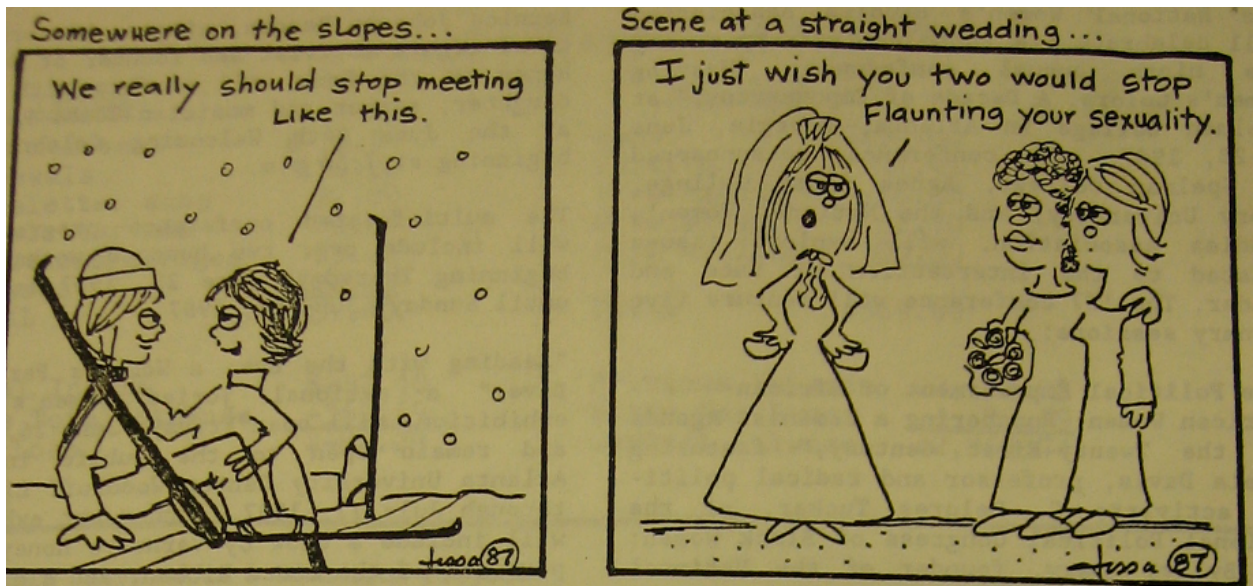
need ritual and symbolism in their understanding of the finite, yet cyclical nature of humans within the duration of time. They are looking for patterns, in order to keep what they like about religious traditions and discard what doesn't work for them because it feels oppressive.

### **Visual Rhetoric and Insider Humor as Tools for Social Cohesion**

Humor was a central component of the organizational culture within the community ALFA women built. Laughter helped the members to feel that they had others they could relate to as they recovered from negative experiences. It is clear that sometimes negativity invaded the sense of community the women had created within the organization, but by incorporating laughter as a regular antidote, they kept one another from the downward spiral of negativity that brought many other liberation-based or radical feminist organizations to a premature ending. The women made trips to "Sappho's Quarry," a nearby place in the countryside, and on at least one occasion held a "laughter workshop" there, in order to counter the "widespread anger, depression, and apathy" due to "the times, the never-improving economic situation, and, or, the increasingly fast-growing epidemic called paranoia which turns sister against sister and even lover against lover" (*ALFA Newsletter* 4.12, ALFA Papers Box 6). Women who felt they were not able to be open around work colleagues or family, faced a special feeling of being drained on a daily basis, whether that resulted from hearing homophobic comments, encountering questions about a significant other, or generally feeling required to hide the lesbian element of their lives. The references to paranoia and the economic situation require further context to really understand how they disproportionately impacted lesbians. Many women feared they would be fired on the basis of their sexual orientation, and they were particularly vulnerable to the effects of the earnings

gap between women and men, since male income wasn't supplementing lesbian households. Additionally, some women had left marriages with children, were primarily responsible for the economic burden of childcare, and some feared that custody of their children might be taken away if their sexual orientation were discovered. Humor thus provided comfort during especially difficult times and worked as an inoculation against inter-organizational negativity.

The combined use of humor and art in making an argumentative case is also a larger pattern among lesbian feminists generally, because laughter is such a powerful strategy insofar as it sidesteps an ethos problem and has the added benefit of being difficult to counter. In the form of a combination of visual representation, juxtaposition, and captions, laughter helped provide the ALFA women with ideas for how they might act in various situations in order to negate stereotypes or draw attention to logical contradictions inherent in arguments used to justify discrimination or judgmental attitudes. Often, mainstream culture's irrational yet socialized and thus normalized scripts pathologizing lesbian behavior and desires became a topic for the visual humor in the newsletters. For example, in Figure 2 (ALFA Papers Box 6 File 15), we see a scene on the left in which two women flirt with one another in a way that is often portrayed as cute when it features a hetero couple, in which the women "accidentally" crash into one another and even use a line commonly used in straight romantic movies. On the right, we see a rather benign scene in which a straight bride accuses them of "flaunting" their sexuality.



**Figure 2: Atalanta Comic—“Stop Flaunting”**

The scene on the left is meant to showcase what lesbian flaunting might actually look like (with enlarged lovey-eyes and intertwined legs) and how different it is from an arm around a shoulder while attending a wedding together. This particular comic highlights the hypocrisy often employed when people feel uncomfortable around lesbians and project the blame onto a couple behaving no different from the straight norm (indeed, here the women are even dressed according to gendered expectations): the bride is hypocritical because in this case *she* is the one literally flaunting her sexuality, since her sexual orientation is on display as she takes part in a ceremony limited to heterosexuals, and these women are presumably there to support her in her flaunting, which adds insult to injury. Many of the visually based arguments feature scenes that are particularly difficult to face in a heteronormative society, because the women needed a reason or keep the lighter side in mind during social rituals that drew the most attention to the women’s deviance from the norms—at weddings, family gatherings, or at work, for example. Wedding situations, as represented by the visual above, commonly led lesbian women feel especially left out of “normal” culture, after having been

socialized according to prevailing attitudes that regard marriage as an important goal and marker of success or even maturity.

**Figure 3: *Atalanta* Comic—  
“De-Dyking the Apartment”**



Because the women felt as though their personal integrity was particularly called into question during stressful encounters with friends and family outside their community, the collective culture ALFA invented reassured them by helping them cultivate personal forgiveness. Members felt a special burden due to the very culture they had created (that is,

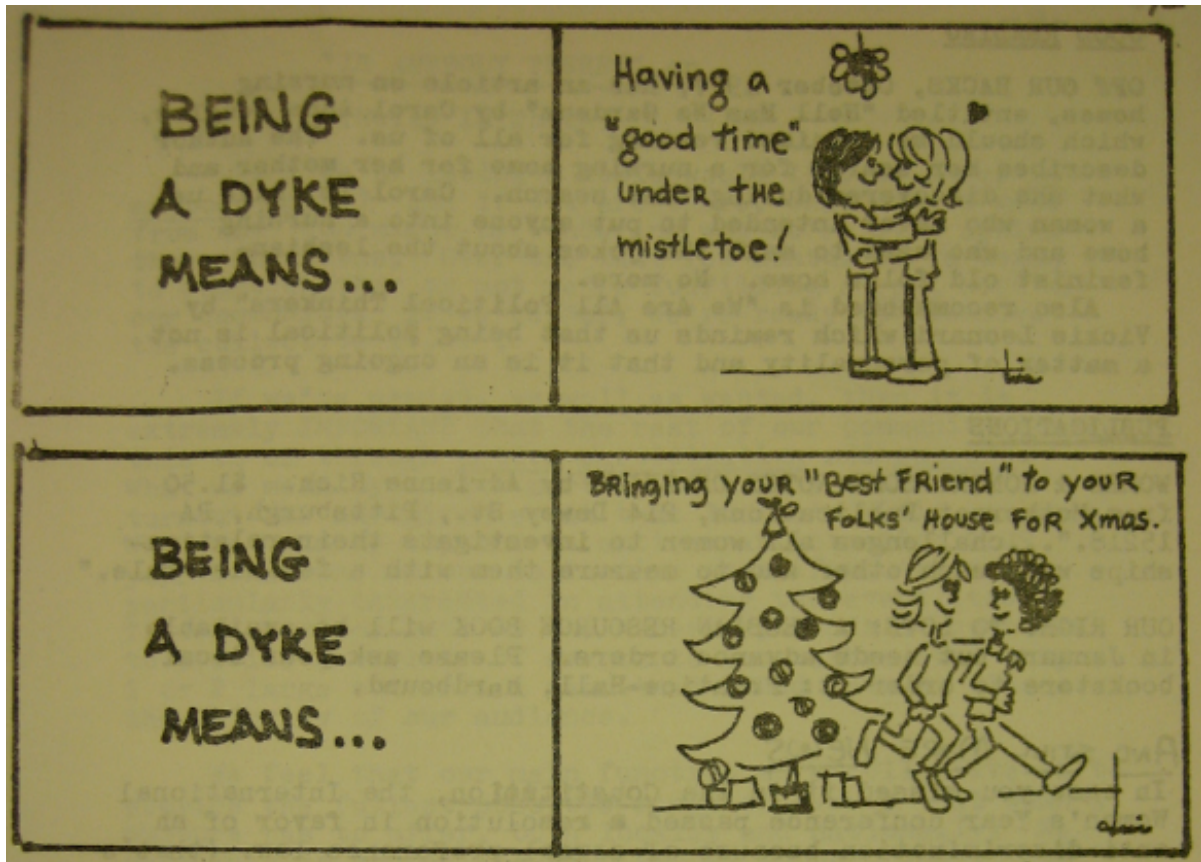
they pressured one another and themselves to live their beliefs in their everyday lives), and so they also built in a way to “confess,” laugh about, and then forgive their inevitable failures. While they were driven to be perfectly consistent in their praxis, they also exchanged the message that they shouldn’t be too hard on themselves when they didn’t live up to their self-imposed expectations. Figure 3 (ALFA Papers Box 6 File 15) illustrates this point well as it also plays on stereotypes, some of which were hyperbole and yet containing some truth.

The women “de-dyking” their apartment in order to avoid the sister’s disapproval were obviously out and proud in many aspects of their lives, yet felt compelled to modify their behavior when around certain people. Choosing to behave in such ways for pragmatic or self-protective purposes was obviously uncomfortable for the ALFA women, because it

made them feel dishonest and inconsistent, the very things they sought to avoid. Many of the scenes that examined the ways they changed their lifestyles in order to be more socially appropriate were self-deprecating, in terms of the style of humor, because it served the rhetorical purpose of helping them resolve the cognitive dissonance that resulted. The message is: “Even though we’ve established this value that says we’re supposed to act with integrity and be consistent in our behavior and beliefs we all know that’s not always possible, and it’s okay to protect yourself or be pragmatic, and we all do it.”

ALFA member-created comics were used to fill space in between the prose items in the newsletter. The comics were sometimes explicitly political, but mainly served to provide social commentary about lesbians and lesbian feminist lifestyles. The ALFA-invented “Being a Dyke Means...” series appeared during the mid- to late 1970s and early 1980s, showcasing images and captions that often worked at the rhetorical level of an inside joke, relying on references best understood by a lesbian feminist community. Family gathering rituals, stressful even for many straight people, constantly sent the ALFA women the message that their friends and loved ones saw them as either perpetually immature or as engaging in illegitimate or unacceptable love relationships. In Figure 4 (*Atalanta* 5.12, ALFA Papers Box 6), for example, we see the women remembering the inherent value of their relationship and reassuring one another that their connection with their lovers can be strong enough to help them smile away the fact that they have to pretend that they are just friends during the holidays.





**Figure 4: *Atalanta* Comic—"Being a Dyke Means..."**

Many ALFA women had to deal with the painful reality that their families would deny or disown their partners altogether, interpret them as the weird or shameful "black sheep," or otherwise categorize them as "old maids." Lesbian feminists also found it difficult to face the strong anti-woman and anti-homosexual messages involved in most traditional religious ideology, and yet it can be difficult to avoid during these times of the year. Another holiday-themed "Being a Dyke Means..." from this same *Atalanta* issue responds that "you don't get stuck with the turkey" and it has a picture of a dorky half-man half-turkey that a smug lesbian couple laughs at. While this sort of anti-man message seems hurtful and unproductive, the ALFA women were also making a commentary about men's expectations about women's roles and domestic duties: the comic subtly asks, who is carrying most of the burden of feeding the family and cleaning up during the holidays? The ALFA women needed

this brand of humor as they encountered holiday situations that were made more difficult when they felt judged or injured by the heteros they loved.

Obviously, these inside jokes were meant only for other lesbian feminists and were not intended to reproduce the cycle of judgment, defensiveness, resentment, blame, and hurt. These jokes provided a crucial outlet for the pain in order *not* to replicate the cycle of oppression. If the women were better able to absorb the hurt they came into contact with when dealing with those external to the movement, then they would be less likely to return it in the form of defensiveness, anger or bitterness. They were also less likely to pass the hurt on to their lovers and fellow lesbian feminist sisters. Thus, the “not getting stuck with the turkey” style of joke helped mitigate the stress of family holiday rituals, during which the average unpleasantness conjured up by the season—missing loved ones who aren’t present, being reminded of past traumas, disagreeing with family members about ideology or politics, feeling compelled to justify various other life choices—were amplified for lesbian feminists. This amplification was especially true for ALFA members, who were more likely to have dealt with the average stressors, in addition to the particularly lesbian ones, since they not only subverted more norms than most women but were also situated in the South, where religious influence and socialized ladylike behavior could be especially strong.

In order to understand some of the humor and why it worked, it is necessary to remember the culture most of the ALFA members had been socialized into, think about the normative messages they received from this culture, and consider how the women’s behavior subverted or threatened these scripts. The ALFA women rapped about these kinds of topics they rapped and many of these issues were addressed in their political education movement literature. When it came to the familial expectations, they had been raised to marry men and

provide grandbabies, and they had also been taught to seek the approval of their family members. No matter how strong the women might have been in their convictions, if they had siblings or cousins who had performed according to expectations, the differences in treatment are easy to perceive, even among lesbian-accepting families. What's more, it can be particularly difficult when one family member who is accepting in private silently stands by or endorses judgmental or shaming practices while in the presence of more homophobic friends or family. An especially patronizing response lesbians (and bisexual women) encountered was the idea that they were just "going through a phase," and would get over it soon. Other women were rejected by their family members altogether, indefinitely exiled if they had unsuccessfully negotiated an attempt to be honest about their lives. Sometimes, women were exiled after accidentally coming out (being caught, or having it slip out during a vulnerable moment), and had *only* the ALFA community or their lovers to rely on.

On the other hand, the ALFA women did have their community to fall back on, and humor was a key way the members mentored one another: some had learned lessons the hard way so that others in the community could be more successful. One main goal that became incorporated into the organizational culture was to enable as many women as possible to be comfortably visible and able to live with a feeling of personal integrity, in as many situations as possible. For most ALFA women, this standard was complementary (perhaps even prerequisite) to their ability to live fulfilling lives free from forces of dominance. Humor thus provided an effective strategy for resolving the situations the ALFA women faced when they were compelled to explain themselves to friends and family. Since lesbians were the ones burdened with the responsibility for educating the cultural mainstream, members of the radical lesbian feminist movement more generally faced one especially difficult socialized

script that their devotion to political education subverted: the expectation that women be agreeable and not cause conflict. Because education can be painful and sometimes involve conflict, lesbian feminists especially understood the value of strategies that relied on laughter, which they invented for one another and stored away like talking points, prepped and ready for the situations when they arose. As ALFA women created their own lesbian feminist cultural wisdom in the form of humor, they combined their movement literature and consciousness raising knowledge with their shared-experience knowledge, turning it into useable kairotic rhetorical memes, transferable and flexible. The members were empowered to live the movement more effectively, turning negative encounters into “teaching moments” while diffusing them with laughter.

The ALFA women’s creation of a unique humor culture thus served many purposes related to community-building and political education. Indeed, much of the newsletter insider humor referred specifically to the ALFA community, or it was regionally exclusive, insofar as it would have resonated more for lesbians in the South. Because the local, regional, and familial situations in which they would be expected to explain themselves were somewhat predictable, they could thus be more confident and political with their presence. It seems pretty clear that they were also interacting in a reciprocal way with other lesbian feminist movement trends, like Alison Bechdel’s<sup>8</sup> popular “Dykes to Watch Out For,” which the ALFA newsletter also printed. The members saw how laughter could be an effective internal education strategy that also created a lesbian-specific culture that the women could relate to,

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<sup>8</sup> She is perhaps best known for the “Bechdel Test,” which measures the representation of women in movies according to whether there are two named women characters who have a conversation with one another about something other than men. (Even at this incredibly low bar, most movies fail.) Bechdel also wrote the graphic memoir *Fun Home*, which is really worth a read, even if you’re not into that sort of thing.

when there was really not much available in the public sphere that affirmed the existence, much less the legitimacy, of their lives and loves. Personally, I love the ALFA invented “Being a Dyke Means...” series because it displays an unencumbered tone that embraces the joy of being different, implying that heterosexuals are too square, backwards, or conservative, in a southern “bless their hetero hearts” manner that had the rhetorical effect of brushing aside the often very hurtful rejections or dismissals they must have felt. This comic powerfully reinforced the importance of never forgetting the value of a lesbian feminist lifestyle even when it wasn’t affirmed among loved ones, often reversing the traditional values in a way that makes the straight characters the subject of laughter. In general, most of ALFA’s visually driven and humor-based arguments relied on the radical feminist and lesbian feminist rhetorical commonplace reminding the women there was nothing inherently wrong with them. That is, the lesbians were not the real problem, but rather the problem was the social inequities created by the dominant power structures and others’ unexamined reactions.

### **Living Politics in Economic Decisions and Personal Relationships**

As a part of their commitment to living their values in everyday life, ALFA women devoted their time, energy, and money to local businesses they believed in, attempting to make conscious decisions to support women-run or feminist-oriented establishments, and boycotting businesses who engaged in sexist or homophobic practices. One of the members’ favorite places was Charis Books and More, a local women-run feminist bookstore that opened up not long after ALFA began to take shape as an organization. In an *Atalanta* article written in honor of Charis’s ten year anniversary, the women celebrate the store as “an

outpost for revolution,” a place “where change is believed in and brought about” as a result of its “opposition to patriarchy” and commitment to “deepening what it means to be a feminist bookstore and more” (*Atalanta* 12.11, ALFA Papers Box 6). The author explains that even though “feminist process” is difficult to define and that “the women of Charis might laugh if you asked them that question,” Charis is feminist in many ways:

not only in inventory, but in the way the inventory is chosen (Sandra has a hunch that the book is important, Linda doesn’t like the patronizing attitude of the walrus in a children’s book), in the fact that those who work at Charis also own Charis (I am trying not to say “worker-owned”) and in the way work is divided and business decisions are made (I am trying not to say “collectively” or “by consensus”).

(*Atalanta* 12.11, ALFA Papers Box 6)

The trouble with the feminist terms in this piece is funny—it has become apparent that many of these terms have become either clichéd or otherwise troubled at this point among the ALFA members in 1984. But the features used to describe Charis Books and More’s commitment to feminist ideals are clear—the women who run it operate their business according to what the ALFA women consider a feminist process. According to the author, this amorphous yet recognizable “feminist process” influenced Charis owners’ practices of picking books as well as their ability to make equitable and ethically responsible business decisions in line with ALFA standards.

The newsletter article goes on to emphasize the word “change,” implying that the ALFA women valued progressive business practices, as opposed to ones based on older traditions, because they might be more likely to attract and influence like-minded customers. In terms of both philosophy and the ability to bring about pragmatic results, Charis is especially laudatory because the owners have been able “to widen the scope of feminist change and reach that part in more people and to (oh why not) EMPOWER more women for change” (*Atalanta* 12.11). At this point in the organization’s life, it looks like the women

recognize the need for a new vocabulary for their evolved understanding of feminism and its widening scope, yet the word “empower” still resonates, even if it has also been overused. It’s likely that ALFA members believed empowerment was especially related to the insertion of feminist/lesbian feminist values in everyday community life. Like ALFA, and probably in part because of the support of its members, Charis turns out to have longevity exceeding many other stores that also operated according to such a model (indeed, in this era of brick-and-mortar bookstore closures, the store has also survived many bookstores not explicitly feminist in nature): it has now been open for thirty-seven years and is one of a handful of independent feminist bookstores remaining in North America. In the newsletter, and later, in an academic essay written by a former ALFA member, the organization’s women repeatedly express admiration for the Charis owners’ successful outreach and educational work and dedication to conducting their business in a way that fosters feminist values and culture.

ALFA members also considered the ways in which they could exert influence on others outside of their culture through their gift-giving choices, seeking to model the change they would like to see take place within our society more broadly. While it might be morally questionable to engage in such activities insofar as they actively sought to influence the children of the next generation, their intent was to help raise the next generation with a dyke-accepting attitude, and they often did so in the context of their nieces and nephews. “Ask Aunt Luna” was a lesbian-feminist advice feature in the newsletter, and it explicitly addressed such issues. It was sort of like a queer activist version of Ann Landers. One woman writes to ask:

I’ve got to go to my nine-year-old niece’s birthday party this week, and what I’ve got to get, according to her mother, is something called a ‘female action figure.’ I’m almost afraid to ask, but what the hell is a female action figure, where do I get one,

and would I want to give one to my little budding baby-dyke niece? Her mom says it's either that or underwear. --- An annoyed 'Maiden' Aunt

(*Atalanta*, 15.3, ALFA Papers Box 6)

In response, "Aunt Luna" explains that the toy store she went to was almost exclusively full of the "male versions: G.I. Joe, Masters of the Universe, and all their ilk. It was like being surrounded by a teeny-tiny army. At the end of the aisle, forming a little separatist nation by themselves, were the female action figures," with three kinds of dolls as she offers her answer:

The first was a pathetic group of armoured women with 'hidden buttons' that you push to activate their 'secret powers.' One doll has a flower growing from the top of her head (whoppee), one has water squirting from her head and my personal favorite, 'Perfuma,' surrounds herself with a 'magic cloud when you press her button. Yippee.

