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"We're asking you to show up" : accountability as rhetorical practice for queer, feminist, and racial justice allyship.

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"WE'RE ASKING YOU TO SHOW UP": ACCOUNTABILITY AS RHETORICAL
PRACTICE FOR QUEER, FEMINIST, AND RACIAL JUSTICE ALLYSHIP

By

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents,

Judy and Carl Tetreault,

for teaching me imagination.

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To my best friend and forever writing and random adventure partner, Shannon LeBlanc: thank you for the bus ride and the honesty and for walking around Cambridge all night convincing me that moving to Louisville would maybe be okay, and then for your keys and couch when I found myself in Indiana. I'm so glad you came here too. And to Ashley Avery-Miller, muse, thank you for being the first to know and for staying on the phone with a baby queer across all the miles and all the time. Thank you to my enduring Emerson group: Jen Crystal, Emily Avery-Miller, Martin and Anshika Hansen-Verma, Susannah Clark, Abby Travis, Tina Paschkópic: I'm so glad our MFA brought us together but that we keep showing up for each other in so many ways.

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ABSTRACT

"WE'RE ASKING YOU TO SHOW UP": ACCOUNTABILITY AS RHETORICAL

PRACTICE FOR QUEER, FEMINIST, and RACIAL JUSTICE ALLYSHIP

Laura Tetreault

April 10, 2018

In this threatening political climate, many are asking how to advocate for social justice across axes of difference, such as in coalitional movements working for queer, feminist, and racially just futures. Rhetoric and composition scholarship, especially cultural rhetorics, has long studied the activist practices of specific communities, but cross-community allyship remains undertheorized. This dissertation responds to these public and scholarly exigencies by more deeply exploring the complexities of positionality, privilege, and oppression that accompany advocacy across differences. The project explores the rhetorical dimensions of allyship in complexly networked, contemporary digital social justice messaging, focusing on centering racial justice in queer and feminist activism in order to advance an antiracist approach to studying intersectional activist rhetorics.

This dissertation forwards scholarship on allyship in social justice through advancing a rhetorical methodology grounded in accountability. I argue that allyship is a

rhetorical process that requires awareness of context and positionality, and the work of developing allies' activist rhetorical awareness must foreground *accountability* to vulnerable communities. The analytical strategies I advance derive from Black Feminist and queer of color activist community practices: asking *to whom* and *for what* a particular rhetorical action is accountable; *centering* those most vulnerable in a particular context while making critical connections to intersecting, systemic oppressions; and foregrounding *impact over intention* as a way to trace rhetorical circulation with a focus on understanding the potential consequences of specific actions for communities most vulnerable in a given context. These strategies are inherently rhetorical, requiring awareness of context, position, and audience, in addition to emerging aspects of rhetoric such as circulation. By unpacking the rhetorical dimensions of activist strategies, this project advances a methodological frame for antiracist social justice allyship.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Being an "ally" has become a rapidly circulating buzzword, with many calls for better allyship but also a lot of uncertainty about what that looks like. For example, recent headlines in liberal media sources feature language like "The Real Work of Being an Ally" (Harris for *Huffington Post*, 2017); "How to Tell if You're Being a Good Ally" (Sebastian for *Teen Vogue,* 2017); "How to Be a White Ally: "Time for White Allies to Move Beyond Perfunctory Activism" (Tensley for *Pacific Standard*, 2017); and "Fighting Racism Is Your Responsibility—Start Now" (Clodfelter for *Salon*, 2016). Such discourse emerges from long-standing questions of how to advocate for social justice across axes of difference, such as in coalitional movements working for queer, feminist, and racially just futures. As I will detail later in this introduction, rhetoric and composition scholarship, especially cultural rhetorics, has long studied the activist practices of specific communities, but cross-community allyship remains undertheorized. This dissertation responds to these public and scholarly exigencies by more deeply exploring the complexities of positionality, privilege, and oppression that accompany advocacy across differences. The project explores the rhetorical dimensions of allyship in complexly networked, contemporary digital social justice messaging, focusing on centering racial justice in queer and feminist activism in order to advance an antiracist approach to studying intersectional activist rhetorics.