The showiest dolls are She-Ra, Princess of Power and her friends, the Champions of the Gem. She-Ra is a blond white woman with impressive golden armour, a neat unicorn to ride, and (natch) magic powers. She also carries a sword, 'cause she's no fool. To their credit, the makers of these dolls have included some women of color in the Champions of the Gem, which is more than some other toy makers do with their lines.

Which brings us to the third group of dolls, Warriors of the worlds. Here we have the closest thing I've seen to plastic Amazons. I mean, these are dolls that have pumped iron. Sturdy, muscled, short practical hair, armour that would drown a horse and names like Valora and Heroia. Unfortunately, they are all white and virtually alike. In fact, they have a disturbing Nazi Clone air about them.

These plastic fighting wimmin raise some weird questions. Why do the makers claim 'magic powers' for the female dolls and not their male counterparts? Why do they feel the need to supplement the muscles? Are the dolls empowering for young girls, or do they encourage war? And why do they wear armour that's really just metal bikinis?"

(*Atalanta* 15.3, ALFA Papers Box 6)

The writer weighs her advice against her philosophical beliefs and indicates how her feminism has influenced her values. She obviously values diversity, practical intelligence, and strength, and believes that these priorities, prompted by her feminist ideology, will be positive influences on young girls. She does not agree with objectification, supplementing strength with masculine excess, nor celebrations of war. And she also questions the need for



magic powers, although she also seems to be enchanted by their inclusion (at least in the case of She-Ra) and so probably questions it more because it reflects a gendered difference between toys meant for boys and toys meant for girls. While Aunt Luna certainly appears to embrace feminine elements, she also mocks the inclusion of flowers, perfume, and metal bikinis and seems to doubt that these items will be positive influences, even expressing her doubt that girls would find these influences compelling. Her response implies that some elements have been included based on what men might think (or fantasize) girls would be interested in, as opposed to what they might actually like. In this discussion and others like it, we see the ALFA members engaging thoughtfully with aspects of consumerism as they attempt to insert their values into the culture, to influence it from within their own families, in a rhizomatic way.<sup>9</sup> While there is clearly an interconnected system of values at work, the women do not simply follow the pre-existing moral code, but rather, they have developed their own sense of ethics, rejecting the ones that others (in this case toy designers and manufacturers) would push upon them through a series of subtle yet pervasive social norms.

As the national discussion about gay and lesbian experience shifted away from gay liberation toward more reform-oriented discussions, marriage arose as a concern, and ALFA women disagreed about whether or not they wanted to support the fight for gay marriage. The debate about marriage rights that began to emerge during this time reveals a variety of political values within ALFA's organization. There was a real lack of consensus about how to approach the issue, since the members associated marriage with patriarchy and would prefer to see more radical social change. On the other hand, many of them also wanted the

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<sup>9</sup> Just throwing in a casual Deleuze and Guattari reference for fun...

right to marry and expressed their desire to support such reforms as a step toward gaining more widespread equality.

ALFA received an invitation from Couples, Inc. to participate in “The Wedding” at the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in October, 1987, and Pam M. writes that she has been “quite disturbed at the validation of this heterosexist demonstration” and so she interviewed ALFA women about their views on the event, transcribed her interviews, and featured them in the newsletter. The first couple she talks with says that they would participate, because they had already considered themselves “moving toward marriage, engaged” and because the “economic discrimination against those in homosexual relationships is pervasive and infuriating!” (*Atalanta* 15.8, ALFA Papers Box 6). For this couple, the economic advantages conferred by marriage influence their position. The second woman Pam interviews expresses her concern that lesbians are willing to sacrifice their radical beliefs for a more mainstream sense of reform. Her objections are based more on principle, she explains, adding that she wouldn’t participate because

It’s really disturbing to me to hear all the stuff going on about Lesbians and weddings, people demonstrating about y’know rights to get married and running to do that and showing that Lesbians could do that, because I guess that central to my feminism, a long long time ago before I became a Lesbian, was my rejection of the idea of marriage.

(*Atalanta* 15.8, ALFA Papers Box 6)

This woman explains that her radical feminist views preceded her lesbian sense of identity, and thus even if she weren’t gay she would still reject the idea of marriage. State sanctioned marriage, she continues, means “a contract with another person promising that you’ll do something or that you’re now some kind of unit” and so she doesn’t understand why to use a heterosexual marriage model “when we’re relating to another woman. I mean this thing was invented by men to keep control of women” (*Atalanta* 15.8, ALFA Papers Box 6). For this

woman, marriage is an outdated model that reinforces notions of possession and control, a stamp of approval from a patriarchal institution that she doesn't need.

The interview goes on to expand on her thoughts, indicating that she feels strongly enough about the issue to condemn the general idea that marriage should be a goal for couples who want to feel like their commitment is legitimate, connecting marriage with property rights and placing its ideology in opposition to human rights. She argues, "I feel the Lesbians who want to participate in that haven't analyzed the situation I think that there's a lot of Lesbians who see themselves as just human beings who happen to be women who happen to love other women and I think that is really head-in-the-sand kind of thinking (*Atalanta* 15.8, ALFA Papers Box 6). Her words imply that people who marry in a state sanctioned ceremony are simply participating in an unethical system and she suggests that those who argue for marriage reform instead of focusing on basic human rights for everyone have misplaced priorities. She also indicates her doubt that marriage would be productive for lesbians, since she believes that it has often been destructive for heterosexual couples:

I'm opposed to the whole idea of weddings and marriage and these kind of state sanctioned ceremonies that legitimize anyone's relationship as if the commitment that the two people make to each other is somehow not legitimate on its own unless you've got some third party smiling on it and *I understand how that arose historically and it all has to do with property, property rights, establishing paternity of children, and all of that I think is crap*. It has been harmful to women for centuries and I think if gay people, men and women, get sucked into the same things it's going to be just as harmful to our relationships as it has been to heterosexual relationships [...] *to me the issue should be whether we're going to work for the rights of all human beings in this country or whether we're going to go with the way that things have been set up for centuries and say 'Well only people who really get to participate in all these goodies are the ones who manage to pair off in these neat little relationships where at least one person has a decent job.'* Y'know alright those are the people that get the fine things in life and the rest of you people are scum buckets y'know and you don't deserve nothing!

(*Atalanta* 15.8, ALFA Papers Box 6, my emphasis)

It becomes clear that she believes that marriage is an anachronistic tradition that has no place in a more progressive future, since it reaffirms difference by conferring privileges that she sees as unearned. In short, she believes that marriage only works to reiterate historic patriarchal patterns and create more hierarchies.

Such debates illustrate how the ALFA women were conflicted over how best to disrupt taken-for-granted cultural norms in ways that might also make a collective political difference. One woman explains that being in a relationship is only “one aspect of the human experience,” and not one that should be

glorified above all others, that whole trend or that whole possible trend that I see of the whole wedding celebration there puts me off. So much is made just at the whole society at large of people being paired off. Now, *of course the society at large would like us all to be paired-off in nice little het couples. I think even fairly liberal open-minded straight people tend to view a homosexual couple being somehow better than just homosexuals on the loose that we're more dangerous somehow* because we're going to seduce their children, their wives, their whatevers.

(Atalanta 15.8, ALFA Papers Box 6, my emphasis)

Not only does this woman believe that marriage works to affirm couples as the only legitimate relationship structure, but it also works in conjunction with homophobia. She would rather orient toward a future in which all people are accepted and embraced, regardless of their relationship structure choices, and so in order to bring that goal closer to reality, more people must be unwilling to conform to the sorts of social expectations that affirm homophobia. The implication is that heterosexual people reward lesbians when they imitate traditional norms, that heterosexuals are less fearful of lesbian women who are coupled up, as opposed to single or in a polyamorous relationship. Her partner adds that “Very often they're reassured when we talk about ‘my lover relationship,’” arguing that, ideologically “the whole wedding/marriage thing” works to

*downgrade something that got tried quite a bit 10 years ago and so far has not been real real successful and I feel that's because of our socialization but we certainly should keep trying at it. And I hope it will come around again. I frankly don't think for society the couple unit is the best unit I think a larger unit is better and I think that most of us are unable to function in a larger unit because of the way that we grow up having such (in America) notions of privacy and possessions etc.*

*(Atalanta 15.8, ALFA Papers Box 6, my emphasis)*

The women wanted to resist the idea that it is best to couple off into pairs, yet at the same time many of them found their own relationships structured in this way, despite the reference to “what got tried quite a bit 10 years ago.” This phrase refers to the non-monogamous, polyamorous, and even sexually promiscuous relationship structures the women embraced. As might be expected, such relationship structures led to interpersonal challenges and some altercations on the softball field (Chesnut, Personal Interview), yet they were also productive for some women as they sought alternatives to more traditional relationship structures. Even though the non-traditional relationship structures appear not to have stood the test of time for most ALFA members, the attempt to live their beliefs in their practices appear to have made a lasting impact on the way the women continued to think ten years later, as they are more likely to question the value of assimilation political moves in terms of what they might imply about their theoretical holdings and ideological principles.

The organizational culture ALFA invented thus intersected with ethical concerns as they considered how their personal choices would impact women more broadly, both movement insiders and outsiders. ALFA women considered how their decisions might better attract or retain members and foster a positive internal social space that would provide a healthy atmosphere for their educational and political action.

## Chapter VI

### Negotiating Image: Outreach, Media, and *Ethos* Constraints

Cautious, careful people always casting about to preserve their reputation or social standards can never bring about reform. Those who are really in earnest are willing to be anything or nothing in the world's estimation and publically and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathies with despised ideas and their advocates and bear the consequences. -- Susan B. Anthony, 1873  
(*Atalanta* 14.8 cover, ALFA Papers Box 2 Folder 36)

How did you get to be a lesbian?  
... Why do you hate men?  
... Have you seen a psychiatrist?  
Do you go after straight women?  
Should you be working with impressionable young people?  
Aren't women physically constructed to be compatible with men, not women?  
Doesn't the Bible say that homosexuality is unnatural and sinful?  
Aren't you trying to destroy the family and moral fiber of this country?  
Aren't you more promiscuous than normal women?  
Wouldn't you like to be cured?  
Aren't more lesbians alcoholic?  
Aren't more lesbians in mental institutions?  
... Do you use artificial devices?  
How do you do it?  
Isn't the women's movement run by a bunch of lesbians?  
Aren't you hurting good causes like the ERA by being openly involved?  
Why do you feel you have to flaunt your homosexuality?"

--- "Questions for ALFA Speakers" [Handwritten annotation reads, "These are the sorts of questions most often asked and which need to be prepared for."]

(ALFA Papers, Box 2 Folder 11)

During the late 1970s and through the 1980s, social movements nationally suffered the effects of a backlash. For lesbian and gay social movement organizations, the new terms that emerged—set by the rise of a “New Right” and an increasingly vocal and political extremist religious influence—painted gays and lesbians as immoral and dangerous. This

particularly transformative moment led to the emergence of rhetorical arguments that repeated the commonplace that gays' and lesbians' "political agenda" and newfound power would endanger children and traditional familial structures and effectively tear apart the moral fabric of the country. The rhetoric that portrayed gays and lesbians as immoral turned out to be especially effective and had long-lasting consequences for the gay civil rights movement. This backlash, catalyzed by Anita Bryant, resulted in a public relations/image battle between the new right and organizations like ALFA. Before Bryant's "Save the Children" campaign, gay and lesbian rights groups had been gaining ground politically and some progressive legislation had even been passed in a range of cities and states. During this time period, however, many of the socially progressive pieces of legislation were overturned as a result of the effective negative political smears.

This chapter analyzes ALFA's response to this moment of change, which would turn out to be significant in the long run: similar rhetoric continues to be effective well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This chapter highlights the rise of a new rhetorical situation, as ALFA discovered the need for more agile rhetorical inventions that would better adapt to shifting political and cultural conditions. I discuss the impact and staying power of the rhetoric of moral judgment while discussing the way that ALFA responded to the situation: they incorporated media strategies offered by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, educating themselves about laws they could refer to as they organized a media outreach committee and educated designated liaisons. The members also launched a massive letter writing campaign in an attempt to counter an especially persuasive and sensational anti-gay program featured on national television. This chapter highlights what was really a somewhat failed battle in the long run for lesbians and gays nationally, yet ALFA did gain ground locally, due to their

work building community inroads and connections, and where they understood the players and their motivations. Because the TV representations were the most pervasive and destructive, the ALFA women focused their efforts here.

ALFA was forced to respond to the terms of the debate as the New Right set the terms. The debate as it played out in mainstream media focused mainly on family structures, children, and morality. The images and programming as well as Bryant's well-documented speaking tour have resonated in our public memory ever since—it shouldn't be surprising that the gay rights movement continues to stall out when forced to address conservative anti-LGBTQ rhetoric according to these terms, which continue to impact gays' and lesbians' ability to marry, adopt, and influence children in basically any way. Thankfully, we have stopped discriminating against queer teachers (I think). Because the deepest argumentative resource the New Right drew upon was to claim that homos are immoral, when ALFA sought to address their image problem, they began from an already losing position—the women's *ethos* was already compromised. Once your credibility is undermined, it is almost impossible to get it back. How do you argue "I'm not immoral"? Such a stance is difficult to start from when your credibility has been called into question. Thus, working at the local level was more effective because they had already done a lot of the groundwork there to build personal relationships and a reputation. ALFA public relations representatives also they knew their audience better at the local level. As a result, ALFA was less effective nationally but rather effective locally when dealing with known entities.

For ALFA, and lesbian-feminists more broadly, mainstream media outlets often focused more on gay men and often ignored lesbians, except to link them with the women's liberation movement in order to derail progress on that front, so there was little opportunity



for education or dialogue with heterosexuals or closeted queer women. When they *did* manage to receive a share of the media attention independent from their connections with feminist activists, lesbians were most often conveyed in one of two ways: the spotlight either emphasized their perversity (they were mentally ill, not “real” women, and thus foreign and scary) or it sexually objectified them (from a heterosexual male-gaze perspective). The ALFA women had a media committee that focused on public relations. This committee researched and invented strategies for effectively communicating both with and through mass media outlets. They represented the organization and also wrote countless letters in response to derogatory portrayals. They also provided a vocal presence when a matter of particular concern to lesbians excluded a consideration of lesbian perspectives.

To stay updated with FCC developments and to better make use of legalistic regulations and arguments, ALFA women also relied on the following groups for educational purposes: the National Gay Task Force (later called the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force); the National Organization for Women; word from underground lesbian, gay, and feminist periodicals, and leftist social movement organizations. On the other hand, ALFA’s media committee at times also fought *against* these “allied” groups. For example, they battled with *Ms.* magazine for more thoughtful coverage of lesbian social and political concerns. Because ALFA women either felt ignored or portrayed as perverse and/or sexually objectified, the overriding themes of their media outreach often consisted of two main refrains: 1. “Why aren’t you talking about us?” or 2. “When you *do* talk about us, why are you so misrepresentative and hurtful?” But it wasn’t just righteous anger and resentment—ALFA women also worked hard to reward behavior they approved of, both with their

enthusiastic vocal support and with their money or whatever other kind of influence they could manage to wield.

### **Shifting Terms: “Save the Children” Initiates Backlash**

In *Sappho Was a Right-on Woman*, Abbott and Love argue that lesbians’ sexual choices are not private but public matters, so long as sexual preference and orientation are implicated in our legal, economic, governmental, religious, and social structures:

As long as the Lesbian is vulnerable to the written and unwritten laws of a society that has legally restricted sex to reproduction, as long as she can be fired from jobs, denied and education, kept out of government service, made unwelcome in churches and synagogues, and banished from her home, Lesbianism is very much a public matter. Unfortunately, what some people do in bed affects their involvement with the human community.

(64)

Robert Asen extends this discussion and deepens it in his 2002 *Philosophy and Rhetoric* article, noting that the interplay of resentment and resistance with identity assertion need not be thought of as simply reactive, as opposed to affirmative, politics. Identity formation is not private nor prior to participation in the idealized public sphere, but rather “entails mutual recognition among members of diverse cultures,” and therefore requires greater inclusiveness so that oppressed individuals and groups can offer “self-fashioned interpretations of their interests and needs against interpretations imposed by others” (346). Drawing on Asen, I argue that the ALFA women were building a collective imaginary self that helped transcend the debilitating effects of continued oppression by sorting out their strategies for resisting stereotypes and misrepresentations, and then enacting those strategies

According to Asen (who also draws on Michael Warner’s discussion of counterpublics), imagining involves the politics of representation, which ALFA women were

very concerned about, when it came to their interactions with mass-mediated communication outlets. For marginalized groups of people, Asen explains, an “intimate connection between representations and social values, beliefs, and interests indicates that representational processes may frame public debates, identify proper objectives for collective action, and suggest appropriate remedies.”<sup>10</sup> That is, the politics of representation in the public imaginary enacts two effects: 1. it silences and makes absent those who are affiliated with historically marginalized groups, and it also 2. makes present those who are absent/silent, in a way that is configured by those who are entitled to speak, so that in order to participate effectively, members of the silenced population must first find a voice and simultaneously counter their misrepresentations in order to generate any sort of credibility. What’s more, Asen explains,

Negative images compel counterpublic agents to engage the statements of others from multiple vantage points; counterpublic agents may wish to assert their interests and identities as they see them, and yet they may need to counteract negative images representing counterpublics.”

(354)

In order to speak with authority and thereby engage members of the mainstream public, counterpublic agents (in this case, historically marginalized minority populations) are called upon to respond to the spread of misinformation and stereotypical representations.<sup>10</sup> This action itself works both to constitute ethos and is also built into a process of negotiating an affirmative identity. The dynamics of public imagining confer varying degrees of advantage upon historically privileged groups by hurting the credibility of counterpublic agents, “concentrating historical animosities in negative images,” and “creating a cumulative imaginary field that constrains the choices of successive participants” (354). Moving forward

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<sup>10</sup> I should also note here that Asen’s observations also apply to our scholarship. We should feel compelled to address the question of misrepresentations and preexisting narratives within academic research. Asen’s argument points to an important consequence resulting from the failure to do so—we retain a limited sense of options and possibilities.

in an affirmative way, then, is not secondary to responding to negative representations for historically oppressed people—it is a concomitant process. In other words, concerns about public image are not as simple as “representation” or “identity politics,” or “political correctness,” but rather these concepts are inherently tied up with collective identity and the ability to educate others in order to enact social change.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s issues of collective identity, community alliances, and representational politics surfaced in a key way for the ALFA women. Queer men and women and feminist activists across the nation had made significant progress in terms of visibility and outreach, organizational networks, and activism enacted through spreading information. On the other hand, the backlash against the political gains was also gathering inertia. Social movement scholar Barry Adam, historian John D’Emilio, and others (Segrest 1995, Engel 2001) have spotlighted the 1977 “Save the Children” campaign as the catalyzing element in the rise of the New Right’s emergent and effective antigay “crusade” (wording that shows up commonly in histories of this phenomenon). This backlash movement counteracted many of the civil rights gains that had recently been enacted, both in terms of the socio-political climate and legal regulations. This New Right movement was energized by religious organizations (notably led by Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and the political lobby Christian Cause), antiabortion and anti-equal rights amendment (ERA) activists, and psychiatrists (such as Dr. Charles Socarides) who profited from homophobia by maintaining that homosexuality was a mental illness that could be cured via conversion therapy. D’Emilio notes that in the years following 1977,

activists faced not the garden-variety homophobia that had come to seem familiar, but a more truculent, militant variety. Two disparate forces—a religious fundamentalism only recently politicized, and an aggressive new conservatism burrowing into the Republican Party and looking for a winning strategy—began to make common cause.

Sharing a revulsion at the effects of the upheavals of the 1960s and fashioning a rhetoric of moral renewal and national resuscitation, they formed a potent coalition that shaped the politics of the 1980s.

(D'Emilio, *Making Trouble* 258-259)

This powerful and well-funded social movement, relying on “traditional family values” scare tactics, targeted a civil rights ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in Dade County, Florida, for their first major political action. Popular singer and former beauty pageant star Anita Bryant ensured publicity and national media attention. Within six months of the ordinance’s passage, Dade County residents had overwhelmingly voted to repeal the law.

Similar gay rights ordinances in other cities were quickly repealed as well, as Anita Bryant and the Save the Children organization toured the United States and Canada. As Adam puts it, throughout the remainder of that year and the following year, the “repeals grew into a wave striking down equal rights laws across the United States,” while “police and street violence against gay people escalated, television programs appeared resurrecting old stereotypes, and many public leaders shed their veneer of liberalism to attack gay people as immoral sexual predators and threats to the family” (Adam 109). The successful pattern of rhetoric relied on the argument that there was a gay conspiracy—a gay agenda—that threatened children and families, and that gays sought to molest and recruit children into homosexuality (one of the commonplaces became: “if they cannot procreate, they must recruit”). Feminist and gender studies scholar Mab Segrest explains, “the New Right had begun to reframe its debate, subtly but effectively,” rallying religious groups, co-opting and subverting the language of civil rights, and capitalizing on a “growing climate of economic crisis and widespread resentment” against feminism and gay liberation (Segrest 103). Within the matter of a few years, the socio-political and economic climate had shifted so that many

of the progressive political gains made during the early and middle-seventies had been overturned. Harvey Milk's assassination, followed by his murderer Dan White's lenient sentencing, seemed at the time to add insult to injury. On the day of that May 1979 verdict, queer San Franciscans marched on City Hall while police, "many of whom had sported 'Free Dan White' T-shirts during the White trial and had invaded a bar a month earlier where they beat several lesbians, now retaliated with a siege of Castro Street, attacking pedestrians and destroying a gay bar" (Adam 114). Around this same time, Phyllis Schlafly and the STOP ERA campaign dealt blows to the lesbian-feminist community, relying on homophobia to argue that the passage of the ERA would disintegrate gender categories and thereby work to legalize gay marriage (Mansbridge 3).

### **Mobilizing a Media Committee to Counter Negative Messages**

ALFA took an especially active role in attempting to influence the mass media coverage of gay, lesbian, feminist, and other issues related to social class and race during this time. It appears as though the backlash against gays and lesbians that occurred in the wake of the Anita Bryant campaign highlighted the need for organized and thoughtful management of public relations and educational outreach in order to counter the negative climate. The media committee flooded their local news outlets with letters, and also sent letters off to national broadcast media conglomerates. They acted upon correspondence they received from the well-organized National Gay Task Force and they reciprocated the correspondence, keeping NGTF informed of their actions and concerns.

In 1978, following the Dade County ordinance repeal, the National Gay Task Force, in addition to 143 gay and lesbian groups, petitioned the Federal Communications

Commission to alter their policies so that gay men and women might have a regulation that they could cite in order to more effectively advocate against homophobic programming decisions. Their goal was to enable recourse when the queer community felt as though its needs were not being met. The NGTF and other groups looked to a minority rights as model and position from which to argue that “the struggle of other minorities against the stereotypes in which they were traditionally portrayed in the broadcast media provides a model for the gay minority” (Memorandum Opinion and Order and Notice of Proposed Rule Making, BC Docket No. 78-237, Federal Communications Commission, p. 5, in ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). In order to successfully petition the FCC for a change in rules, organizations representing the “gay community” argued that denial of fair access to “broadcast industry management” meant that “gay individuals would be sentenced to a life of ghettoization and stereotyping,” and thus “must be protected from slander, misrepresentation, ridicule and exploitation” (Memorandum Opinion and Order and Notice of Proposed Rule Making, BC Docket No. 78-237, Federal Communications Commission, p. 5, in ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). The NGTF and the organizations it led doesn’t appear to have questioned the either the ethical implications nor the longer-term limitations of appealing to race-based minority model precedents. I am doubtful of the long-term efficacy of such strategies, and am bothered by references gays make to “ghettoization,” like we see here, since such comparisons often ignore some basic material, pragmatic, and political realities. If we look at the aims that these groups sought, we can see that they were primarily interested in bringing about reformist policies and regulations that might enable gay organizations to influence broadcasting choices and also provide them with some sort of recourse.

A final commonplace relied on the shared and fundamentally American belief in freedom of speech and the opportunity to exchange ideas and engage in dialogue that would improve the overall social conditions of the broader society. According to already existing FCC guidelines at the time, when a broadcasting station licensee applied to renew its license, that station was required “to demonstrate its efforts to learn the problems, needs and interests of the communities served by that station” (FCC Feedback, 11 August, 1978, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). This process, called “ascertainment,” required the FCC to contact “community leaders” in accordance with nineteen categories on a checklist, including agriculture, business, education, labor, ethnic and racial minorities, and women’s liberation groups. Notably missing from these categories were representatives of and for queer organizations and the differently-abled. The newly proposed ascertainment policy would explicitly state that broadcasters “have a responsibility to insure that all significant elements or institutions which are readily accessible within their community of license, whether or not they are one of the nineteen categories on the Checklist are ascertained” (News From NGTF, 15 August, 1978, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). The NGTF sent letters to lesbian and gay organizations urging them to write the FCC in support of the proposal, and in the meantime, to “present themselves for ascertainment now,” because the process “may currently be done at the option of the broadcaster” (News From NGTF, 15 August, 1978, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). ALFA women, having built up a sizable and influential community in Atlanta, seized upon this opportunity by both writing to the FCC in support of the proposal and petitioning their local media outlets for inclusion in programming decisions.

In their letter to the FCC, ALFA women explained that they felt the proposed regulation revision was long overdue, particularly for gays and lesbians, because



“cooperation from the stations has always been a somewhat ‘iffy’ situation,” and usually only happened because individuals or organizations themselves took the initiative to stay informed and initiate the process (Letter to FCC secretary from Sandy Bayer, 10 October, 1978). The letter emphasizes the need for educating the general public about gay perspectives, arguing that ascertainment can be a key step toward eradicating ignorance and oppressive myths. In this letter, as in the ones that ALFA sent to the local stations, Bayer relies on two lines of argument to support the idea that queers constitute a community worthy of being considered “significant”: first, she explains that “the ascertainment process can only benefit the population as a whole” insofar as gays can help promote more widespread societal virtues such as “tolerance and understanding”; and second, Bayer notes that “a recent study by the Kinsey Institute has shown that the population of gay men and lesbians in the United States is quite possibly larger than the black population,” which should be “certainly significant enough to warrant serious consideration of this community’s problems, needs, and interests” (Letter to FCC Secretary, 10 October, 1978 ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). Bayer’s letter implies that “the population of gay men and lesbians in the United States” is a separate entity from “the black population” as it claims that the two community needs are comparable. The letter also seems to indicate that the FCC had been responsive to needs articulated by African American activists, who had apparently set the precedent for ascertainment policy.

Both lines of argument in Bayer’s letters rely on the assumption that the audience will share ALFA’s belief that the distribution of well informed and multiple perspectives should be the goal of responsible broadcasting practices. This argument shows up multiple times in other correspondence that ALFA sent. Tolerance, understanding and more informed dialogue in the name of the greater good were the key appeals that ALFA women articulated. The

second appeal, which was encouraged by the NGTF, and which shows up less often in other ALFA materials, was supposed to be effective on the basis of precedent—if ethnic and racial minorities have already made it onto the checklist, then aligning gays and lesbians with them by citing a scholarly study should be sufficiently persuasive. ALFA women, however, rather than use this model in their other areas of advocacy, instead more commonly argued that they were already included within the racial and ethnic minority struggle for civil rights; this position arose because members were themselves Jewish, Latina, and African-American (although only barely so, on this third count), and also because they were ideologically aligned with third-world liberation struggles, which they enacted in their politics (some of the members lived in Nicaragua, while others had worked in support of the Cuban revolution).

At the local level, ALFA received a positive response, and they ended up meeting with multiple station directors. The letter they wrote emphasized their attempts to stay informed with FCC regulations and license renewal dates, conveyed in a tone of collaboration and shared interests. ALFA sent a letter to each station, giving them the benefit of the doubt if they had not initiated the ascertainment process. Each letter contains wording similar to this:

According to information received from the Federal Communications Commission, we understand that your station, as well as others in Georgia, is to be reviewed for license renewal in August of 1979. Community ascertainment is a responsibility which I believe your station has undertaken in order that you may be assured of fairly representing community concerns prior to your license renewal. [...] As I am sure you will agree, our input in this process is important, especially in light of recent developments concerning gay rights in this country.

(Letter to Public Affairs Director, WGTV, 5 July, 1978, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18)

By appearing to be well-educated about the shared interests underlying the philosophy at stake and conveying their understanding that the local stations should reasonably be on their side, ALFA was able to come across as reasonable and intelligent, helpful and diplomatic.

Several program directors specifically wrote back to thank ALFA for getting in touch, either thanking them for meeting to discuss the major issues that the organization was concerned about, or expressing their eagerness to meet in the future. One promotion director made an attempt to cite the programming decisions that particular channel had already made, while explaining that she looked forward to meeting with an ALFA representative in the near future. This news outlet representative also wrote, “we would appreciate it if you would keep us informed as to any particular news that you think might be of interest to us by contacting our program director” (Letter from WATL-TV, 19 July, 1978, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). Another program director wrote, “the ascertainment requirements are designed to assure that stations remain conversant with the problems of their communities and you were most helpful” (Letter from James H. Ferguson, WAGA-TV, 28 August, 1978, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18).

The media committee, although sometimes disorganized “primarily due to ALFA’s lack of hierarchical structure” (Memo to News and Editorial Departments, ALFA Papers, Box 2, File 19) worked hard to reward good behavior and pass the word along to others, especially the National Gay Task Force, whom they often cc’d in their correspondence. In a November 1978 letter to an Atlanta TV outlet, ALFA media committee representative Sandy Bayer commends the station manager’s choice for a prime time broadcast of “Word is Out,” a film which interviewed lesbians and gay men. Bayer notes the bravery that it took to air such a program, “especially considering the climate of anti-gay sentiment expressed so frequently these days since Dade County and Ms. Bryant.” In her concluding sentences, Bayer thanks the station and notes that she believes such programming “can only promote more tolerance and understanding, as well as destroy the many myths about lesbians and gay

men and our lifestyles.” The letter’s tone expresses surprise, relief, and gratitude—the word “commendable” appears twice, as the writer comments on the “courageous” nature of the broadcasting choice. In this same letter, Bayer seizes upon an opportunity to take care of further unfinished business, recognizing a potential ally in this local station:

During the past few months, representatives from A.L.F.A. have met with almost all local television station executives in order to participate in the ascertainment process. On July 5<sup>th</sup> [four months previous], a letter was sent to the public affairs director at WETV concerning this matter, but I have not yet heard from anyone about this. I understand you conduct two ascertainments each year and that we have just missed one. I would appreciate your contacting me in order that we might participate in the next ascertainment done by your station.

(ALFA Papers, Box 2, File 19)

Here, it becomes clear that Bayer recognizes that this is a good opportunity to take care of a related business matter in order to gain even more influence at the local level. The letter’s wording makes it clear that this oversight must be unintentional (since the rest of the letter is so complimentary and because the station is obviously making pro-gay programming decisions), yet at the same time, she tries to make the station feel as though it is one of the only stations that have not been attentive to ALFA’s ascertainment requests.

In a 1978 letter addressed to Ms. Nancy Scott, of *Today in Georgia*, a program on a local TV station, ALFA media coordinator Sandy Bayer emphasizes the gay community’s need for the media’s attentive distribution of well-informed perspectives. Bayer’s letter begins,

This is just a note to let you know that I saw your show on October 11<sup>th</sup>, during which you interviewed Sergeant Matlovich and the head psychologist for the Kinsey Institute concerning homosexuality, and thought it was absolutely dynamite! When those who have little information (or mis-information) about gays have a chance to hear from experts in this field, it is always a step toward promoting understanding and tolerance.

(Letter to Nancy Scott, 4 November, 1978, ALFA Papers, Box 2, File 18)

Initially, Bayer claims, she had prepared herself “for the worst” because “the gay community has many reasons for distrusting a large segment of the psychiatrist profession,” but it turns out that she should have known that Ms. Scott “would only allow [...] someone with intelligence and accurate information.... thank the Goddess.” The letter was also carbon-copied to Ginny Vida, of the National Gay Task Force, and a similar letter was sent to another local station, which also aired the program.

Even though there were plenty of instances during which ALFA was pleased with the programming, the media outlets eventually appear to have been more of a problem than an ally. Perhaps the ascertainment process was simply undertaken to ameliorate ALFA women’s concerns without resulting in any real broadcasting changes, or perhaps the climate of the country changed so much that queer issues were effectively shouted down. It’s also possible that even while the program directors at the local level might have been receptive, that national level had more influence over the programming decisions. What’s more, the media contact persons changed: in a memo to news and editorial departments, ALFA notes, “Media personnel have often been shuffled from one person to another, resulting in confusion, inaccuracy and loss of valuable time” (Memo to News and Editorial Departments, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 19). The memo notes that five “official” contact persons may now assist the media outlets in their search for accurate information. After this point in time, the letters that ALFA sent changed in tenor to some extent.

### **Abandoning Arguments, Embracing Ethical Evidence**

Maria Dolan was another media committee representative active during this time. Although some of Dolan’s strategies at the national level are sarcastic and biting, her local

letters reveal her to be reasonable, professional, articulate. She moves away from trying to argue that they are moral and instead shifts to assuming that her audience shares values like fairness and rule following. That is, Dolan's letters move toward actually *demonstrating* her morality and credibility instead of trying to argue a losing position (since trying to argue you are not immoral does not work). It is difficult to say which tactics were more effective in the long run, since the friendly tone was necessary when addressing people the ALFA women knew personally, while the more aggressive letters sent to the national outlets likely caught the producers' attention, which perhaps meant that they were more likely to read them, at the very least.

One letter written by Dolan in response to "Gay Power/Gay Politics," a particularly incendiary "documentary" produced and aired by CBS in 1981, calls the programming an "awesome example of how television's powers-that-be determine what information and attitudes will be promulgated for public consumption" carrying the "rather explicit message of 'To arms, to arms—the homos are coming!'" (Letter to CBS, 18 May 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18) The ALFA women were upset that gay men and lesbian women were, once again, "sullied with the old 'corruption of children' charges. Once more," writer Maria Dolan argues, "we suffer from the voyeuristic leerings of the cathode ray tube. And once more, Lesbians are utterly ignored to the point of invisibility" (Letter to CBS, 18 May 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). They implore CBS to be more responsible with their power:

How can this nation aspire to any level of understanding about minority struggles—or anything else—when its information and attitude source seeks to scare people into unthinking reactionary postures?

Your inflammatory docu-trauma poisons the atmosphere, obviating all communication attempts, and endangering our very lives with the violent repercussions.

(Letter to CBS, 18 May 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18)

Dolan's words are strung together in an artful, if melodramatic, chain of fury. Her rhetoric is a mixture of the above serious critique, mixed with humorous parenthetical asides ("Oh, I've forgotten—that's [referring to a 'non-orgiastic social function'] not steamy enough for television."), hyperbolic hypotheticals, satirical rhetorical questions, and peppered with words in scare quotes. Dolan takes CBS to task for emphasizing "non-representative elements" and she argues that if the network wishes not to be "pestered with cries of 'equal time'" that they "should have a weekly sleazy drama, a la Dallas, called 'San Francisco'—all about the absolute debauchery, avarice and power-lust of those perverse people in the city by the bay" (Letter to CBS, 18 May 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). The level of anger is both tangible and funny, and yet the letter is striking in its ability to convey the emotion accompanying the constant frustrations of the never-ending media battle. Dolan uses the words "emotional *impact*" [my emphasis] and "inflicted" in one sentence of her letter, indicating that the force of the documentary was violent and traumatic, like a physical blow.

The letter concludes with a legalistic P.S. that reads, "I have taken the liberty of enclosing a copy of the letter I sent to your local affiliate. It may prove of some interest" (Letter to CBS, 18 May 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). A salient theme pervading both the letter to the national office and the one to the local station is the pattern of argument insisting that this type of program is just one example of a much larger and frustrating phenomenon: "Unfortunately, this failure of thought-process in favor of sensation riddles nearly all public presentations about our community. The public needs unbiased information, not innuendos, provocations, and sensationalism" (Letter to local CBS affiliate, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). In both letters, Dolan appeals to the mission of journalism as

informing the public, charging the station with thoughtless fear-mongering and cheap titillation, at the expense of a minority population of real people.

In the letter sent to the outlet channel, Dolan alters the tone of the message that the station has neglected its responsibility to educate the public. Instead of hearing raw anger via emotionally charged words, this letter relies more on a “you should know better” sort of tone, framing the media’s role in this matter as one of civic duty. While the letter to the national offices is almost laughable, due to its level of anger, sarcasm, and resentment (“Are we just too alien for your patriarchal sensibilities?”), this letter to the local outlet has a more earnest and studied tone to it. Dolan appears to be in more familiar territory, arguing in a more attentive and methodical way, to a more concrete audience. It also refers to FCC regulations in order to assert authority, ending with a reminder that there are real consequences to media broadcast programming decisions. The second page is worth quoting at length:

Why were no representatives of local Lesbian and Gay organizations contacted for a panel discussion type of show after GPGP’s airing? This would have been a public service; to enable people to answer some of the falsifications and distortions presented in that pernicious piece. I am sure that you are aware of the Federal Communication Commission’s regulations regarding participation of representatives of ‘significant elements’ in the local area with regard to programming. (If not, I refer you to their March 12, 1980 decision including Lesbians and Gay Men in that category).

The FCC requires you to ascertain our problems, needs and interests. Yet, one of our greatest problems is media distortion. Broadcasters have invariable preferred time and again to focus on the ‘sexy’ or ‘freaky’ elements of Queer life, in apparent attempts to titillate viewers, create publicity through controversy, and objectify Lesbians and Gay men—thus precluding any real understanding of our community or analysis of our oppression.

And unless your profession’s journalistic practices change substantially, there will never be clarification and reasonable treatment of our community. This also cheats the heterosexual community out of any opportunity to learn about us.

(Letter to local CBS affiliate, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18)

It seems as though Dolan senses that she might be able to make more of a difference at the regional level, and this attitude is reflected in the subtle ways she alters her wording. Here,



the language is more attentive to the material consequences of misrepresentation. Because Atlanta had by now built a large base of politically aware gay men and women, they also had increased their local collective bargaining power, which Dolan appears to allude to as well. The references to governmental regulations reiterate the way in which ALFA women's attention to self-education enabled their ability to appeal their case for social change to others (and it also demonstrates that their campaign to reform the FCC rules ended successfully).

This letter goes into a more specific critique, and even though its tone is still somewhat hyperbolic, it is less sarcastic and sharper in describing the ALFA women's specific grievances. It explains that part of the problem is that the program has purported to be a documentary, examining "the rise of political voice and organization in San Francisco's 'Gay' community" but that it instead turned out to be "a sleazy peep-hole presentation of a tiny minority within a sizeable population" (Letter to local CBS affiliate, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). Interestingly, Dolan never denies the "truth" of the program, but rather claims that the producers, if they were conducting a more attentive documentary, should have put their discussion into broader context with a more representative perspective. They also, she argues, should have probed deeper into the social causes of the elements that the program highlighted:

What began with such promise (i.e., the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights), deteriorated rapidly. I thought: Ah, recognition at last for our numbers and our attempts to secure basic human rights denied on an arbitrary basis. How naïve of me. Instead viewers were fed a prurient concentration on parks, bars, drag halls, the S and M scene, etc. Focusing on the sexual adventuring, no attention was paid to the origins and functions of such institutions.

(Letter to local CBS affiliate, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18)

The program was insulting not just because it was a public-relations smear of gay and lesbian women, then, but particularly because it billed itself as a news piece that instead turned out to

offer only a surface gloss. Rather than discussing the ways in which gay bars and drag halls might be both symptoms of and solutions to feeling ostracized by an oppressive majority culture, these aspects of gay life instead appear to be evidence that when the queers get the power they want, they will make over the rest of the country in a morally perverse manner. Dolan blasts the broadcast media for failing in its civic educational mission, neglecting to provide thought-provoking and in-depth coverage, relying instead on sensation and controversy.

The letter again complains of lesbian invisibility, noting that a co-producer “(or should I say, co-provocateur) admitted that Lesbians were not included because we are ‘not controversial enough’” (Letter to local CBS affiliate, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). Dolan’s argument ultimately claims that the local station abandoned its duty to its regional constituents by not acknowledging that, despite the program’s explicit claims to be a documentary news report, in fact it was a clear attempt to spread sensational and misrepresentative information for the purpose of defaming the image of gay and lesbian people. This anger might also be indicative of the ALFA women’s understanding that representations in the public sphere “are at their most political when they appear to be non-political” (Asen 355). The evidence that Dolan assembles indicts the program for sensationalizing the seedy lifestyles of some in the gay community, while focusing on gay men and women’s recent political actions (which of course also demonstrates their inertia toward an agenda of cultural domination). Effectively, it appears to have portrayed queers as over-sexed, immoral, and threatening as they recruit their troops to fight a battle against families and children. That is, the program both relied on and fed the already-pervasive anxiety that, unless the homos are stopped in their ambitions for increased political power, the continued erosion of the

country's moral fabric will debauch future generations of Americans. In what feels like an ironic move, due to the in-depth critique that Dolan's two-page typewritten letter has already provided, the letter concludes, "P.S. If you would like a more detailed critique of the program's contents, please contact me" (Letter to local CBS affiliate, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18).

Dolan, also wrote to a news anchor at ABC's national office about a special program on the women's liberation movement titled, "The Trouble with Women." Writing in 1980, Dolan prefaces her comments with the statement, "I realize you may consider yourself a feminist," explaining in her cover letter that she doesn't want to come across as "picking on" ABC, because the network, she claims, "has dealt with such subjects as Gay and Lesbian and Women's Liberation to a greater extent than have the other networks" (Letter to Harry Reasoner, 27 February, 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). She includes a letter that she sent to the ABC programming department, and it's clear that her main explicit critique of the broadcast is that it was not representative enough, focusing on only one certain type of woman involved in women's liberation. Yet this complaint is not made to assert that the program should have included other women just for the sake of being representative. Rather, the politics of representation are inherently linked with the quality of the content. Dolan writes,

From watching the program, I could easily conclude that the liberation of Women is overwhelmingly the concern of white, professional class, young, heterosexual Women. Oh yes, there was one middle aged, working class white Woman featured in a segment on displaced homemakers. And she did make some of the most hard-hitting points in the program. But ABC totally ignored the struggles for liberation, recognition, and fair wages being undergone by Black and Third World Women, working class Women, and Lesbians.

(Letter to ABC-TV Programming, 27 February, 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18)

The program's focus on just one kind of woman means that the issues up for discussion and the nature of that discussion are affected—if the program only emphasizes the struggles of a white, professional, young, heterosexual class of women, then it elides other concerns, overlooking different material conditions that correspond to social class.

What's more, Dolan explains, even though it might be “fine to talk about birth control and abortions in the furthering of career aspirations,” those options are not available to a large majority of women (Letter to ABC-TV Programming, 27 February, 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). Dolan continues along these lines, saying that it's very nice that ABC also considered “men's changing roles” or “getting a job and ‘being responsible,’” but pointed out that many women may not “possess skills which society values enough to compensate you for,” while others may not have requisite level of education or access to childcare, and still others have to worry about being fired or otherwise discriminated against for being queer (Letter to ABC-TV Programming, 27 February, 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). The letter concludes by explaining that the network presented “a very white, heterosexual, professional bias,” which overlooked the “multitudes of Women in this country working for their own and their sister's liberation, in a wide variety of areas. When will the networks really perform a public service, and present a more inclusive, more representative picture of the struggles actually going on in this country?” (Letter to ABC-TV Programming, 27 February, 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18). This letter clearly indicates the ways in which ALFA women were more concerned about the systemic roots of power and wants the network to focus not only on a more “representative” segment of women, but the accompanying concerns that a more representative sample might be dealing with. By omitting a consideration of social class, race, and sexual orientation, that is, ABC has

managed to gloss over what for the ALFA women is the more fundamental fight: “liberation from fundamentally oppressive social institutions such as patriarchy, information control and wage exploitation” (Letter to ABC-TV Programming, 27 February, 1980, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 18).