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On a broader scale, the below Google Trends line graph, tracing a period of 5 years from March 2013 to March 2018, shows an upward recent trend in searches for the term "allyship," with spikes in November 2016 following the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president. As the graph specifies, the majority of these searches originate from the U.S. and Canada. This data is not the fullest representation possible, but it does show that allyship is a term that captures the contemporary zeitgeist—and, as the search frequency hints at, the contemporary confusion about how to enact this thing called allyship.
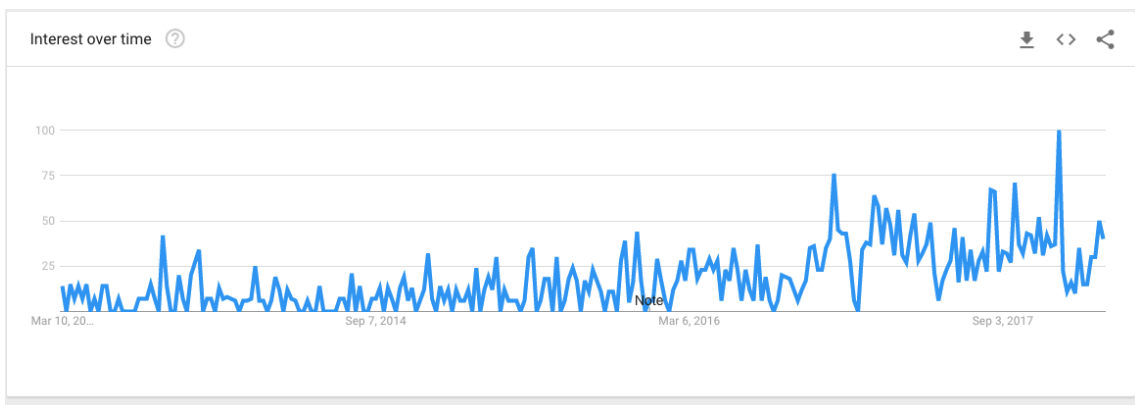
Figure 1: Allyship, Interest Over Time

In addition, there have been renewed calls in these politically threatening times for academics not only to study, critique, and deconstruct oppressive practices, but to more actively stand in solidarity with oppressed communities working toward more equitable futures. Numerous calls from researchers who bridge rhetoric with queer, feminist, and critical race studies offer an opportunity to more deeply consider the rhetorical dimensions of allyship across differences (Inoue; Kennedy, Ratcliffe, and Middleton; Ratcliffe; Wallace). Scholars in feminist rhetoric such as Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch have called for more work that builds upon *reclamation* of the rhetorics of marginalized communities in order to conduct further inquiry into how

centering communities of resistance can lead to re-theorizations of rhetorical practices. A related thread of scholarship asks what the place of rhetorical studies may be in queer and feminist work, such as Jean Bessette's argument that rhetoric can provide a new, more contextual way of conceptualizing queerness (148). In addition, scholars in cultural rhetorics and related areas have also called for more rhetorical work that not only studies activist practices but also *enacts* a commitment to social justice (Bratta and Powell; Del Hierro, Levy, and Price; Riley-Mukavetz; Sano-Franchini).

As Phil Bratta and Malea Powell point out, culturally situated rhetorical work is often viewed as a narrow specialty, and when the intellectual work of non-dominant communities is represented, it often constitutes the object of study and not the theoretical frame: "Even when so-called 'identity-based' scholarship… is occasionally marshaled to support arguments being made at this R/C+CS [rhetoric/composition and cultural studies] intersection, work that substantially engages intellectual frames taken from outside dominant Western culture have traditionally not been seen as central to R/C+CS work" (Bratta and Powell). Alternately, when "identity-based" work is engaged, often it remains within dominant theoretical frames; for example, as Karma Chávez writes, "us[ing] the postmodern writing of European male theorists to critique the 'theory in the flesh' of women of color theorists, which functions to simplify and negate women of color theorizing while remaining distant from the actual lived experiences of oppressed people" (58). These problems are not unique to rhetoric and composition, but is a symptom of a larger academic culture that dismisses the intellectual work of historically marginalized communities. But where we look for our rhetorical theories and praxes is a political issue; as Sara Ahmed writes in *Living a Feminist Life,* theory *is* politics. From Ahmed's premise that "[f]eminism is at stake in how we generate knowledge; in how we write, in who we cite," I am advocating

for a queer, feminist, critical race approach to activist rhetorical praxes suited to contemporary struggles---praxes that originate from and center queer women of color. This work goes against the grain of much academic critique that relies on judging the degree to which a rhetorical production is assimilationist or radical, queer or normative, and thus requires new models of accountability—a way of developing alternative ways of rhetorically analyzing movement discourses that judge efficacy according to which vulnerable communities are centered.