### **Future Outreach Orientations and Speaker’s Bureau**

Along with the media committee, ALFA initiated a “Speaker’s Bureau,” in order to facilitate non-mass-mediated interactions with the heterosexual public. The idea for a Speaker’s Bureau first appeared in 1978, proposed in a letter from an Emory student, Bill Price, who found a funding source. Price advocated that they begin “a small-staffed, low-budgeted, non-political group designed to provide gay women and men as speakers to predominantly straight groups” in order “to influence the attitudes of the straights in the audience,” in addition to the closeted gays (Letter to ALFA, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 11). The people chosen to speak “would be ‘ordinary’ homosexuals, unpaid volunteers, who would speak personally and from their experience, fielding questions, correcting myths and stereotypes, being themselves” (Bill Price, Letter to ALFA, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 11). It’s unclear whether or not ALFA actually joined up with Price, but they did end up formalizing Speaker’s Bureau representatives. In that year, the ALFA women sent letters out asking various organizations to “sponsor a ‘Gay people are our children, relatives and friends’ program” in order to “sit down and talk as human beings together” with ALFA liaisons: the point was to get with the National Gay Task Force to have a mass “Week of Dialogue with American Parents and Families” during the last week of October, because “Studies have shown that heterosexuals who know a gay person are twice as likely to support gay rights

legislation as non-gays who think they don't know any homosexuals" (ALFA Papers Box 2 File 12). Again, the focus is on dialogue and information—education as the solution to fostering tolerance and understanding.

By 1981, ALFA had begun rallying with others to make outreach more systematic. The Speaker's Bureau informational pamphlet explains, "The ALFA Speaker's Bureau operates in the belief that ignorance and fear have created a mythology of stereotypes surrounding the lesbian and her lifestyles. We believe that only by dealing with the issues face-to-face can the general public come to grips with its own fears and prejudices regarding lesbianism" (ALFA Speakers Bureau Pamphlet, ALFA Papers Box 2 File 11). ALFA mailed these information packets to media outlets, lesbian/feminist/gay organizations, colleges, community mental health groups, liberal churches, community service-oriented organizations, and "hostile" groups (ALFA Papers Box 2 File 12). This packet operated according to the philosophy that "considering the political climate of this country today, we feel that all organizations involved in such issues [that affect women in the Atlanta area] need to pull together to make sure we continue to make gains in these areas," especially the following: Abortion, Anti-Klan activity, Birth control, Equal Rights Amendment, Forced Sterilization, Lesbian/gay rights, and Reproductive freedom (ALFA Papers Box 2 File 12).

In a letter that they sent along with their packet to "ally" organizations also working toward social change, ALFA women explain:

Many strides have been taken toward our goals of equality and freedom of choice in those areas we have chosen to invest our energy, our financial support and, sometimes, even our lives. But, as you know, as we have moved forward, we have also come under increasing attack for our views and lifestyles. Those 'in power' were more comfortable when we were in our 'closets' and are pushing even harder today for a return to a time when we were not so visible.

(ALFA Papers Box 2 File 12)

The women note that they are a diverse group from many walks of life, and they urge their audience to work with them as allies for change, fighting the “divide and conquer” strategy of others who would like to keep oppressed peoples separate and fighting amongst themselves. That is, they focus on cultivating connections:

Obviously, those of us involved in these struggles are not going to cease in our efforts to demand equality for all people. But one difficulty we experience from time to time is the separation of our own group from those of others who are also involved in working for change. It is convenient for those in power to separate us, of course, ‘divide and conquer’ having long been an effective concept. But in this political climate today, can we afford to keep ourselves separate? Can we afford to allow our differences in personal lifestyles and ideologies to stand in the way of a unity that could benefit us all?

(ALFA Papers, Box 2 File 12)

This document includes the explanation that ALFA is trying to work toward unity by providing speakers for outreach and coalitions with “various local organizations and community groups,” because the women believed that “it is only through learning about each other that some of these barriers that separate us can be broken down” (ALFA Papers Box 2 File 12).

The letter sent to the college professors and organizations was very different in nature. It reads:

In recent years, both lesbians and gay men have become more visible to the public eye, both nationally and locally. However, the myths, fears, and ignorance that surround homosexuality are still considerable. Little is known of the history and lifestyles of lesbians and gays even today, and this ignorance creates difficulties not only for the lesbian/gay community, but for the ‘larger society’ as well. [...] It is important that individuals in the ‘larger society’ and, particularly, those who will be leaders in the future, know us and our community, free of the usual misinformation and distortions. We believe that you, as a member of the academic community, are interested in presenting the ‘whole picture’ to your students and to your colleagues, rather than just the distortions. If so, we feel you will be interested in using the services of our Speaker’s Bureau for your classes, seminars, or other programs you may be planning.

(ALFA Papers Box 2 File 12)

This letter also emphasizes diversity of background, but conspicuously adds, “ALFA members come from all walks of life; there is no ‘typical lesbian.’” Members who volunteered to be liaisons provided brief biographical sketches. The information they included explained that they were many different kinds of women: Elaine was invested in politics “of non-violence and anti-war,” Linda’s interests included “the areas of nutrition and addiction/alcoholism in the gay community,” Margo was a “co-founder of the Atlanta Socialist Women’s Union; formerly a carpenter,” Lorraine was a lawyer, M.P. a pilot, Sandy was formerly a journalist, but now was a “teacher and counselor in the metaphysical field in Atlanta,” M.A. had an accounting background and was interested in “theatre and writing” Sarah, physically disabled, worked in a feminist and children’s bookstore” (ALFA Papers Box 2 File 12). The women were mainly in their 20s and 30s, some from other parts of the country, such as the Midwest, Cincinnati, and North Carolina.

Rhetorical tips for being an effective educator:

Helpful Hints for Public Speaking:

1. Know your material, know what you want to say and the points you want to make. ...
2. Be aware that you set the climate for the whole speech by the way you stand and speak. Your non-verbal communications say whether you are confident, uptight, scared, or relaxed, and how you want the group to react to you.
3. ... remember the closer you are to the audience—the fewer pieces of furniture between you—the more open kind of climate you can establish.
4. Never apologize for what you are about to say. If you say that you are underprepared or things aren’t going to be good, then the audience will stop listening before you start.
5. Speak clearly and slowly enough that everyone can understand.
6. Have your volume loud enough to reach the person in the audience who is furthest from you.
7. Look directly at the audience. Don’t look at a wall, or any one person. You can bring everyone into what you are saying by looking directly at them from time to time.
8. If you get confused or forget what you want to say, just stop, be silent for a moment. Silence is better than, ‘Ugh, you know,’ in a sentence that doesn’t make sense.



And the final tip: Eye contact and genuineness are the most important keys to a good presentation. Believe in what you say, want for others to understand where you are coming from.

(ALFA Papers Box 2 File 11)

## Chapter VII

### Reinventing ALFA: Newsletters, Networks, and Diversity

Dear Alfans: I so enjoyed the May issue of *Atalanta* that I had to write you a fan letter. I enjoy and relate to your excellent newsletter every month. I find many of the articles informative and challenging. I so sympathize and relate to problems like keys to the community building, where furniture goes, and how to have an intern. I don't know many of you, but you seem like such a sister community to me—in the south, struggling, processing, learning. I loved the cover of your May issue<sup>11</sup> and want to thank the author of the article on disability. I was rightfully challenged to get my priorities in order in my input in the Pagoda's deciding how we will spend money in making improvements in our community physical space. I love you all lots and appreciate all your good work!

-- Lavender (*Atalanta* 12.7)

The above letter, written by a sister lesbian feminist organization and printed in ALFA's collectively written and self-published monthly newsletter, *Atalanta*,<sup>12</sup> offers an indication of the wide-reaching impact of the ALFA women's writing. In addition to publicizing ALFA's social change work and connecting the women to a nationwide community, *Atalanta* also grounded the organization internally. ALFA women and other feminists across the Southeast were the newsletter's primary audience, but the serial circulated both nationally and internationally. By the mid-1980s, each issue averaged between twelve and twenty pages and offered an in-depth forum for discussing strategies that might redress structural inequities reinforced by traditional socioeconomic and political institutions.

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<sup>11</sup> Illustrated by Nancy Oswald and titled "The Circle," featuring naked women with differently colored heads dancing in a circle around a campfire.

<sup>12</sup> All issues of this newsletter can be found in the ALFA Papers, Box 6.

Initially, the newsletter was simply called *ALFA Newsletter*, but in January of 1977, it transformed into *Atalanta*. The change reflects the women's awareness of the importance of names as it also enacts the organization's commitment to recovering and publicizing stories of strong women from both historical and mythological sources. According to Elizabeth and the Newsletter Committee, the name change was meant to serve as "a warning to those who think we want to be one of the men," insofar as the new name would "honor Atalanta who struggled to be a person under patriarchy," and remind ALFA members to "be closer to that goal" (*Atalanta* 5.1, 1). The first official issue of the renamed newsletter features an extended retelling of Atalanta's story:

Atalanta, a Greek woman from Arkadia, was exposed to die at birth by her father, as has been the custom with female children through history. Our Atalanta was, however, found and suckled by a she-bear (*Ursa Uvi*, no doubt). Later in life, she, like us, attempted to live an independent life under patriarchy. She was the fastest runner, the bravest athlete in her community. [...] Later, she evaded her father's attempts to marry her off (yes, he had reappeared once child care was unnecessary) by promising to wed whomever should beat her in a foot race. The original story has her finally take pity on one young man (the losers were put to death) and let him win. Sound familiar? Atalanta didn't have a sisterhood. Later the story was changed so that the man beat her through cunning.

(*Atalanta* 5.1)<sup>13</sup>

The retelling is punctuated with satiric asides and inside jokes, which rhetorically work to help the women of ALFA relate to Atalanta and her struggle. As the Elizabeth and the newsletter committee continue the story, they also highlight the ways in which the women of today can see her as a model of strength.

In this first renamed newsletter, the ALFA women symbolically reappropriate the myth of Atalanta through the force of their revisions, in order to make the story into a parable

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<sup>13</sup> The Newsletter Committee notes that help for their article came from *Of Woman Born* by Adrienne Rich, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* by Sarah Pomeroy, and *Greek Mythology* by H.J. Rose.

that embodies and transmits the organization's values. The reader learns that there is "some confusion" about what happens to Atalanta after the foot race: "Since we know that Greek mythology, like Christian scripture" has worked "to mask the story of our mothers, we must look closely here" (*Atalanta* 5.1). In this article, as with many articles that appear in ALFA's newsletter throughout the years, the members indicate their high level of awareness that stories about women have already been altered in order to fit with the values of a patriarchal society. Their revisions are thus justified, and even needed, in order to reclaim women's place in history and remember that there were many strong women who preceded the ALFA

**Figure 5: Atalanta Cover**



members, and that they, too, were marginalized and struggled for the right to live lives unimpeded by the violence of patriarchal beliefs and traditions.

The cover of this issue (see Figure 5, *Atalanta* 5.1) features a hand-drawn picture of Atalanta and Ursa the she-bear [see picture], and the final page of the issue continues the retelling of the story in a more imaginative and playful form. The authors explain that much of the story has been lost, but they

emphasize the interpretation most appealing to them, using epideictic rhetoric to connect Aphrodite with “patriarchal love,” laud Kybele for being “one of the Great Goddesses in earlier near-East matriarchies,” and suggest that Atalanta’s story was probably co-opted because she was “linked with the worship of the virgin goddess Artemis (Diana) in the days when virginity referred not to the state of one’s hymen but to the state of one’s mind—she who belongs to herself” (*Atalanta* 5.1). Again, such insertions are typical of the kind of writing that recurs in the newsletters, insofar as we see the women writers celebrating femininity, recovering history, rewriting myths, and retelling stories so that they value traits such as independence, creativity, strength, and intelligence. The story does not end, but instead closes with the beginning of a story about the adventures of Atalanta and Ursa, exhorting the members to “Tune in Next Month for an Exciting Sequel” (*Atalanta* 5.1, 8). These added artistic elements fill in the gaps of the story, bring it to life and provide the ALFA women with a creation story that likely prompted increased emotional attachment to the newsletter.

Through the newsletter, ALFA continued to re-invent itself during the course of its educational practice. There were a wide variety of needs and constituencies served by the newsletter, which worked as an aggregator for information of concerns to lesbians both in Atlanta and nationally. ALFA’s standing newsletter committee ensured that the work would be split among the members who were most devoted to the writing and production each month, and so it changed in tone and style from month to month and year to year as a result. After the name change, *Atalanta* became more experimental and artistic, growing in length and eventually including carefully chosen ads that often featured information about the business, like “WOMAN OWNED + RUN PUT YOUR \$ WHERE YOUR POLITICS

ARE!” (15.7, 9). Generally, the newsletter reflected the ALFA women’s attempt to pour their collective resources and energy toward supporting women, regardless of their sexual orientation.

The conversations featured within the pages of *Atalanta* encompassed topics related to gender, sexual orientation, race, and class; for example, the women debated about disability rights, the prison industrial complex, gay health concerns, lesbian motherhood, mental health, and popular culture. It usually featured a compelling cover, often drawn by hand and either funny, satirical, celebratory, or political. Each issue began with a featured article section that provided a recap of a recent event or topic of temporal relevance, sometimes contained comics or political cartoons, and usually spotlighted one or two issues of concern to lesbian women, often regarding health, sex and sexuality, politics, gay news, or matters of relevance to feminists more broadly. There were book, movie, and television show reviews as well. Each newsletter also contained a calendar of events, the minutes from the general monthly meeting, and subscription information. Ultimately, the newsletter was a site for education that moved beyond the immediate community and into the larger region and nation at the same time as it brought knowledge from the broader lesbian feminist community back to the local.

In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on ALFA’s discursive exchanges during the mid-1980s so that I can address the temporal gaps in our current scholarly narratives in order to account for the rhetorical work of lesbian feminist groups like ALFA during the years that followed the traditional zenith of American second-wave radical feminist political action. Rhetoric and composition and communication studies scholars have begun to develop an understanding of the American women’s liberation movement, but our interpretations have closely

followed the narrative articulated by historians such as Alice Echols and Sara Evans and others whose disciplinary conventions have tended to emphasize a focus on theorizing about “what happened” to radical feminism as it continued into the 1980s (see Kelly 172-173, for example). It would be productive to move beyond the emerging narrative, which asserts that radical feminism evolved into an apolitical cultural feminism pioneered by lesbian-identified women who were ideologically invested in separatism. I help deepen our understanding of the kinds of internal debates and bring greater visibility to the variety of work and values actually embodied within the work conducted by radical lesbian feminist groups such as ALFA during these years.

And yet the ALFA members’ wide variety of values and strategies threatened to prevent the organization from retaining the level of political energy and cohesion necessary to continue their activism into the mid-1990s. Without the grounding force of a monthly newsletter, the organization probably would have succumbed to disagreement, frustration, and a general lack of organizational ability. The process of producing and distributing the newsletter gave the members of ALFA a sense of collective identity, held them accountable to both their own organization as well as their broader community, and it offered a forum for receiving feedback and engaging in ongoing discussion of important issues. The newsletters provided a collective autobiography—a collaborative memory narrative—that responded to need for more information and helped them to rethink their mission, goals, and strategies. Whenever the socio-political rhetorical situation prompted the need for continued reinvention, the newsletter offered a forum for debate about new options for the future. Even after many organizations died out, the ALFA women remained invested in revolutionizing the institutions that enabled oppression; so they continued their analyses of the broader patterns

of dominance and its deployment within traditional institutions. The do-it-yourself communication networks they created and participated in relied on the idea that oppressive kinds of power could be subverted by spreading information “in a circular rather than top-down” manner that was underground and thus “organic and systemic,” and these communication networks became “engines of social change and cultural invention” (Meeker 14-15). The newsletter enabled ALFA to publicize members’ ideas and activities and plugged these otherwise marginalized women into a larger discursive community of like-minded advocates.

During the course of my analysis, I rely on José Esteban Muñoz’s “queer utopian methodology” (*Cruising* 116) insofar as I aim to extend our traditional (heteronormative) methods of revisionist feminist rhetorical historiography: I critically re-imagine and contextualize the ALFA women’s discussions of past by bringing them to life in a way that addresses our current debates while orienting them toward a queer ideal yet impossible future. That is, I position the newsletter debates about socio-political desires and strategies in a way that focuses on the rhetorical tactics that forwarded a utopian vision of ethics, identity, and community. ALFA’s organizational reorientation anticipated what Muñoz has described as “queer utopian futurity,” wherein pragmatic and performative negation become resources for countering intersectional oppression and enabling post-institutional modes of interpersonal and political relations (*Cruising* 13). Instead of succumbing to the hopelessness that might have so easily resulted in rhetorics of blame and resentment, the newsletters enabled the ALFA women to work toward constructing new social norms that would be both diverse and community-oriented, simultaneously inclusive and embracing individual difference.



As I highlight the ALFA women's radical feminist processes that oriented toward a "perfect" but perpetually out of reach future, I offer the newsletter discussions as a model for engaging in substantive debate about what a utopian future might look like, and I analyze examples of these discussions in order to identify both successful and unsuccessful strategies. These newsletter-mediated debates about an idealized vision of the future and the rhetorical techniques that might facilitate its emergence energized these radical women. As a result, they were able to cultivate theoretically coherent and rhetorically innovative ways of saying "no" to their present realities without engaging in oppositional politics. Instead, they devised strategies for working within the traditional systems of governance and culture while they discussed alternatives, re-invented and experimented with new platforms and techniques for social change.

### **The Rhetorical Role of *Atalanta***

The political context of the 1980s presented particular rhetorical difficulties for organizations with lesbian feminist roots, because the nation had grown increasingly more conservative: the Equal Rights Amendment failed to pass in 1982, and AIDS was just beginning to emerge as a health crisis for the gay community. According to Bonnie Dow, many feminist organizations fragmented as they "lost grass-roots membership and dropped out of the media spotlight," while diminished "government support for feminist ideas, combined with an increasingly troubled economic life" prompted many radical feminist groups to relinquish their more revolutionary visions (91-92). The rise of the new right led to a backlash against women's rights and the utopian gay liberation goals of the past began to look unrealistic. The mainstream media "reflected and reinforced discourses that equated homosexuality and homosexuals

with disease and perversion” while national and state governing bodies appeared to be indifferent to the AIDS crisis—more focused on enacting repressive laws than providing support for those in need—and so the resulting sense of “grief, fear, and overall trauma in lesbian and gay communities was enormous” (Gould 60-61). During this time, Heather Love explains, “it was hard to hold on to optimistic historical narratives” and so gay and lesbian organizations “focused instead on the ongoing problem of homophobia and its material and psychic effects” (158). As the feeling that revolutionary change was just around the corner faded, the disappointment was incredibly deflating to radical groups such as ALFA.

So it’s not surprising that around 1984, ALFA had begun to lose energy. The arguments made by the new right during the late 1970s—that non-heterosexually oriented people were morally perverse—turned out to have surprising political resilience, detracting from the ethos of gay men and women. In order to continue to agitate for change during these dispiriting years, ALFA women needed the feeling of community that the discursive space of the newsletter provided, as it helped them to transcend feelings of disappointment and resentment. Women from distant places wrote to express how alone they felt, to thank the members of ALFA for their work and their writing, and to ask for pen pals. For example, Karen from Cincinnati, Ohio, confesses, “You don’t know how much your newsletter means to this young dyke. It is like sunshine in a field of flowers, or a nice cool brook when you are hot and thirsty” (*Atalanta* 12.5, 11). Even though women like Karen were not able to participate in ALFA’s local actions, the newsletter still provided solace, support, and a feeling of connection to the members located in Atlanta. The women who read alternative radical feminist publications such as *Atalanta* discovered that they were not alone as women dissatisfied with their roles as wives or mothers, experienced lesbian desires, or were

otherwise discriminated against because they were women (Meeker 230). *Atalanta* thus offered hope to women who were physically isolated and it also gave ALFA members a sense of connection to a larger movement. Newsletters such as *Atalanta* enabled ALFA and the broader lesbian feminist community the rhetorical space needed to continue to fight for a more ethical world, despite the daily weight of sexist and homophobic oppression.

In addition to providing the ALFA women with the community support and resulting encouragement necessary to continue their work, *Atalanta* helped to focus their energy where it needed to go—it gave them the space to debate internally, to engage in collective reflection and strategize about the future. Within the pages of *Atalanta*, we see ALFA women moving forward by taking the time to reorient. Rather than follow the example of many other formerly radical groups who turned to identity politics or minority rights models (Kelly 162), the ALFA women worked both within and outside of mainstream institutions to construct new realities that might work in a post-identity political era. That is, while many other feminist, gay, and lesbian organizations opted to argue for reform instead of revolutionary social change, ALFA women looked to their own organization's history—to its revolutionary roots—for guidance. As it became clear that comprehensive social change would require a reevaluation of strategy, the members began by repeating the same questions that had haunted them ten years earlier: who are we and what do we want? And, as they had done in the beginning, they held meetings to begin a conversation about their shared visions for the future of lesbian-feminism as it intersected with ALFA. The newsletter once again became a central place for the members to track their collective sense of identity as they asked: how might we persist in modeling our utopian vision for the future? Who would that future include? What might it look like?

Without the newsletter driving them forward, the organization probably would have disappeared by late 1985. ALFA was losing money and their membership renewals and new memberships were dropping off. They weren't sure why this was happening, but the discussions at the meetings, as recorded in the newsletter, indicated the need to be more overtly political. According to the meeting minutes in the December 1985 newsletter, ALFA had been mobilized around the Boogiewimmin [social] events, yet lacking in political energy, and the women were reluctant to acknowledge that they had lost sight of their political mission: "Sally said that any organization which calls itself lesbian-feminist in 1985 is [already] political. We are what our members have energy for at the time. Jo A. agreed with Sally" (*Atalanta* 13.12, 9-10). Sally's argument is representative of much lesbian feminist thinking at the time: if ALFA was an out and visible lesbian feminist organization, wasn't it inherently political, making change through everyday interactions? The word "energy" recurs throughout these discussions, since there was only so much energy to go around. The women asked themselves, did it matter that they were making small changes in their local world by directing their limited resources and energy toward women? Weren't they making a difference in the individual lives of the people they encountered and wasn't that enough?

Eventually, the members realized that they needed to think about their audience and remember that they were more successful in the long run when they focused their social change efforts on the local community and city, while connecting ALFA to a sense of history and the larger feminist movement efforts. In the minutes, we see the women asking "who the message is going to?" and realizing that they might "need to publicize ourselves more" (*Atalanta* 13.12, 10). In order to move forward more productively, the women re-focus on

incremental and pragmatic goals that will be small yet achievable: “More discussion followed and then the energy moved to the more concrete—Sally suggested ALFA organizing around International Women’s Day in March and getting other organizations to sponsor events as well” (*Atalanta* 13.12, 10). This short-term, manageable goal of attending to the local and making efforts to extend their energy through coalitions with other city organizations appears to have been successful: by April of the following year, ALFA appears revitalized, with a longer newsletter and debates about issues that extend from one issue to the next.

By 1987, the final page of *Atalanta* also features a revised their description of the organization, which extends ALFA’s reach and lists specific political causes that the organization supports:

Women involved work on social, political, educational, cultural, and recreational activities. We are concerned with the entire spectrum of lesbian-feminist issues which includes, but is not limited to, the liberation of women; eliminating discrimination based on sexual orientation, ending racial, anti-Semitic, and economic oppression; eliminating nuclear weapons and reducing the threat of war; creating a positive, enabling environment for fat and differently-abled women; and ensuring that the world’s living and non-living resources are used in a responsible manner for the benefit of all and not exploited for the profit of a few.

(*Atalanta* 15.6)

The renewed mission description now includes an explicit focus on cultural and recreational activities in addition to the original social, political, and educational goals. In the wake of their restructuring debates they have realized that while new memberships might have dropped off as a result of a lack of political energy, the social and cultural events have been an effective tool for retaining the members they already have. As a result of the debates that received positive feedback in *Atalanta*, moreover, they have realized that their group has also been energized as a result of expanding their specific political causes to advocating for peace,

the differently-abled, and the environment, in addition to their preexisting attention to eliminating discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, race, and advocating for economic justice.

Newsletters like *Atalanta* rhetorically functioned to help organizations and their individual members reorient and connect to others who were also doing similar work in their own local spaces, insofar as it provided a network for discussing these visions of new realities with the others who were also working toward the same goals. For lesbian feminist organizations such as ALFA, underground communication networks “provided countless thousands of women with the opportunity, indeed the imperative, to connect with others to discuss problems they had previously considered personal in a context that highlighted their universality and their political dimensions” (Meeker 226). As the women participated in these do-it-yourself information circuits, they also watched their organization’s identity emerge autopoetically in the newsletters and gained the objective space to better negotiate between the idealistic and the pragmatic. It is clear that the ALFA women sought to create a world in which people would be treated both as individuals and as a part of a larger community, and the newsletter created the discursive space for generating the kind of collective self-awareness necessary for ongoing reinvention. Consistency between theory and practice, experimentation, and flexibility formed the foundation of ALFA’s strategies moving forward through the 1980s and early 1990s.

As I will explain during the course of further analysis in the remaining sections, the newsletters provided the community and the space for discussions that oriented toward a new future that might never actually materialize—a utopian future that lesbian feminists nevertheless believed eventually might be possible. ALFA women debated ways to make

room for voices that have been left out as they experimented with ideas about how to play by an alternative system of rules; they did not seek to make everyone assimilate into a culture of sameness, but instead valued a mix of perspectives while emphasizing the virtues of individual freedom and non-conformity as they worked to build a broader community of feminists working toward social justice.

### **Painfully Self-Aware: Identity and “Criticism/Self-Criticism”**

Discussions in *Atalanta* became especially contentious when they featured debates that revolved around aspects of identity related to race, socioeconomic class, and the differently-abled. As the organization reoriented, members fought over how to best continue to put these values and commitments into practice. Historically, the ALFA women had adapted the feminist practice of “criticism-self-criticism” (crit-self-crit), a lesbian feminist rhetorical practice that had arisen out of their rap groups. The goal of crit-self-crit was to ensure that they were applying their own rigorous critiques of traditional institutions to their own attitudes and beliefs, in order to help make their lived practices line up with their theories. *Atalanta* became a space to continue this practice and extend it into the realm of theory.

Criticism-self-criticism became a primary way in which the ALFA women worked through questions of ethics. Their ethical system appears to have been based on reflection and self-knowledge, honesty when engaging with others, and respect for individual perspectives. The goal was to orient toward a life that would be consistent in terms of ideals and practices: the women wanted their political and ethical beliefs to match their daily behaviors. Within the newsletters, the ALFA women often express the belief that conformity

to one standard of practices would be self-defeating, but they agreed that social justice would be the ultimate utopian goal. They would provide a model for other groups to imitate, while also building flexibility into their vision. So the women debated as a community about what their organization would “stand for”—that is, they debated about what their version of social justice might look like—but each individual member was responsible for how she would put the community values into practice.

Even within the difficult socio-cultural context of the mid-1980s, ALFA women reoriented toward the more positive future they believed might exist on the horizon and perpetually out of reach. The pattern of themes that emerge in these issues of *Atalanta* indicate that the women were developing character virtues that would bridge the gap between their ideals and practices. The organization’s vision functioned rhetorically to inspire the members’ collective inventive practices: it invited a discursive engagement with the present that pushed the women’s thoughts and actions beyond their present realities. Such discourse was simultaneously revolutionary and pragmatist as it took the form of internal debates; the women wrote in order to ask how their socio-political desires might be put into action in an everyday way.

ALFA members and others who wrote in to *Atalanta* believed that ethics might be achieved by attending to both the essentialized socially-constructed identity based on socially-maintained stereotypes and a more complex understanding of self. That is, through critical reflection and debates in the newsletters, the women of ALFA and their peers sought to transcend more ossified understandings of identity even as they recognized the impact of sexual orientation, gender, race, class, etc. Their explorations took place at the overtly political and theoretical level as well as at the personal level. Demographically, most ALFA



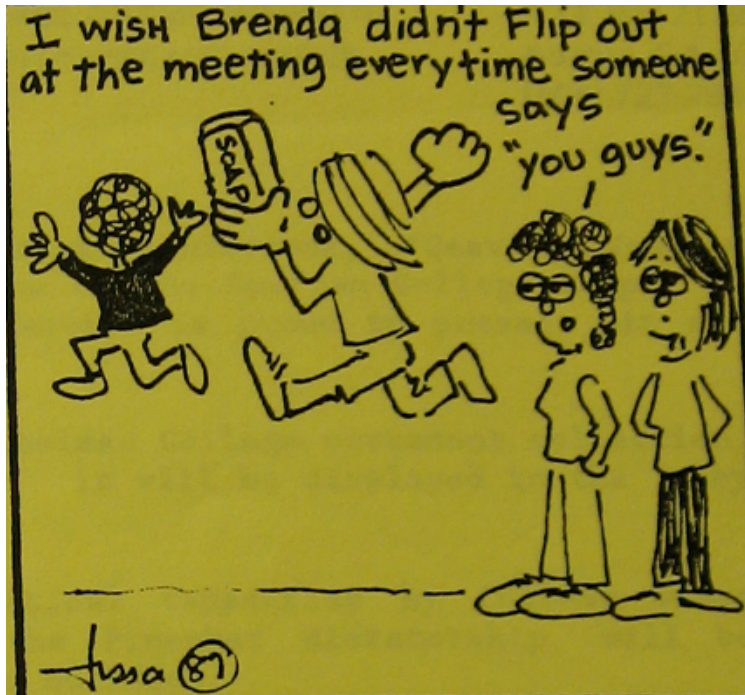
women were white and many were Jewish and Latina, but only a few were African-American. And even though most ALFA women had been poor when they first emerged as an organization, by the mid-1980s, many had worked their way into the middle class, taken college courses, or received a degree. So in terms of socio-economic class, the women were often educated yet closely connected to value systems aligned with those of working-class or the poor. Thus, while ALFA members faced intersectional oppressions that extended beyond their experiences of sexism and homophobia, their commitment to identifying and challenging all kinds of systemic oppression was embedded within their lesbian-feminist orientation.

Political correctness became both an expectation and a point of contention. In the May 1984 issue, Mary S. explains that she objects to the use of the term “political correctness” altogether because it is vaguely defined and doesn’t actually accomplish much, except demand that others conform to one standard of language. Mary’s main complaint is that political correctness policing obscures the more complex issues at stake while also becoming an instrument of suppressing ideas or beliefs that might merely be different from the norms, as opposed to unethical:

Why do we hide behind a trite phrase [political correctness] instead of voicing our real objections? After all, it isn’t the personal choices of vegetarianism or non-monogamy that bother us, but the subtle insistence that all Lesbians must adopt them. [...] I think that what we are really feeling when we speak against being ‘politically correct’ is Pressure (to) Conform. Isn’t that a more accurate definition of ‘p.c.’?  
(*Atalanta* 12.5)

Mary S. expresses her frustration with the idea that there might be only one way to be a lesbian feminist, because according to her understanding of the values that undergird ALFA, there should be space for everyone to make their own decisions about how they will live their values in practice. On the other hand, many ALFA members felt morally opposed to eating

animals or coupling up because they believed that engaging in such practices reinforced the dominant (and dominance) paradigm. Mary is pointing out how the unspoken expectation that all “good” lesbian feminists act according to one set of ethical values undercuts the ALFA women’s commitment to individuality and non-conformity. It turned out to be more difficult than expected to strike a balance between the potentially dominating force of any



**Figure 6: *Atalanta* Comic—“You Guys” and Crit/Self-Crit Political Correctness**

new system of ethics and the dominance of the traditional system ruled by capitalism, patriarchy, and compulsory heterosexuality. Members constantly needed to remind themselves not to be hypocritical or reactionary.

Even though the ALFA women valued the criticism-self-criticism orientation of political correctness and took language very seriously, they also debated about the efficacy of political correctness policing because they noticed how it often wasted time or shut down discourse rather than opening up space for more productive critique and education. Figure 6 (ALFA Papers Box 6 File 15) illustrates this point well. Three years after Mary S. wrote her more theoretical letter arguing that political correctness can often be equated with “pressure to conform,” a situation arose to illustrate the point in a more grounded way: one meeting had

featured a talk by a member who had just been released from prison, and she spoke to ALFA members about the race and class dynamics she observed there. The content of the talk had been controversial and so in the following month's *Atalanta*, the ALFA women wrote critically about her attitude in the form of an apology. The next month, another woman wrote in to criticize the members who wrote the apology and defend the woman who spoke. This writer explains that what she had heard during the talk was "some very heavy material concerning life in prison," and she chastises the members of ALFA for being too quick to judge the content as politically incorrect. She accuses them of failing to recognize the difference between racism and discussions that attend to race:

The Goddess knows, I am all for political correctness. I have been a 'radical feminist political activist' for a long time and have a personal commitment to identifying and interrupting all forms of -ism's. I found nothing, absolutely nothing, in the material in question to be 'politically incorrect.' I did, however, find several cold hard facts regarding prison life presented to the audience. It is a fact that there are more black people in prison than white. It is a fact that education levels among inmate populations are alarmingly low. And it is a fact that the nutrition provided to inmates is poor, consisting primarily of government-surplus processed foods and carbohydrates. Prison life is ugly and violent and a reality that few of us have had to deal with in any direct way. The 'justice' system that put this woman into prison is rife with sexism, racism, and classism. [...] My great concern is that instead of welcoming her back into the community with open, caring arms, wanting to hear her, and help her heal herself, we are slapping her away, hitting her with labels, censorship, name-calling, and 'apologies.' I am ashamed, ALFA.

(*Atalanta* 15.7)

The writer reminds the members that when the speaker's observations are put into the proper context, the feelings of discomfort and blame can be shifted to the institution of the "'justice' system," reminding ALFA members that they need to be better critical thinkers. This letter, with its repeated refrain of "It is a fact that" and emphasis on pragmatic realities demonstrates how ALFA women were careful to remind themselves that a focus on political

correctness at the expense of understanding the content can foreclose opportunities for self-education.

In the remainder of the letter, the author explains that she is also upset that the few individuals who felt offended took the initiative to write on behalf of other ALFA members without their consent. She writes in the singular first person, so that it will be clear that she is not speaking for others who might disagree with her as she critiques the members' "judgmental" apology. She closes with the exhortation to remember that even in cases when people are unintentionally politically incorrect, there is a more important problem—the deeply engrained oppressive values that have been written into our cultural norms. The letter continues:

I think your action was inappropriate. Where is your sense of humor? If you've been missing it lately, you might want to look for it behind your judgmentalism. [...] Racism exists. This is a factual statement, not a racist one. [...] In what ways are you an oppressor? For we all are products of our society, no matter how much we reject that society. Clean your own house first before you attempt to evaluate someone else's. [...] We lesbians cannot afford infighting; if we don't support each other in this world, then we are shit out of luck and we'll all go down alone, sooner or later. What goes around, comes around, sisters.

(*Atalanta* 15.7)

Because the writer's sentiments reflect the values we see constantly reiterated in *Atalanta*, it is safe to assume that her letter left a deep impression among the members: we see the call to remember to carefully analyze your own position and attitude before critiquing others and we again see an emphasis on remembering that institutionalized oppression is the root problem. The statement that they "cannot afford infighting" is an argument that emerges repeatedly within the pages of the newsletter; it reminds the ALFA women that they need to transcend the divisive effects of identity-based and reactionary attitudes at the same time as it invokes ALFA members' long-held belief that they must be a unified community. Members are urged

to remember that the real enemy is the drive to dominate other humans—because they know better than many how effective shame can be as a mode of control, they are especially sensitive to this critique. Self-righteous and judgmental behavior was clearly a problem within ALFA, but it seems that the women were especially quick to critique themselves for these particular flaws.

Repeatedly, the pages of *Atalanta* feature discussions that invoke the rhetorical strategy of attending to one's culturally-influenced sense of identity as a way to analyze and transcend internalized attitudes in the fight for social justice. When racism is at issue, cultivating the quality of empathy becomes central to this process. Lorraine emerges as a leader on this front, writing reports about strategies she finds useful as she encourages others to follow her lead. One report features a summary of the anti-racism workshop she attended as a part of the Black Women's Health Project at the Martin Luther King Center. Lorraine explains that the woman who ran the workshop operated on two assumptions, namely, that "1) every white person in the U.S. has learned to be racist—we can't avoid this, having grown up in this society, and 2) one can't be totally non-racist but can be actively anti-racist (working against the racism in ourselves and the system)" (*Atalanta* 12.4, 3). The logic here is that white individuals are more quickly able to move beyond guilt and resentment and into action when they recognize the ways in which the dominant culture teaches unethical behavioral norms, both overtly and subtly. In order to help encourage fellow ALFA members to work toward an anti-racist world, the report displaces the blame for racism onto institutional and socialized forces. This strategy appears to have been an important part of the workshop, and it also echoes the ALFA women's own understanding of the most effective way to advocate for social justice.

Lorraine notes that the workshop instructor emphasized the process of working toward social justice wherein it becomes imperative that each person individually work toward an anti-racist society.<sup>14</sup> According to the premise of the workshop, “the process of acquiring a white racist identity is, for the most part, unconscious, an internalized learning process, and something that is not our fault. What is under our control is the unlearning of that identity and the construction of a new, anti-racist white identity” (*Atalanta* 12.4, 3). This process-oriented and education-based model for fighting institutionalized racism is in line with the ALFA women’s radical values, because they believed that we need revolutionary and systemic social change. Because Lorraine has underlined her belief that acquiring a white racist identity is “not our fault,” she also helps to relieve the emotional pain that accompanies an honest look into how we all perpetuate hurtful attitudes without the intention of doing so. The combined emphasis on process, education, and empathy helps each person to see the ways they have personally been affected by systemic racism while also providing an impersonal source of blame that might motivate them beyond paralysis. If racism can be learned, then it can also be unlearned and thereby reveal ways for each person to work toward subverting institutionalized racism. According to this model, racial identity is a legacy of the past that remains salient in the present but does not in and of itself determine one’s attitude in the future.

The workshop involved an exercise that asked participants to remember a particular incident when they felt oppressed for any reason. By attempting to identify the underlying

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<sup>14</sup> The *Atalanta* report also credits Rita Hardiman’s work for influencing the workshop instruction. Hardiman’s dissertation (University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1982) is titled *White Identity Development: A Process Oriented Model for Describing the Racial Consciousness of White Americans*.

pattern of feelings caused by oppression, the women can more readily identify opportunities for empathy and uncover the racism internalized as a part of growing up in a socially unjust culture. The workshop participants were coached to ask themselves how they felt during a time when they experienced oppression, and Lorraine writes that it was

startling to realize the range of emotions that we as white women have felt in association with racism—mostly negative and hurtful. This is another realization that Joanna [the workshop leader] helps us to achieve—racism doesn't only hurt black people; it hurts white people also. One exercise has us list the prices we pay for our racism as well as the benefits we gain.

(*Atalanta* 12.4)

It becomes clear that empathy is one quality that becomes key to overcoming pre-existing prejudices, and again we see the ALFA women taking steps to promote equality for others, because they believed that such actions would help further the cause of social justice for all people. This workshop strategy also echoes a repeated refrain in the ALFA literature: racism, sexism, homophobia, and other kinds of oppressions hurt *everyone*, not just the people who are most immediately and obviously impacted.

Even though the process of cultivating empathy and reflecting on one's own internalized attitudes about race and identity can be painful, this process becomes transformative. Instead of dwelling on feelings of resentment and paralysis, Lorraine explains, the readers of the *Atalanta* article can instead use the pain as motivation to change themselves personally and set an example for others to do the same:

This summary fails to convey the eye-opening (and in some cases gut-wrenching) nature of the workshop. I feel it is a must for those women who want to start the process of dealing with racism, both in their personal lives and in their organizations.

(*Atalanta* 12.4)

Lorraine closes by encouraging others to engage in such workshops and she asks that ALFA and sister organizations across the country form anti-racism groups as well. In this example,

which is typical of ALFA newsletter reports on workshops, the organization does not simply assert idealistic values in words. Instead, their values become integrated into practice: after this article is featured within the newsletter, ALFA initiates an anti-racism rap group and forms coalitions with other local organizations fighting racism.

Generally, when the ALFA women wrote internal critiques, they reminded their sisters to be empathetic toward others both within and outside of their organization and urged the members always to present a united front. In this way, moments of crit-self-crit were countered by warnings against the dangers of infighting. When the internal critique focused on socioeconomic class struggle, the women commonly pointed out blind spots that resulted from their radical feminist perspective. For example, an article titled “Hooking is Real Employment” reminds the ALFA women to be sensitive to the plight of those women who aren’t understood by most lesbians and feminists. The author, Nancy Oswald, highlights the connections between lesbians and prostitutes as she argues that the media has “accentuated the bizarre and brainwashed you,” adding, “When you scorn prostitutes and view them as a group apart from the rest of women you are adding another division of the movement that limits the potential strength of women united” (*Atalanta* 12.4, 5). Oswald attempts to generate empathy for women who sell their bodies as she instructs her audience, “Clean up your attitude and start speaking up for the rights of all” (*Atalanta* 12.4, 6). Oswald specifically places blame on the media instead of the more vague and often-evoked concept of “society,” probably because the media was so damaging to lesbians during the Anita Bryant campaign and still fresh in many of the ALFA women’s minds.

Again, it is not enough to feel guilty for perpetuating hurtful attitudes; instead, each woman must re-examine her individual understanding of oppression and reorient toward



sisterhood for all women, irrespective of profession or class, *and* take action. Oswald assumes the voice of a prostitute as she continues her essay:

Women had to organize and educate people to gain understanding and respect. Women had to encourage each other in those difficult times of self-discovery. Your sisters made the struggle easier. I am a prostitute and I am your sister. Please be mine.  
(*Atalanta* 12.4, 5)

As is the case with many newsletter articles, these moments of education include steps that each woman can take individually to make a difference, and they often exhort the organization to do something to take these moments of crit-self-crit beyond raising awareness. In this case, Oswald tells stories about working conditions and safety concerns, and closes by urging the ALFA women to write letters to congress to ask that prostitution be decriminalized and recognized as a legitimate option for employment.

In short, the members wanted to make sure that they were not simply paying lip service to a philosophical value even when its logical translation into everyday practice might seem odd or inconvenient—they attempted to transcend hypocrisy and actually turn their beliefs into concrete realities. This mission for integrity obviously became an ongoing challenge. The ALFA women struggled to develop a consistent philosophy as they worked to give their monetary and emotional support only to inclusive and ethical people and programs. This desire for consistency between ideals and practices worked in a reciprocal way: attention to intentions and thought patterns led to different behaviors, and the attempt to put beliefs into actions led to new awareness at the theoretical level.

In addition to internal critique related to race and class, the ALFA women also became sensitive to the plight of the differently-abled. For example, there was a long exchange in the newsletters when they tried to screen a movie about disability but had problems finding an accessible space that was also friendly to their feminist and lesbian

needs. Maria Dolan wrote a long article that discussed her experiences trying to plan this event, because she had not felt very supported in her attempts to find an adequate space. Dolan explains that she has “come to see the interconnectedness of oppressions” and recently recognized the constant need for vigilance as she admits that she wrongly assumed that it might be enough to be enlightened and well intentioned (*Atalanta* 12.4, 13). In this case, Dolan’s words are persuasive because she begins by explaining what she has learned from participating in ALFA, and then she admits her personal flaw in failing living up to her ideals. But as she continues, we see that this article is not just a confession or an attempt to raise awareness about a single issue—rather, she claims that other ALFA women have also been short-sighted, and her frustration is apparent as she questions the other members’ commitment to the values they claim to share. Dolan appeals to the organization’s avowed mission and vision as she continues:

Do we really care about the accessibility issue, or is it only ‘liberal guilt’ that even forces us to pay it lip service? Is participant sisterhood for all womyn, or only the fully ambulatory, the middle class, the white girls, etc.?

I believe that it is the community’s responsibility, as ‘self-avowed’ feminist, to understand that we make decisions around these questions daily (hourly) and to finally own that. If we’re really interested in changing the world, then we need to speculate on what that world will actually look like, who will be allowed to populate it, and under what conditions.

(*Atalanta* 12.4)

In this case, Dolan’s letter prompted the women to think more about access and inclusion, as well as their underlying philosophies and practices. This article prompted the women to focus on this issue in a more long-term way, and, as the letter quoted at the beginning of this chapter indicates, ALFA’s example on this issue impacted other lesbian feminist organizations across the country.

Others who were oppressed in different ways shared many of the difficulties that the ALFA women encountered as a result of their gender and sexual orientation. Even though the specific experiences were often different—even though oppression manifests itself in a variety of ways and is dependent upon context and history—the ALFA women highlighted patterns that they had in common with others. To continue with the differently-abled issue for example, a book review of *Voices from the Shadows: Women with Disabilities Speak Out*, by Gwyneth Ferguson Matthews (Women's Educational Press, Toronto, Ontario, 1983) points out the ways in which disabled women, like lesbians, have had limited access to information about sex, are often seen as “different” or “apart” and as a result become lonely and have difficulty finding jobs (*Atalanta* 12.8, 13). The author also reminds the ALFA women how those who are already suffering one kind of oppression also often suffer economically: “Read the April/May '84 issue of ‘Lesbian Connections,’ ‘Your Attitudes Are My Greatest Handicap,’ and you will find out that the median income for disabled women is just above zero. [...] you'll realize just how expensive it is to be disabled” (*Atalanta* 12.8, 13). In such articles, we see the ALFA women working through questions of ethics: they sought to create a more inclusive world that might be based on self-knowledge, empathy for the struggles of others, and respect for individual needs and preferences rather than conformity to one system that owed its power to a legacy of domination and exploitation.

Criticism and self-criticism played a critical role in helping the members hold themselves accountable to their expressed beliefs. Even though the ALFA women were not themselves immune to the sexist, homophobic, racist, ableist and classist ideas and thoughts that they had inherited from the culture in which they were raised, they knew that if they

aimed toward a utopian world in their mission statement and professed beliefs, that at least they might be able to recognize and hold themselves to account for the times during which they slipped. By engaging in the process of crit-self-crit in the newsletters, they overcame many unproductive thought patterns and trained themselves to think in new ways. Through the process of attending to identity in order to better fight on behalf of those marginalized because of their race, socioeconomic class, or disabilities, ALFA women were able to transcend “socially encoded scripts of identity” and “phobic energies around race, sexuality, gender, and various other identificatory distinctions” (*Disidentifications* 6). Even though the newsletter discussions were often painful and divisive, the collective and self-aware level at which they took place helped the organization become more flexible and consistent. As a result, the women were also able to better put into practice what they professed to believe.

### **Subverting Patterns of Oppression: Local Coalitions, Intersectional Harms**

During the 1980s, the ALFA women refined their ability to fight against oppression by identifying the underlying pattern of strategies used by those in power. By understanding the rhetorical strategies that were used, consciously or not, to maintain the traditional hierarchies of power—to conserve the old order, to maintain order—the women of ALFA sought to align with others who also desired an end to the boomerang cycle of oppression. During this period of backlash against the gains made during the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the women found allies and worked within a larger context. Grounded and self-sufficient now, with a solid group foundation, the members strengthened their connection with coalition causes, both old and new. The women renewed their national fight against homophobia alongside gay men and health workers throughout the region, continued

their commitment to protecting the environment and protesting the prison industrial complex, and they allied with local gay men, black and white, to fight against the racism in Atlanta. During the course of their work with each of these causes, ALFA members documented in the newsletter the ways in which local concerns are not only national, but also international concerns, and they developed strategies to transcend intersectional harms.

The women of ALFA took a bottom-up approach to building theory in their newsletters, taking what worked and discarding what didn't. They were promiscuous in their approach to identifying patterns and developing strategies to fight back: in *Atalanta*, they discussed ideas from other newsletters with national circulation (such as *Lesbian Connections*), popular and academic theories, educational pamphlets put out by other groups, and even entertainment-oriented books and TV shows.

As the AIDS crisis gained momentum, there arose an obvious need for more information to counter the ubiquitous narratives of hysteria and fear. In the newsletter, the women shared heartbreaking stories and simultaneously provided hope for one another. Often, this sharing came in the form of a few members reporting back to the rest of the organization about conferences or retreats that the women had attended. This kind of sharing worked to validate the feelings of other women working in health care industries and to translate these emotions to others whose support would be needed to help mitigate the ever-present challenge of burn-out. ALFA member Julia S. writes:

I didn't realize how much I needed to talk with other gays in health care—we are (most of us) isolated and closeted in our work places. We co-exist daily with racism, sexism, and homophobia. We see people mistreated by a health care system that fails to respect the rights and dignity of the ill. We feel powerless to change these abuses, and may gradually become insensitive to them. However, through sharing at the gay conference, I was reminded of what we **can** do: We can educate our colleagues and we can advocate for our rights and for our patients' rights even if we can't come out professionally.

Reports such as this demonstrate that even though the mainstream public discourse and behavior of our political leaders ignored the widespread need for better health care and compassion<sup>15</sup>, women such as Julia S. could at least take action. At the same time, other *Atalanta* readers could empathize and know that they weren't alone if they were feeling overwhelmed or helpless. They worried about becoming too numb or resigned to letting the pain take over instead of actually working to change things. Reports such as these helped to channel energy from conferences and retreats, where there was a strong critical mass of like-minded queers together at work on one specific issue, and bring that energy back home to others who would need to first understand and empathize, and then be uplifted and able to work for change.

The newsletter thus became a monthly reminder of the old unfinished social justice problems, the new symptoms and current crises, as well as the more positive future the ALFA women envisioned. The members' writing helped remind them that even though "it was hard to hold on to optimistic historical narratives during the darkest days of the AIDS crisis" (Love 158), they could still focus their attention toward the future they were working toward, which bolstered the organization's collective energy and offered inspiration and support to those who needed it when they needed it. *Atalanta* often featured stories of heartbreak followed by inspirational "let's take action in this way," but it was also more complex than that, because the social justice problems continually evolved—the strategies of

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<sup>15</sup> According to Gould, during the early and mid-1980s, the media hysteria continued to reflect and reinforce "discourses that equated homosexuality and homosexuals with disease and perversion" while the national government "was displaying monumental indifference to the epidemic" and "legislatures were focused less on addressing the needs of people who were sick than on proposing and enacting repressive laws, including calls for quarantine. The grief, fear, and overall trauma in lesbian and gay communities was enormous" (60-61).

those who wanted to maintain the machine of oppression kept changing, and so the ALFA women continued to experiment with new strategies.

Who was a part of the local oppression machine? It was a multifaceted machine that included the traditional institutions that in theory are supposed to work *for* people instead of against them. In one telling example, we see a three-prong approach from the police, big business, and religious institutions. The police targeted gay men who were trying to distribute information and knowledge about gay culture in an above ground way. They arrested men working at Christopher's Kind, a gay bookstore in midtown Atlanta, and charged them with "selling obscene materials" (*Atalanta* 12.7, 3). The ALFA members, working from an underground part of town and in a way that was essentially invisible to police, didn't face this same sort of censorship, since lesbian women from this time most often distributed much their knowledge via self-produced newsletters such as *Atalanta*.

Even though they might not be reaching as many people as more visible gay men's bookstores such as Christopher's Kind, The ALFA women were allied with the men and spreading the stories of what was happening to the male gay community when they attempted an above ground strategy. In the case of Christopher's Kind (CK), the men were arrested three times within the course of two months because they were selling sex magazines, one of which might be seen as "hardcore," to plain clothes cops (*Atalnata* 12.7, 3). Lorraine wrote about their story as she called her ALFA women to arms. She explains that "CK is a bookstore, not a porn shop" and goes on to describe the simultaneous (and, she indicates, perhaps not coincidentally so) attempt to suppress information about gays from yet another source—Southern Bell Yellow Pages, which "refused to print the ad which has the words lesbian and gay in its copy. The YP sent a letter to CK refusing the ad on the basis of their

‘policy’ to not print ads of homosexual groups or businesses” (*Atalanta* 12.7, 3). Lorraine explains:

It seems that such ads are offensive to some of their other advertisers—especially since ‘Christopher’s Kind’ comes right after ‘Christian...’ in the directory. Seems to me it’s time for ALFA to address this kind of harassment and outright homophobia. Can we afford to remain silent?

(*Atalanta* 12.7, 3)

Without actually coming out and saying that the religious organizations in the area were also working to oppress through repressing information about gays, Lorraine indicts them alongside the Southern Bell Yellow Pages and the police. The women reading her story see that when gays try to distribute information in a more visible way, they face a multi-tiered attack from government, businesses, and religious institutions. If the machine of oppression works in a collaborative way, the oppressed must do the same, she implies with her question “Can we afford to remain silent?”

ALFA women used the newsletter to rally against intersectional harms and shifting strategies of dominance by returning to their ongoing causes and coalitions in order to provide updates about which strategies they are using and why. These updates helped even inactive women keep up with the cause, follow along with the action, and they also provide an ongoing narrative that features successes, failures, and ideas for future moves. For example, Lorraine provides several updates about the Atlanta Anti-Discrimination Project, which was formed by a group of men in Atlanta called Black & White Men Together (BWMT). During the previous year, Lorraine explains, BWMT had successfully lobbied to pass ordinances against the race-based discrimination that had been taking place at various bars in the city. In order to monitor compliance, BWMT requested help from local allies by sending “a letter to 17 lesbian & gay groups in Atlanta asking them for input and inviting



them to send representatives to scheduled meetings. ALFA has been the only group to respond by attending meetings so far” (*Atalanta* 12.4, 11). Lorraine commends ALFA’s commitment and continues with a list of actions to be accomplished, outlining strategies that emphasize raising awareness, educating others, and intervening when necessary:

Our first plan of attack is, obviously, to obtain simple compliance with the posting requirements of the ordinances. The next step is to set up a mechanism through which individuals in the community can register complaints about continuing discriminatory practices. Ads in *Cruise* (the only ‘gay press’ in Atlanta at this point, other than *Atalanta*, of course) as well as fliers distributed to all lesbian/gay groups will advise us of our rights, and the bar’s duty, and give a phone number to call with info on non-compliance and instances of discrimination.

(*Atalanta* 12.4, 11)

The article reminds us that because ALFA seeks to end all kinds of discrimination, it has been important for the group to step up as an ally by helping hold the city accountable. One way they have agreed to help, Lorraine explains, is by letting the ALFA house number be used as the hotline on Friday nights between 8 and 11 pm (*Atalanta* 12.4, 11). Another update on the project, four months later, describes how some bars have begun enforcing a “quota system” in order to limit entrance to “a certain number of Black people or women,” at which point “triple carding” and other practices are being used “to deny further entrance” (*Atalanta* 12.8, 7). Such updates helped encourage, remind, educate, and involve the women of the organization at the local level as it also spread their impact and strategies beyond their own community.

How did the ALFA women pick who to ally with and when? During the 80s, their newsletter reveals a pattern for picking causes. ALFA women write in the newsletter about how they were working to help solve global and intersectional problems in a local and coalition-based way. The pattern includes examples such as above, insofar as they chose to support local people traveling in a similar direction, oriented against discrimination and

oppression of all kinds, and they also picked causes and groups who are targeted by multiple powerful institutions. They saw how they could easily be targeted in the same way and recognized that it was worth a fight and spreading awareness. They chose to support causes that were overlooked and ignored by mainstream people, in order to raise awareness about those who were invisible. They supported causes affecting the largest number of people and chose based on the “seriousness of the situation,” as in the case of their alliance with the Community for Creative Non-Violence, who protested the policies of the Reagan administration by sponsoring a month long “Harvest of Shame” to draw attention to the lives of the poor and the homeless (*Atalanta* 12.7, 4). ALFA women focused their work on causes that impacted people on multiple axes, identifying areas where the harm worked in an intersectional way. So they chose to fight the kinds of oppression that caused the most widespread harm, in the most serious ways. Even though the organization chose to fight for causes closely allied with their own, they also oriented queerly, celebrating and embracing difference, working with others who had empathy for all living people and nature as well.

The example of one woman’s plea that ALFA work for the Women’s Peace Encampment in Aiken, South Carolina pulls together these intersecting axes. As the writer explains why the ALFA women should support this cause, we especially see how the global is local, and we also receive some insight into the way the ALFA women promiscuously connected various causes that might seem relatively unrelated. The report in the newsletter about the Women’s Peace Encampment begins by providing some important context. They came together “with pine trees and crickets in protest against the operation of the Savannah River Plant which produces 95% of all plutonium and tritium used in nuclear weapons built in the U.S. It all starts here: the death blood of every insane nuclear weapon built comes from

this place in our backyard” (*Atalanta* 12.8, 2). The article emphasizes the way in which international concerns need local solutions as it links the environment to women and the fight for peace. The writer explains that like “our sisters at Greenham Common, Seneca Falls, Camp Crab, and angry women everywhere, we need to begin to speak and act against the SRP and against every kind of violence sanctioned by societies from which a woman’s perspective has too long been absent” (*Atalanta* 12.8, 2). In order to help the ALFA women see why this cause might deserve their attention, the writer explains that causes such as this one have historically been women’s causes in multiple cultures and countries, and so it thus aligns with the organization’s professed interests.

As the article continues, it stresses the way in which the Savannah River Plant has also affected the local community’s drinking water at the same time as the protest has brought together a wide variety of people who share strategies and stories and experiences. The writer shares the strategies as she also explains that she has gained some personal value from her work with the peace encampment:

We have vigils at the main gate of the plant. We listen to women from South Africa and Nicaragua, we listen to each other talk about racism, endangered wood storks, anti-semitism, dreams, militarism, and magic. We go swimming, we sing, we get up with the sun to meet 14,000 workers with signs and theatre. We separate ourselves from a society that threatens to kill us all in order to confront it and in order to begin, within ourselves to learn new ways of doing things.

(*Atalanta* 12.8, 2)

The eloquent words pull together international perspectives and reveal how protesting nuclear weapons unites connected causes (from endangered wood storks to preventing violence and global destruction) and allied people, while it also appears to have been a restorative and informative venture. It becomes clear that such protests not only raise awareness and fight against oppression, but they also can be a place where feminists can

come together to learn from one another in person and discover new strategies from the mix of people working together in coalitions. Even though every woman who read *Atalanta* obviously could not join in the fight, they can see what others are doing; regional women can look to see if there are similar causes and learn from the Women's Peace Encampment example.

In addition to featuring inspiring words about the collaborative protest work and coalition conference activity, the newsletters also featured confessional letters that were more oriented toward recruiting and educating individual allies. These letters sought to eradicate ignorance by raising awareness and empathy, in hopes that sharing upsetting stories might increase the sense of urgency and motivate individuals politically. Often, these kinds of letters emphasized the small things that the women could do to reach out and support those who are affected and spread word to others. The prison industrial complex is an example of one part of the machine that ALFA women repeatedly discussed because it targets those who are already oppressed in intersectional ways. They also chose this battle because they recognized the way in which the judicial and prison systems rely upon multiple strategies for dominance and unite multiple oppressors. One particularly moving example comes in the form of a letter from Elizabeth C., a political prisoner convicted of “praying on the railroad tracks in front of the Nuclear Train as it made its way through our state” (*Atalanta* 15.9, 1). Her letter is worth dwelling on because it highlights the overlapping issues at stake as it helps the *Atalanta* readers to see how strategies for oppression evolve and grow when they are not prevented. Elizabeth paints a picture of a growing business, a powerful industry that has cropped up in part to replace slavery and punish the already poor and marginalized, all “done in a modern sneaky way” (*Atalanta* 15.9, 1). She doesn't offer solutions, but she speaks of

the power of remembrance and showing support by visiting, listening, and writing letters to those who are imprisoned.

Elizabeth's letter works on three main rhetorical axes: she explains who is experiencing the oppression, tells stories about how they are affected, and she also casts blame on who is responsible. This is a common pattern for such testimonial letters in *Atalanta*. The letter draws the reader's attention to the fact that mainly the institution of prison affects "overwhelmingly the already sorely oppressed": racial minorities, the poor, women, families, children, and lesbians, and she organizes the letter in this order (*Atalanta* 15.9, 1-3). What does the machine of power do to those whom it already oppresses? Intermixed with her descriptions are quotations from letters written by her friends still in prison. The combined effect of their words drive home the point that those who are put in prison face an experience that is dehumanizing on various levels—the prison turns people into property, "chattel property," or as one of the jail doctors described it, "literally 'property of the state'; the separation and sexual assault manipulates your mind; it punishes not just the prisoner but also their families and especially the children (*Atalanta* 15.9, 2-3). Elizabeth draws parallels with the military in her critique as she casts blame, indicting the prison and justice system together with other kinds of institutions, bureaucracies, and industries whose trade is humans, power, and money. She ends her letter on a more personal level and, again following a rhetorical pattern common to such *Atalanta* confessionals, ends with a difficult question that echoes ALFA values:

It is hard for me to have to think about prison long enough to write this letter. I have written hundreds of letters to prisoners this past year and I have had to force myself to do much of it. I cannot blame someone for wanting to distance herself from the whole experience. On the other hand, women prisoners are perhaps the most marginalized group in our society. If we who have been there do not remember, who will?

(*Atalanta* 15.9, 3)

Such letters help remind ALFA members where, how, and why it is important to find the motivation to hold themselves and their allies accountable, even when the machine of oppression appears to be insurmountable. In *Atalanta*, we see ALFA members' attempts to reconcile the individual with the collective and make space for greater overlap, both in theory and practice.

### **Toward a Social Justice Utopia**

The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and 'rational' expectations.

(Muñoz, *Cruising*, 27)

It was through the newsletters that activists mediated the tension between what they were doing locally and the national movement without a national organization. We can see a collective self-aware national movement within the newsletters, and by recording, archiving, spreading political strategies and knowledge, these ladies were able to effect change in an underground way. The ALFA women participated in a kind of negation that was not based on oppositional or identity-based politics. Although the women were never quite able to eradicate the related vocabulary from their discourse, they repeatedly critiqued such sentiments and instead attempted to move beyond such unproductive debates. While they did not refer to their vision as a queer utopia, I find it helpful to think about their philosophy as participating in the act of creating such a reality because the newsletter discussions were often oriented toward articulating a future beyond binary gender and sexual identification categories. Muñoz explains that "there is something queer about the utopian," that we orient queerly when we live within a heteronormative or even within a homonormative reality and

imagine the possibilities for a utopian future that is not limited to “an isolated future for the individual” but instead as “a hermeneutic that wishes to describe a collective futurity, a notion of futurity that functions as a historical materialist critique” (*Cruising* 26).

In order to explain the rhetorical resources available when orienting toward a queer utopian futurity, Muñoz relies in part on Shoshana Felman’s concept of “radical negativity,” which helps us see how we can say “no” to the present without engaging in oppositional politics and without normalizing or attempting to reinforce the pre-existing binaries. Instead, we can envision a world in which we transcend a “binary logic of opposition” wherein “the negative becomes the resource for a certain mode of queer utopianism” (Muñoz, *Cruising*, 13). By orienting toward a queer utopian vision—through a process of radical negation—we can sidestep unproductive negativity and instead produce new knowledge and options for rhetorical action that moves beyond stagnant oppositional or identity-based strategies. This kind of transcendence involved a naïve belief in a queer utopian world in which everyone understands what is ethical and tries to match their actions to their beliefs while holding one another accountable and propping up the ones who are falling, instead of letting the movement burn out or accept defeat. The newsletter helped them to accomplish these goals, this high standard.

Through the newsletter, the ALFA women sometimes revealed themselves to be all too human in their weaknesses, imperfect and unable to always transcend binary or categorical thought, but they were brave enough to try and become self-aware. That is, they helped one another become aware of their collective weaknesses through *Atalanta*, which also helped to provide strength through testimony. In *Atalanta* we see them trying to navigate that line between the ideal world and the recalcitrance of the real one, trying to find a

balance. And again, even though they did not use these terms, they anticipated scholars such as Muñoz in their critique of “pragmatic gay politics,” arguing that we might instead see “queerness as horizon” in order to revive “concepts such as freedom that have been withered by the touch of neoliberal thought and gay assimilationist politics” (*Cruising* 32). Keeping this framework in mind helps us understand the evolution of the organization of ALFA and the activists’ vision of a future that continually exists on the horizon and yet is perpetually out of reach. Queerness as horizon enables an engagement with the present, both at the level of theory and practice, through epistemological and ontological discourse that pushes beyond present realities. Such discourse is both revolutionary and pragmatist, and in the case of the ALFA women, took the form of internal debates about the way in which their socio-political desires might be put into action in an everyday way, both in terms of culture and politics.

In *Atalanta* I find a redemption of radicalism—these women were experimenting with ways to break down the old in a productive and creative way that involved a simultaneous building a more honest and respectful future in which all humans can be free from dominance. In the newsletters we can see how critique can be constitutive of the new, we can see the defeat, the frustration, the reminders, and a narrative history to help others find their way in the present and the future. I hope that I have provided some insight into how alternative media outlets such as *Atalanta* worked to ground and support organizations like ALFA as they worked within constantly shifting conditions to rewrite our broader socio-cultural rhetorical scene. In their newsletter, this long-lived organization provided a model that should be helpful to consider in the future as we think about ways to move social justice causes forward in revolutionary yet pragmatic ways.



## Chapter VIII

### **Conclusion: Rhetorical Strategies and Actions for Political Education and Social Justice**

Below, I outline the ten main strategies and ten pragmatic actions or processes for social change that this group of lesbian feminists taught me. When I presented seven of these strategies to my writing group, they asked me, “So are these *your* strategies or the strategies of ALFA?” Honestly, I don’t know who has ownership over these strategies, and I don’t care. The process of writing this dissertation taught them to me. I wrote them as I was trying to sort through what I wanted my words to show, even though I wasn’t sure how to fit them into the actual work itself. The following lists are my understanding of ALFA’s pragmatic-utopian process of collective invention as they advocated for social justice (freeing all people from the forces of dominance and possession). While some of them were ALFA’s explicit strategies that I can easily provide evidence for, some are more ephemeral or arose as a result of the crucible of turning around the ALFA documents and other research in my mind.

In some ways, these conclusions are for me the most tangible result of this project, and so I share them here for anyone else who might be interested and put them to good use. The following strategies are what I have learned as a result of writing this dissertation, influenced by what I have learned during graduate school, what I was taught by my committee members and others in the academy and outside of the academy, as I buried myself in my archival material and tried to empathize with it, as I experimented with my dissertation’s concepts in both my personal and academic life.

As prerequisites for the following invention strategies and actions/processes, I suggest that the following two qualities are necessary:

1. *Attitude. Orientation. Ethos, credibility, ethics. Intention, tone, style.* Image plus Intentions. *Maat.* Your intentions must be based in good faith, not ego-oriented, not tainted by *ressentiment*. You must genuinely want to communicate, to understand and be understood, to go beyond good and evil, beyond blame and judgment.
2. *Timing. Grace. Agility.* The concept of *kairos*. Attempt to forecast opportunity, remembering that there are many openings, it is never too late to do the right thing, and the best arguments are timeless because time is cyclical and history repeats itself.

## **10 Collective Rhetorical Inventive Strategies**

1. *Work from a supportive community base.* If there isn't a supportive community already in place, find one or create one. It should be oriented toward creating and inventing. The community should be progressive and oriented toward the future, yet it must honor and carry forward traditions, rituals, histories, and stories that continue to be relevant insofar as they serve human needs and cultivate spiritual health and wellness. It should be protected from conditions that arise out of ego-based self-protective mechanisms, materialism, possession, and dominance. It should be oriented around the concepts of productivity, pragmatism, patience, and peace. It should be positive and affirming. It should strive to be perfect, but will not always be. It should be idealist, but compassionate. It should use mentorship. Mix it up with diverse perspectives—create a space in which this can happen, an environment that is truly welcoming of many different perspectives—and exchange diverse

perspectives, gather together and share. It should be flexible and able to adapt to changing conditions. It should foster the exchange of stories, research, and ethics. Pollinate.

2. *Acknowledge and embrace difference, but emphasize commonalities and connections.* Work in symbiotic solidarity with people whose perspectives are radically different from your own, but who are oriented in the same direction. Remember that we are all humans and so have some very basic things in common, no matter how different we may seem. The differences are advantages we can learn from. Pay attention to communication—different vocabularies are difficult to work with so there must be translators around. Try to use fresh language that doesn't carry ideological baggage, vocabularies that can accommodate the pragmatic need to communicate meaningfully across multiple audiences. Pay attention to the words that have become too loaded to be productive, words that indicate ownership and ego forces, words have been colonized by forces of power and outlived their usefulness. Think before you speak or write, trying to take care with the words.

3. *Listen.* Listening is the key to empathy, building a creative collective community, and communicating and sharing information in a dialogic way. Tell your own stories to cultivate mutual understanding and to help them see your perspective so that you can be a better listener. That is, say back to them what you hear as you listen. Figure out how and why other people are misunderstood and talk about the effects, consequences, and solutions. Do not make assumptions that other people make and remember how insensitivity hurts. Remember what Maya Angelou says about when people show you who they are to believe them. Listening involves observing and watching as much as it does hearing words. Tell other people's stories: help your listeners to feel other people's stories, help cultivate

understanding. Make others empathize. Make them want catharsis and forgiveness. Be a translator for those who cannot speak to one another or cannot speak to power.

4. *Research. Educate. Work. Do your homework. Be a mentor and mentee.* Back up the research with cold hard facts that are put context with the relevant supporting details, keeping the bigger picture in mind. Spread information: raise collective critical consciousness by informing yourself before you spread your information to others and make sure your evaluation process is sound so you don't pass on inaccurate information. Live your knowledge in your personal life and let your personal experience inform your research and education work.

5. *Build a library (physical or virtual: both if possible) of information and keep a record of your work.* Try to archive your work in at least one other space. Create a social media system for exchanging this information. Make sure you have a librarian of some kind, or someone who works like a librarian to organize and sort through all the material and help to make it available to others. Protect the information in the library from forces that seek to destroy it, but share it freely.

6. *Lead by example, in both your personal and professional life.* Model honest and ethical behavior. Look for other examples of ethical leaders. Find people you admire (living or dead) as models and attempt to emulate them in your own way. Act with courage, integrity, and empathy. Think about the perspectives of cab drivers, bartenders, artists, nomads, and gypsies. Three test questions: How would you feel if people could hear your thoughts and read your mind as you interact with them? How would you feel if your actions were made public? How would you feel if you knew that people who know you, or people who you trust and respect, were watching you? But also try not to care what other people

think: know yourself enough that you can drop insecurities. Learn to forgive yourself when you do not live up to your standards or the standards of others so that you cannot be shamed. Examine your beliefs about ethics and consider whether or not your actions line up with your sense of what is virtuous. Try to anticipate the effects of your actions so that you can act with intention and be consistent. Be compassionate and understanding and try to do no harm. Be a good collaborator, colleague, mentor, friend, family, and neighbor who protects and cares for others. Reward positive behavior, ignore (remove your attention) and/or express disappointment with unethical behavior.

*7. Hold people accountable when their actions do not line up with their professed values, mission, ideals, or goals.* Question hypocrisy. We are only as strong as our weakest links, but the forces of domination produce those links, so they also contain the key to unlocking how the system works, how it works, and why it has been working. The behaviors of others rub off onto you, so surround yourself with others whose intentions and actions support your goals, and make sure that they actually follow through on their expressed beliefs. (See no evil, Hear no evil, Speak no evil. Birds of a feather.) Remember that individual people are products of their environments and so as you provide guidance, remember that the Institutions are responsible for producing forces of dominance. Seek to subvert systems that allow people become beings for another and agitate individual people who refuse to acknowledge or hold themselves accountable for enabling that kind of a system to continue. Know when to let go (when they cannot, or when you cannot). Know when to leave unsupportive structures of power in order to find or build ones that will be more creative, productive, and compassionate.

8. *Comedy, Satire, and Laughter.* Say back what you hear in an exaggerated but true way. Speak the truth to the forces of power in a way that highlights the irrationality of the logic of the power. Laugh and make others laugh at the surprising ironies and ridiculous truths. Use the power of reversal (put things into perspective with metaphors and by pointing out incongruities). Visual illustrations are really effective here. Cultivate a counter culture.

9. *Civil disobedience, good cop, Bad cop.* Tag team the oppressive forces with simultaneous attacks from within the power system and outside of the power system. (Is it possible to get outside the power system? Probably not, but get enough outside of it.) Fight with rhetoric, love, and understanding on the one hand and try to avoid the pragmatic reality that there is potential for violence. We can do this the easy way, or we can do this the difficult way. Martyrdom can work if the lamb is ethically pure and if the story is told in the right way: self-immolation (fight fire with fire), self-starvation, let them crucify you. Make sure not to confuse martyrdom strategies with unproductive victim-mentality and remember that it only works if the lamb is seen as ethically pure and if it happens in a publicized way.

10. *Occupation.* Occupy, inhabit, instigate change from within, as a germ, a rhizome, and a sprout (maybe like a virus? but not as a parasite). Be political with your presence or be covert. Both work. Do not confuse occupation with colonization. Poke and prod and agitate but do not dominate.

### **Actions and Processes**

1. *Recognize that there is a problem and inform others.* Recruit others in this understanding and orient them by educating politically. Work in a way that is utopian in vision, pragmatic in practice.

2. *Find a community and coalesce around a few “strategically essential” (Gayatri Spivak’s concept) identity categories.* Make the community diverse, and make it so that everyone should feel welcome. There are roles for all different kinds of people, although there will inevitably be some people who will feel less comfortable, depending on what your strategically essential identity categories are. But it is a good test for ethics, to see if your philosophy matches up with your practices.
3. *As your group politically educates itself and others, work to develop cultural literacy.* Help others see that as long as they are subject to forces of dominance and possession, we are not able to live free, self-determined lives. Communicate that while there is a need to self-protect, cultural literacy political education is the only solution that does not reproduce the forces of dominance and possession. The oppressed should never become the oppressors. This is, of course, impossible, until we are all able to live free and self-determined lives with intention, so figure out your subject position in your respective environment, and figure out who *you* oppress and try not to do it and it will help you educate better.
4. *Describe the problem in the most accurate terms you can, while avoiding name-calling.* Get to the ROOT (root, as in radical) of the problem by connecting your understanding of your oppression and the oppression of others to real lives and real stories. Try to remain in the concrete, because abstractions are a problem. And yet that is the problem with language. So try to make your language fresh, while remaining communicable. Some words turn into name-calling if they are used often enough that they bring along baggage that enables pre-judgments. Look for underlying patterns that describe the problem as you figure out whose stories to tell.

Anyone on the margins and on the edges, anyone who is the most oppressed by the particular social conditions provide the key to the problem. Pay special attention to people whose basic human needs are not being served. (People who are pathologized, shamed or blamed, or otherwise deemed “unworthy” of society because of their “choices.” This can include people who are without homes and jobs, non-legal immigrants, criminals and prisoners, underground artists, the “mentally ill,” people who are being killed for some reason, or who die unnecessary deaths like from addictions or suicides. There are so many.) Recruit the people with the power within the systems to see that their well-being depends on helping educate. Speak the truth to the power in their terms, gently, helping them to see how their own self-interest is involved. Nobody is free. It can be difficult to see how you are an oppressor, but this is where displacing the guilt onto the system comes in handy. Because that is the key to forgiveness, because guilt is unproductive.

5. *Spread your knowledge around to everyone you meet in different ways, depending on your subject position within your context.* You never know who is connected to who, and you never quite know who your audience is, so act with ethical integrity, trying to live your life according to your utopic vision of the possible. When people call you out for your inevitable hypocrisy, blame the system, because none of us are free, but try to act with intention and be able to explain your choices to others in a way that they don’t take offense because their choices might be different. Do NOT judge other people, but have a sense of justice. Spread it around in your personal life, work life, etc. This can be called outreach. (Do we get the world we want, or do we get the world we deserve?)



6. *Reinvent your group and yourself constantly, putting it in fresh terms before the old ones become stale.* Keep moving so the forces of dominance and possession cannot trap you. Move around from group to group and place to place and enable your group to be flexible and shuffle people in and out of it. You want to be contagious, but not reproduce. Sometimes a stable group made of the right mix of people can really get things accomplished too. This is the committee structure. Be flexible.
7. *Keep a record of your work, whether that is in social media, archives, libraries, etc.* Keep your record for your own community reflection and for the benefit of others. This can be a “collective journal” or newsletter, or some other kind of way of developing culture, sharing knowledge through networks, and leaving records for other humans. Think about future generations, so you move humans as a whole closer to the utopic vision. This means that what happens in early childhood and early education is really important and where you could sink the most resources.
8. *Work symbiotically with other groups, remembering how group identification ultimately does more to divide us than unite us, even though strategic separatism might be necessary for self-protective reasons.* The goal is for humans to be united and to eventually eliminate the forces of possession and dominance, things that make us “beings for another.” Work with other people oriented in the same direction, although it is difficult to discover who’s who, because the incentives are all messed up. Pay attention to people who reward “good” with their attention and ignore “bad” by removing their attention.
9. *Within your own group, encourage confidence.* If people have confidence, they will be less likely to be clingy, needy, or otherwise unproductive because they are blinded

by their own insecurities or excessive ego-focus. Be compassionate, but remember that cultural literacy and political education are the solutions. Confidence comes from only rewarding things that have been “earned,” although that is a tricky one, too. You must respect and love others, while also holding people accountable for their actions. Aim for excellence, but forgive yourself and others. If you shoot for the stars, you might be able to orbit.

10. *There are many ways into knowledge. Pass it around. Be communicable, promiscuous, weird, and contagious.* Make sure your community’s collective attitude stays positive and healthy, because these things are contagious, too. That means you have to encourage a culture that laughs, is able to be spiritual, and helps you meet other basic human needs, like food, water, drink, sex, personal-work balance, etc. Pay attention to how people in various communities spread around ethical information. Small talk and repeated phrases. “Gossip” or storytelling conveyed in conjunction with how people feel about the gossip or storytelling. Pay attention to what gets passed around and how and by whom, looking for patterns.

## **Epilogue**

I would like to close with a story. It is a personal-academic story of my process of writing and sharing the work of my dissertation, which is about a social movement organization consisting of radical lesbian feminists who called themselves ALFA. It is also a more informal reflection on my method and approach. I tell this particular story in part because I spent so much of the time that I should have been writing my dissertation instead working through solutions to the institutional critique that my dissertation contains. As I

wrote, I asked myself, how could I navigate this system of higher education with my personal integrity intact? What compromises was I willing to make and not make? I spent so much time working on figuring out how I could help to transform the system of higher education and yet I don't have enough power within it to do anything about it except continue to try to play by the rules and just be successful within the system but it exhausted me, burned me out, and impacted my work. I am not alone. Although my story is a story about radical queers, this story could be told by anyone doing work that challenges established traditions and norms of the institution of higher education. I hope that my reflection here might imply possible directions for future scholarship. I hope that in the future, we might make as much room for big picture creative thinking as we do for the more specialized work. I hope that in the future, we might re-structure the institution of higher education so that it maintains high standards while also encouraging more interdisciplinary cooperation and fostering more progressive thought. I hope that in the future, we might actually succeed in building the social utopia the ALFA women oriented toward.

When I was a little girl, I knew I wanted to be a writer.

My desire to be a writer also led to a desire to understand how life worked, and led me to my college majors in English and philosophy. I learned about the lives of other writers and philosophers I related to and wanted to emulate. I tried to look for the patterns underlying what I saw and was taught. One day my creative writing teacher said the advice given him by another writer was, "To be a good writer, you must do three things: (1) you must listen to a lot of jazz, (2) you must smoke a lot of pot, and (3) you must fuck a lot of women." This was the process that he had gone through to get the improvisational, artistic, creative, and human knowledge that helped *him* become a good writer.

I eventually came to latch onto the two seemingly irreconcilable pieces of advice that intuitively felt true to me: “Write what you know,” and “The best writers can write about what they don’t know, as though they knew.” I wanted to find that place where the imagination meets the artistic desire to tell true lies, the ability to convey universal truths gained through experience yet tempered by the understanding that all truth is subjective and thus the idea of Truth is also a fiction. I decided that I would try to *live* what I wanted to write about, to seek out experiences that were foreign to my knowledge in order to better be able to write about them. I made personal decisions that I otherwise wouldn’t have made, seeking out experiences I otherwise wouldn’t have sought, in order to write about them.

It was around that time I stumbled upon an important epiphany: my desire to choose experiences just so I could write about them would also change me as a person, would impact who I *was*. When I did realize it, I decided, well, I’ve made it then, I have become a *writer-philosopher* as the most primary aspects of my identity.

I would try to be invisible as a person—a channel, a medium. I wondered if this was what Roland Barthes called “the death of the author.” While I was in grad school, I came to the intellectual understanding that I had no essential self, nothing holding me together except for the culmination of my experiences as I traveled through the world, my mind held together only by my reminder to myself that I was a human, that I had a genetic inheritance and an environmental influence that had created me. My sense of self became my relational subject position among other humans that varied depending on my surroundings. In rhetorical terms, *who* I *was* depended on my audience. The psychological community might call it insane. They might pathologize it as bi-polar, obsessive-compulsive. They might say I have a “borderline personality,” or call it schizophrenic. It has disturbed the people around me

sometimes, who saw how different I was in different contexts and who struggled with wanting to define my “identity,” which was strategically essentialized for communicative and interaction-based purposes, to varying degrees of success. I once tried to explain to my mom that I was a writer-philosopher, that I didn’t believe I had a “soul.” These words upset her because she intuitively felt them to be untrue. These words were also inaccurate, because I do feel a sense of personal integrity, my “personality,” an intuitive knowledge of my subjectivity within the durational flow of time.

Graduate school was incredibly at odds with the intuitive and experiential knowledge that had guided me, even though there were many overlaps. I came to another understanding of my personality as “Extroverted iNtuitive Feeling Perceiver” (or ENFP, or “Advocate”) and realized that was why I had troubles translating myself to other people in the scholarly community. The most difficult aspect to reconcile was what I perceived as the demand that I intellectualize everything, that I explain and analyze things, when what was more “natural” to me was to share myself with others, to intuit, to feel, and to perceive. Deleuze spoke to me with his philosophy, but he wants people to apply his approach, not explain or reproduce him so that didn’t work for translating myself, and he appeared to turn a lot of people off. Foucault spoke to me, and seems to be doing rhetoric-philosophy and was widely valued by the rhetorical community, but I couldn’t figure out how to use him to translate myself either.

Then Jordynn taught me this little key that helped me unlock things intellectually. She connected the concept of creativity, which I wanted to understand better, to “rhetorical invention,” to what Kenneth Burke called “perspective by incongruity.” Rhetoric people, including me, widely respected Kenneth Burke, and yet some people whose intellects I admire also call him intellectually “lazy,” which I have also been misunderstood to be, so

maybe he was my point of connection. I knew that Nietzsche and Bergson, two other philosophers who spoke to me and to Deleuze and to Foucault, had taught Kenneth Burke about this concept, so it seemed like a good place to start. You smash together seemingly irreconcilable things and the paradox, the metaphor that resulted from the ability to see through different lenses revealed surprising overlaps that contained some universal truths. Perspective by incongruity is ultimately impossible—the truths contained within metaphors and paradoxes are as impossible as true empathy, and yet there is something mystically, intuitively, and perceptively real there. If I could figure out what Burke was onto with this, maybe I could be communicable to the academic community.

Perspective by incongruity became my method, had already been my method, but now I knew how to explain it to people who have read Kenneth Burke, and I decided to try to study “perspective by incongruity” itself, as “rhetorical invention.” I was initially interested in individual invention, but Jordynn encouraged me to but take it to the collective level, because that is what feminists value and I am a feminist, and because the gaps in the research reveal that lots of scholars—not only feminists—are interested in how networks work and how groups of people invent together. I liked the challenge of it, too. Even though individual creativity or invention is itself difficult to pin down, it is perhaps more ambitious to figure out how groups invent together.

It was still incredibly difficult for me to reconcile my intuitive, artistic, and experiential approach to life with my understanding of what my “scholarly” or “professional” life demanded—my own intellectual shortcomings, I suppose. My sense of myself as “writer philosopher” was simply too different from my sense of what it meant to be a “scholar,” I

thought. I didn't want to compromise my sense of personal integrity and yet I hadn't been able to find my balance.

After I began writing and understanding my dissertation project, I attracted, or sought out, a girlfriend who was enough like my ALFA women to help me work through its concepts in an intellectual and life manner. Her beliefs were like the ALFA women's beliefs. She was what Kenneth Burke would call a close enough "representational anecdote," and Bill Balthrop had taught me that the search for the right representational anecdote was a key for writing his own dissertation. Rachel was incredibly productive for my work, as Jordynn pointed out. Then I began to feel not challenged enough by her—I had learned what I needed to learn from her, I decided, and I was stressed out about the job market. I broke it off, deciding I didn't have time in my life for her. Then, a combination of life experiences, resulting from her suggestion that my musician artist brother come live with me, pulled me into his artist-musician community. My brother's drummer died of a heroin overdose. He had been given a "hot shot." A sort of preexisting community of people who knew Dave and who had believed in my brother's band began to solidify in an official way in the wake of Dave's death, because everyone who knew him drew closer together in order to heal and to support one another. We intuitively felt the need to protect one another because we knew there was something wrong, that Dave's unnecessary death was a symptom of some problem area we needed to address as a community. We collectively felt responsible for not preventing his death, and we also knew we needed to take care of one another. The timing was horrible, since I was in the middle of applying for jobs, but I felt pulled in. Not only because Dave was my friend, but also because I wanted to help take care of my brother, for whom I felt

responsible since he had only been living with me for about a year and didn't have many close friends beyond his two band-mates, one of whom was now gone.

About the time I popped my head up, which was probably when I should have pulled away from the community, which had begun calling itself "Faders" (spirits, ghosts, we don't exist) I found a reason to stay. The community satisfied a personal need I hadn't been satisfying since coming to grad school. The community was in many ways the perspectival opposite to the academy: it was an underground that functioned off the grid in many ways, an underworld filled with artists, artist lifestyles, and people who artists attract. I also looked around and realized that by studying how the Fader community worked, I could learn more about the ALFA women I had been studying. Our community was similar in many ways to ALFA: it was very diverse and creative, filled with people who had felt marginalized or left out of mainstream culture, or who identified with that feeling, and it developed its own cultural structure. But it was also the perspectival opposite of ALFA as well: whereas ALFA was a lesbian-feminist community, I felt like one of the weaknesses of our Fader community was sexism and homophobia, as I looked around and saw how it was missing lesbians and gay boys, and I struggled with the community as a result. I thought to myself, I can write about ALFA better if I remain in this community in participant-observer role, looking for patterns of overlap and difference between it and my ALFA community, as I worked to explain both to my academic, above-ground community. My method of perspective by incongruity had become triangulated.

Well, I then became very "intimately acquainted" with it. I was a participant-observer to the point where my method of triangulation became difficult to balance. I attracted, or sought out, the member of the community who was really the representative anecdote of how



it was different from my ALFA community and my academic world. I thought this could teach me some things, and it did. And that was what I was trying to explain in my dissertation's introduction and conclusion, which were the first draft of this defense, which I wrote after I finally began to be able to put the process of my approach into words. My dissertation is the result of the imperfection of my negotiation of my utopic vision with the pragmatic realities of my situation. I was developing my approach as I lived it, experimented with it, and wrote through it. The actual product of my dissertation is the result of my imperfect application of my attempt to balance my life with my work as I applied my method. I have come to think of it as a “queer-promiscuous perspective-by-incongruity-triangulation” method. It does not seek to reproduce itself. It probably hopes that it might be contagious.

When I use the word “queer,” I am not limiting its use to LGBTQ people, rather, I mean it in a more radical way, in the way that is most threatening. When I say queer, I mean subversive, different, unknowable, ambiguous, and even self-destructive in many ways. When I use the word “promiscuous,” I don't just mean in the sexual sense of the word, but also in the Deleuzian sense of the concept of “nomadic.” When I use the phrase “queer-promiscuous,” I mean to indicate an orientation toward scholarship that doesn't have an investment in reproducing or prolonging its own self, doesn't have many goals except to be self-determined, free, and consistent—making its ideals match up with its practices. It doesn't care about whether or not it comes across as unruly or misbehaving or inappropriate to others. A queer-promiscuous perspective-by-incongruity-triangulation orientation understands that there are roles for many ways of being, doesn't want to remake other things in its own image, and hates feeling like it is being made over or controlled. It wants a future

in which a wide variety of perspectives coexist and work together symbiotically and in community with others. Such a method wants to “have sex” with lots of different kinds of projects in lots of different ways, to understand the research and concepts on their own terms in order to bring something creative and unique out of the result, to highlight something about the project that the project didn’t even know to be true about itself. It can be a mind-fuck, too. In a good way, but sometimes in an unraveling way. There are many ways into knowledge, many ways to do what I am trying to describe here, without seeking to colonize nor to reproduce. I am trying to describe one option for an attitude toward scholarship that embraces experimentation, a sense of unknown possibility that can only be understood in retrospect, if at all, as it innovates terms for a future world it wants to will into existence and is audacious enough to believe that it can.

Yet, I have come to the conclusion that our current practices of “professionalization” are inherently hostile to a queer approach to scholarship and teaching. When I say professionalization, I mainly mean our hiring, tenure, and promotion practices and the homogenizing values they enforce, although I am also referring to the process that we go through in graduate school to get to the point of applying for a tenure-line job. Of course, this implies that a tenure-line job is the most desirable end of the “professionalization” process. Yet I am not simply referring to these professional practices either: I am also referring to the disciplining features of the process that one must endure simply to earn a PhD, even if an academic job is not the ultimate goal. While the queer world and the professional world need not war with one another—indeed, ideally they would become lovers in academia—they often battle one another instead: where the professionalization process demands “conform,” “be coherent and reader-friendly,” “obey the standardized practices of form and citation,” the

queer impulse screams, “conformity feels constricting, untrue to freedom and originality,” “I want to be ambiguous,” and questions the “standardized practices of form and citation” because they have too often worked to exclude queer approaches. The state of our profession is particularly damaging to queer graduate students and contingent faculty, as well as others who are already vulnerable within the institutional forces of power. A queer or sexually deviant worldview is often misunderstood and accused of various anti-scholarly things by individuals tasked with the enforcing the dominance and possession processes, the disciplining forces of an institution that seeks only to reproduce itself. With the exception of some theorists within the field of English literature and perhaps within the area of the digital and multimodal, the professional world of rhetoric and composition has not been welcoming to queer approaches or research material. While Jonathan Alexander, Charles Morris III, Larry Gross, Gust Yep, Susan Owen, have made more formal arguments about this phenomenon, I feel compelled to add my own voice to the mix. There are more voices silenced, and our collective scholarship continues to feel the consequences.

Initially, the process of writing and sharing my dissertation work was exhilarating. But as time went on, it seemed like the more time I spent trying to help people understand what the ALFA women were trying to do, the more I began to question the value of the project, even though I had received plenty of positive feedback. I still believed in the value of the project and felt like I was doing it justice as I explained it, but a nagging question crept in as a result of my experiences: what if the word *lesbian* turned people off? Was it giving them the misunderstandings I was beginning to encounter? Was my “queer approach” a problem? Was my project too radical?

I wanted to believe this wasn't the case, but the feeling was difficult to quell. Obviously, I was recalling only the negative responses I'd received. The first experience involved a faculty member who I thought could contribute much to my project, but who refused after he discovered what I wanted to write about, even after enthusiastically working with me for hours on my master's thesis. The reasons he gave me implied that because my dissertation was about lesbian feminists who were working in Marxist traditions, he assumed that it would mean that they were using identity-based minority models and that they were anti-men and so I wouldn't be able to write about them in an affirmative Deleuze-informed way. He said, "I cannot help you with this project—I don't have the kind of expertise you need." He also told me, "I think your dissertation will be very successful and that you will get a good job as a result of it." It was a positive departure, truly. But this worry nagged at me: I interpreted his comments (correctly or incorrectly) to mean that he was disappointed in me, that he believed I had made a strategic move to play to the socially liberal guilt of the academy that purportedly to want to know more about the stories and strategies of historically oppressed people, that he thought I had chosen my subject matter for the purposes of a job, and that I had in essence "sold out," chosen my project of the wrong reasons, based on what he thought he knew about how lesbian feminists worked. Maybe he thought I had chosen my project because I was personally invested in it and that would blind my ability to do good scholarship, or that it meant I had chosen it not on the merits of the value it might offer to the academic community. Maybe he was just too busy. I don't think I took it personally.

I tried not to take it personally when, on the way home from the last *feminisms* and rhetoric conference I attended, at the airport, a certain woman who shall not be named got

into a discussion with me which turned into a very long lecture from her about why she thinks that “sexuality” should not be an topic for discussion either in scholarship or in the classroom, because she is a mother, but she leaves that at home in her private life, and it shouldn't be any different for queer scholars either. I like to think I'm a reasonable person, so I wanted to make sure I was hearing her correctly. I asked, “I'm just trying to make sure I'm hearing you right: So you're saying that sexual orientation and having a queer perspective ‘doesn't matter’ or ‘isn't important’ in any way?” I thought that she would clear things up for me, but instead she said, “Yes, it's ‘irrelevant’ because...” And at this point I really couldn't hear anything more that she said, because I was just replaying the conversation in my head as she continued to talk and I heard the words “doesn't matter,” “isn't important,” and “irrelevant” on repeat in my head so I just started crying right there as she continued to talk. I felt so shocked and in disbelief that here she was a feminist, and we'd been talking about the value of feminist perspectives the whole time at the conference that I couldn't understand how she wouldn't see the connections and obvious alliances between a feminist and a lesbian perspective. It was very awkward then, and I didn't know what to say because I thought that if I said anything it would just be out of anger and wouldn't get us anywhere, at which point my colleague and ally Risa Applegarth spoke up and tried to say what I might have said. I was so grateful for that. Then Ann George, who was also witness to this particular incident, turned to me and said, “I think that you shouldn't have to feel like it's on you to make this case—it should be people like me who need to help figure out what resources might be needed and figure out how to go about doing this stuff.” Which was really nice. But I was beginning to see that even when I perceived myself among feminists and others who should be allies, it wasn't necessarily the case that they were working in solidarity with a queer

approach. Rather, it seemed that they were threatened by it or by what it revealed about them and they appeared to desire to squash it. I was really troubled by the whole thing and thought to myself, “but it *is* on me to make the case, because I have to do so if people are to understand the importance of my project and its scholarly contributions.” I also thought to myself, apparently other people were not already making the case for me, although my experience had just shown me that some could and would stand in solidarity.

I began to notice the subtle critiques from academics that were less insidious or obviously homophobic but still related to some doubt about the legitimacy or the contribution of my project. Maybe it’s just me, but I think that some of these critiques are a result of people who would like to think they aren’t homophobic being distracted by the lesbian content of the analysis and who therefore miss the point about how incredibly persuasive and creative these women had to be merely to organize and do anything at all, much less keep going for twenty-two years after years of fighting the disappointment and the daily drain of oppression because of their subject position as lesbians and feminists in the South during this time. Obviously, I had internalized other people’s apathy or antipathy regarding the value of lesbians or feminists or lesbian feminists and their persuasive strategies as subject material. Often, when I talked about my project to people both inside and outside of the academy, they went ahead and assumed I was a lesbian, even though I most often translate myself as bisexual. That’s fine, I thought to myself. It’s only a problem if people mistakenly assume that I’m only interested in doing scholarship about lesbians.

I know that perhaps the biggest reason why I began to internalize the critiques was because of the homophobic experiences I’d experienced in my personal life, as I went through the difficult process of discovering which of my friends and family held the beliefs I

wanted to believe they didn't, and seeing how that sometimes irreparably tainted our relationship. Perhaps the most traumatic experience occurred at a family reunion, a space where I decided I wanted to be able to be open. Maybe I would be able to bring my girlfriend there the next year. I wanted her to see it—this beautiful place in rural Idaho where my great-grandparents had homesteaded. I hadn't been there for a while, cloistered away in grad school, and it was really great to be back. I wanted to be able to talk about my writing—my work—freely, and I wanted to be able to talk about my love—my girlfriend—as freely as they discussed their own partners. Most of them knew I had a girlfriend, but everyone was trying not to talk about it, except for my siblings and cousins who knew me the best. The unspoken rhetorical message was clear: I was expected not to talk about it. Others were asked about their relationship partners; I was not asked. I was not ashamed of it and one of my cousins and I were having a conversation during which I used the word “gay” and unfortunately, my other cousin's nine year-old daughter overheard me say the word “gay” and she looked up at me in shock and said, “Gay is BAD.” I asked her why she thought that, and she said it was because her parents told her so, and I prodded her why and she said, “because my mom and dad say it's wrong.” I asked her why and she said, “because boys go with girls and girls go with boys and boys and boys don't go together and girls and girls don't go together.”

I told her, “I'm gay. Well, I'm half-gay. I'm bisexual.” This revelation was difficult for her to reconcile because she had been following me around and looking up to me. She asked what that meant and I told her it meant that I had a girlfriend. She was the *only* person, then, who asked me about my girlfriend and what she was like and so I told her. I wasn't trying to indoctrinate her or teach her anything. I simply refused to lie about my reality or

cover it up. I told my mom about it because I something told me it would perhaps cause trouble. What I didn't know was that her parents had been homeschooling them in order to protect them from "subversive ideas." My mother was ashamed of me on their behalf and didn't want to ruffle feathers or cause conflict. She yelled at me, "why don't you just *shut up about it?*" I told her, "I don't ask you to 'shut up about Dad,'" and there was some crying involved. My sister, who is also a mother, gave me a look that told me I should have acted differently, adding, "people get really protective about their kids."

Then I faced my cousin's wrath. Apparently, the girl's brother had told their parents and he was furious. He is a big guy and he got into my face, wagging a finger in it as he screamed at me, and I don't remember everything he said, but I remember the exact words that hurt the most: I had "stolen her innocence," because "she didn't need to know that lesbians existed until she was eighteen and now she will never get her innocence back." He threatened to shoot my dogs. And his eyes. I will not forget the way his eyes looked. Although it had been traumatic for me, it also opened up dialogue, and our family is close enough that we worked through it. Regardless, the experience hurt. And I learned that while I am among allies, I was uncovering difficult truths about the attitudes people continue to have and to hide.

And I began to realize that these kinds of attitudes were also present in academia, that when you are a queer writing about queers, differences in methodological approaches and approaches to heteronormative professional practices uncover homophobia even in supposedly socially liberal straight people and sexism in supposedly socially liberal men. For me, the lesbian-phobia my project uncovered in straight women—especially supposedly feminist women—was most discouraging, though. The academic job search spotlighted the



problem for me. I noticed how people began to tune out the minute I used the word “lesbian,” I encountered patronizing attitudes from people who wanted to be enthusiastic but thought my project would not teach anyone anything unless they were also queer. I began to realize that I had trouble translating myself and my approach to people who wanted me to play by straight rules, conform to hetero expectations.

Last year, after coming to terms with the fact that I had been rejected from the one job I really wanted, I was told the real reason why through back channels, while I was at CCCCs. Apparently, one woman on that search committee had felt like my presence would “make the department too queer,” that she had talked the dean out of hiring me because she was worried their department would make this transition from token queers to “too queer.” My informant asked me, “What did you say to piss her off?” I searched my memory. Was it my fault? Had I done something blameworthy? I had sensed immediately that she reacted strongly in a negative way to my project and to me. And then it became almost ridiculously obvious as she sat through my job talk frowning and even passing a note at one point. Her eyes. I still see them judging me or my project or both. I didn’t know what I had done to make her react so strongly to me. I didn’t know what I could have done differently. “Was there a problem with the quality of my scholarship?” I asked my informant and was reassured that in my informant’s opinion it was not, but that “she said she thought you were ‘not serious enough’ and worried you would make the department too queer.” Being entertaining and weird is a value that is celebrated among queers but within straight academic culture might be mistaken for not caring about the work. I asked myself, why would I want to be in a department that might believe that something could be “too queer” and that it would be a negative thing? I didn’t.

I knew that there were other reasons why I didn't get that job, but allow me an anger-and-resentment-based rant for a moment. "Too queer." It was like adding insult to injury. I cannot adequately express how many times while writing my dissertation I was so frustrated about how our scholarship has been overwhelmingly too straight, too square, too hetero. But, having tried to operate from the general principle of rewarding good scholarship by citing it and ignoring scholarship I disapprove of (instead of criticizing it, like I did in drafts and in my journals and to my writing group members), I found that the resources I sought were either difficult to find out about (having been hidden in code words by scholars reluctant to put the word lesbian in titles) or sorely lacking, in terms of what I needed.

I was trying to do my scholarship the right way by fitting myself into scholarly conversations that I believed in, and yet the scholarly tradition of having to fit in with preexisting scholarly conversations was holding me back when I wanted simply to create instead of spend all this time searching for ways to fit myself into scholarship I was so distracted by because I wanted to criticize it for being too straight. I knew that my attitude was self-defeating, and I understand the idea behind our citation practices. On the other hand, I wondered how much of it was to keep the system of higher education repeating its dominance, to keep it reproducing well-behaved straight and obedient rhet-comp automatons. Which of our practices were suspect and how and why? I grew more and more riled up from the cumulative effects of seeing feminists who should be allied with my project either elide the contributions of lesbians, dismiss them, say it doesn't matter that they were lesbians, blame them the failure of the ERA when they worked just as hard if not harder than the straight feminists to try to get it passed, or otherwise get it "wrong" in the little scholarship that addressed lesbians. Indeed, it wasn't only straight feminists who were limited. One

*lesbian* woman I read makes these sweeping generalizations painting an either/or picture that also gets things “wrong.” What I’m saying is that our too-straight lens has affected the quality of our collective scholarship. Even much of the work that is queer is often male-centric. Why had nobody yet uncovered knowledge about the women I was studying, and why did the previous historical record differ so much from the evidence I was seeing left behind by these women who built and maintained the longest-lived lesbian feminist organization in the history of our country? Perhaps a more disturbing question was—why did so few people even know that the ALFA organization had even existed, even though the women had left behind vast documentation in an easily accessible and widely advertised archive? I’m not sure why people should be worried about departments becoming “too queer,” since our scholarship has been decidedly and frustratingly too hetero for my project. What does “too queer” even mean? Was she worried that queer people want to take over the world and shut straight people out, or oppress them as they have oppressed us?

Our academic scholarship possibilities have been limited by an inability to see queerly. Yet many queer scholars among us have not been writing the queer projects they have wanted to, because they have been coached by well-meaning people that “you can *be* queer but you can’t *write about* queers” or “you have to wait until you get a job or get tenure before you can do that” or other such nonsense that should not be the case. I began to lose sight of the critiques that were productive and could no longer distinguish them from the critiques that were made for the wrong reasons. And my work suffered as a result. I know I am not the only one for whom this is the case. I tried to stay positive in my attitude and my scholarship and not rant about it in my dissertation itself. Yet I kept hearing the words in my head: “these critiques need to be made. These things need to be said.” There are others like

me, not just queers—others who do not fit into our current models that purport to desire to *educate* for the greater social good instead of reproduce the problems in our greater society. I feel compelled to make the case because it comes from a concern about the way we practice the ethical values we purport to ascribe to, and it affects the quality of our scholarship and our creativity. I have seen what my own internalized lesbian-phobic attitude did to my dissertation and I saw what it did to my dissertation after I gathered my courage to shove it aside. I saw the difference in the chapters and it amazed me.

I have come to believe that identity-based minority models for fighting oppression are ultimately unproductive: they fail because they encourage a victim-mentality. Analogies comparing sexism to racism or homophobia to racism (while illuminating, when made in the right way to the right audience) can ultimately be unproductive when people are so focused on their own oppressions that they imagine various axes of oppression in competition with one another. So what can a straight person do? What can queers do for others who are their allies in struggle? What can we all do with the knowledge that all oppressions are connected? What my dissertation and my personal experience has taught me is that *everyone* understands what it feels like to be subject to that root pattern that lies underneath the different kinds of oppression that exist, and that we must stand in solidarity with others, cross bridges of difference, and seek true empathy, as impossible as that may be. Everyone has been controlled by disciplinary forces—even heterosexual straight white men of ample economic means. It's just that some have more stamina to continue playing the game because they are less beaten down in their personal as well as their professional lives. The places where the different kinds of oppression overlap, if we examine them the right way, looking for the patterns, contain a key to the solution.

Our current professionalization model that contains the inherent message to “do as I say and not as I do” is not enough. We must make our practices match up to our ideals in a more consistent manner. The current model, which displaces the blame onto the disciplinary system of power and that timidly believes we can accomplish something radical by playing by the rules of the past, is misguided. We must improve the structural integrity of this institution we call higher education, because our current mode of operating is turning off smart people who don’t have the patience for those who refuse to get with us or get out of the way, and it squashes others. We will experience a brain drain in higher education. Probably, we already have. Look around—pay attention. Who is not welcome here? Whose presence are we uncomfortable with? (people of color, queers, artists, etc...) Why do we advocate diversity if we do not want to change our practices in order to accommodate the diversity we profess to desire? We are spinning our wheels with busy work imposed by the outdated bureaucratic rules and regulations found in our graduate school requirements, job market, and tenure/promotion practices. We need to revise our professionalization practices and our assessment standards to increase our relevance and reflect the fact that our current model is not only outdated but also unsustainable. Reproducing professors and shaming those who do not obtain or do not want academic jobs is not the answer—we must better use the vast intelligence resources that we already have, and we must demand global revision at the local and national levels. I am tired of seeing awareness of our problems go hand in hand with inaction. We need people in positions of power to care about what’s going on down here, down at the place where we toil away as the 70 percent who do not have tenure-line jobs, we need them to examine their place within the system, to do something about it, and we need stories of local change to spread to the national level.

I leave with the following questions: Do we get the world we want or do we get the world we deserve? I ask because I know that even though the system of higher education is implicated in the critique, it is also devoted to education, which my dissertation has taught me is one effective answer, might be the only answer to eradicating oppression, which we *must* do if we are to live free and truly self-determined lives. What this dissertation has taught me is that once we understand how oppression works, if we have begun from a place of trying to empathize, we can better educate. And as we educate we must create. We must innovate. Together, collectively, with others working toward the same goal. It is possible to find new models for the power structures of our institutions, and it is possible to build them, and we need to recruit as many people working together to build them, because the only solution is to create, to invent, to create together from a rhetorical understanding of how oppression works, guided by a utopian vision of what could be possible.

That is what the women I write about in this dissertation were doing. And they were successful—incredibly successful. And they showed me it is possible. In this dissertation, I have tried to understand and translate what they understood about how oppression works. Their main solution was to educate in a way that was deeply politicized, in the traditions of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Martin Luther King, among countless others who fought against oppression during this time using political education methods. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire explains that because oppression is a “*distortion of being more fully human*,” eventually the oppressed will struggle against those who were the oppressors, but in so doing,

the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (*which is a way to create it*), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather *restorers of the humanity of both*. This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: *to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well*. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. *Only power that springs from the*

*weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both.*

(44, my emphasis)

This recognition that Freire describes—that oppression is a condition of humanity that puts “sides” at war with one another is what the women in my dissertation understood all too well. The individual people who oppress can help the oppressed to become free, to “regain their humanity,” but the energy must ultimately stem from the oppressed, and they must work together. The women I have been studying believed what Paulo Freire believed. They knew that freedom is only possible through overcoming oppression in solidarity with others, while simultaneously attempting to create new communities, new social conditions that oppress nobody.

The women who I write about also knew that in order to effectively create new social conditions that oppress nobody, we must first recognize that there is a problem and we must first believe that utopia might be possible. Freire’s recognition that all oppressions are connected and interlocked in Hegelian battles of push and pull led the women I write about to displace their blame onto the traditional institutions themselves and imagine how it might be possible to create new ways to live that do not rely on the previous structures that have become oppressive, and thus their position was revolutionary, radical, and inherently creative. It was critical utopian in vision. They were collectively inventing. And their mission was inherently rhetorical insofar as this is a problem that can be resolved through more effective means of persuasion. Their ideas find root in Freire’s words, which I will quote at length because they are so important to a proper orientation for truly understanding what this dissertation is about:

*In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.* This perception is a

necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action. [...] The oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught only when this perception enlists them in the struggle to free themselves. *The same is true with respect to the individual oppressor as a person. Discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed.* Rationalizing his guilt through paternalistic treatment of the oppressed, all the while holding them fast in a position of dependence, will not do. *Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity; it is a radical posture.* If what characterizes the oppressed is their subordination to the consciousness of the master, as Hegel affirms, *true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these “beings for another.”*

(49, my emphasis)

Here, Freire is explaining that we must have the proper orientation before we can effectively free ourselves and others from conditions of oppression. There are several steps involved: We must believe it is possible to transform our conditions and we must believe that it is necessary to do so by entering into solidarity with others and working together in a symbiotic way to create new ways of living that do not rely on the traditional systems that have become oppressive. We must thus realize the way that we also are oppressors and even though we can displace the blame onto the traditional systems, we are implicated in these systems of power insofar as we continue to oppress those who are also oppressed by these systems. That is, we must discover our places within systems of oppression and work in solidarity with those we oppress in order to make better arguments to those who are in positions with the greatest power to effect change. The oppressed and the oppressors must work together to transform the very forces of dominance that reproduce structural power inequities.

Ultimately, the ALFA women have provided a model for alternatives. They asked themselves: How do we transcend oppressive forces so that all people can live free from the forces of dominance? They were inspired by seeing others do this and they wanted to break free themselves. The combined forces of institutionalized and cultural sexism and



homophobia was what had most oppressed these particular women, and their answer was to experiment with the question in their own lives, guided by the examples of others. Guided by a perfect vision, but aware that there was also the force of what Kenneth Burke has called “recalcitrance.” They realized that at its core, there is an identifiable pattern to oppression and how it works. And there are identifiable rhetorical strategies available for accomplishing this goal.

What they discovered was that they first had to realize that there was a problem, and find others who shared their problem so that together, they could figure out what to do about it. This was a big part of it. They worked to understand their problem and get to the root of it through education practices. They realized that the only way they would be successful was to figure out how to work together in a community with others, and they came to realize the value of creating that work space in a way that would foster their education and creativity practices. These practices would support the work they wanted to do, which was political, and difficult, and draining. Their vision of what was possible and their collective work to build a creative counterculture was what kept them going, as they pragmatically took steps to build a movement library and archive, do outreach work, and share their work with others. They built a model and they wanted to be contagious. They knew they could only be contagious if they worked in alliances and coalitions with others in order to be successful, and so they also worked symbiotically with those not in their group but who were oriented in the same direction. Utopic in vision, pragmatic in practice, flexible and adaptive. They lived their political beliefs in their personal lives, and tried to make their philosophy match their practices. Feminism is the philosophy, lesbianism is the practice. The personal is political. They lived the movement in their political education practices, trusting that it would make

the most difference in the social conditions they sought to transform, because they were touching people's personal lives in ways that mattered, as they also transformed their own lives in ways that helped them be successful in their work. And it was the practice of inventing and reinventing a supportive community with a creative culture—that part of being a human that matters so much, that part about being a human that their oppressions had threatened to take away—that gave them the stamina to keep going when faced with the impossibility of achieving the idealistic and perfect vision that they knew should be possible: freedom from the forces of social dominance, freedom from the distortion of the more fully human, the freedom to live self-determined lives with a sense of personal integrity.

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