Rhetoric and composition is challenging these academic histories of erasure through the emerging field of cultural rhetorics---including queer and feminist rhetoric, and rhetorics of race and ethnicity---that are steadily gaining ground in the field, as evidenced by the Cultural Rhetorics Conference, the launch of the new cultural rhetorics journal *Constellations*, and the field's increasing focus on non-dominant rhetorical practices (Bratta and Powell; Del Hierro, Levy, and Price; Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab; Strandjord). However, we must undertake these studies with an especially high awareness of power structures and put into place deliberate and intentional practices for subverting those structures, or we risk reproducing oppressive practices in our scholarship.

Speaking about allyship, it necessary for me to acknowledge my own positionalities. I come to this work as a white, queer-identified, cisgender woman who is also able-bodied and middle-class. Although I am shaped by both experiences of privilege and marginalization, I have benefited in many ways from the systems that privilege whiteness. In response, I aim to use my position to challenge white supremacy. That is how I first came to social justice research---through asking hard questions about

what it means to work for racial justice as a white person, and how to integrate my other positionalities, including my queerness and feminism, into this work.

This dissertation responds to the above cultural and scholarly exigencies by theorizing social justice allyship across differences. The project is grounded in rhetorical analyses of three contemporary activist digital media projects: *Black Futures Month,* a Black Lives Matter online art initiative; *The Identity Project,* an LGBTQ photography project; and two examples of viral protest rhetoric from the 2017 Women's March on Washington. As I will detail later in this introduction, studying these intersectional activist projects has allowed me to more deeply theorize specific aspects of allyship across differences as a rhetorical process. Before detailing the cases, the next section will explain the theoretical and methodological frameworks in which I situate them.

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

This research is situated in three main, interconnected areas: Cultural rhetorics, including queer, feminist, and racial justice rhetorics; interdisciplinary queer and feminist of color theories and methodologies; and digital rhetorics, especially circulation, multimodal rhetoric and composition, and digital research methods. I take cultural rhetorics and queer and feminist of color frameworks as the basis of this project's methodology, while digital rhetorics guide my choice of methods. The following sections detail each of these frameworks.

Cultural Rhetorics

This project frames cultural rhetorics as an emerging focus within rhetoric and composition that foregrounds antiracist, queer, feminist, disability-based, and decolonial approaches to the study of communicative practices. Working within a cultural rhetorics framework, as Phil Bratta and Malea Powell explain, asks researchers to view all cultures as rhetorical and to develop rhetorical theories and methodologies from the practices of communities instead of imposing outside explanatory frames onto these communities. This understanding also disrupts what cultural frameworks of understanding are considered neutral and capable of crossing contexts, and what frameworks are considered limited to one context; for example, the assumption that Western, Eurocentric rhetorical theories can be mobilized to understand the communicative practices of any community can represent an assumption that these Western frames are neutral (Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab). In contrast, frameworks emerging from specifically marginalized communities, like African American rhetorics, are often framed as limited to these communities (Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab). These assumptions operate through the same cultural logic that privileges whiteness as a seemingly neutral default, when whiteness is actually another specific and culturally located construct as well (Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe). In response, cultural rhetorics scholarship aims to bring a social justice focus and deeper intersectional analysis to rhetorical studies by 1) challenging the assumptions that frame some rhetorical theories as a default and as detached from culture, and 2) developing new rhetorical theories and methodologies emerging from community practices, especially multiply marginalized communities (Bratta and Powell).

Cultural rhetorics also represent an explicitly social justice oriented thread of rhetoric and composition scholarship, connecting queer, feminist, antiracist, decolonial, and disability rhetorics under a shared framework and a commitment to building actively anti-oppressive scholarly practices. As Victor Del Hierro, Daisy Levy, and Margaret Price argue in *Enculturation's* special issue on cultural rhetorics, working within this framework also means that scholars need to *enact* social justice, not only study it: "Within academia and outside of it, we encounter examples of how marginalization operates as a colonizing tool to make one believe that a static center exists. Because that center most often represents a white supremacist heteronormative ableist ideal, everything outside of that is marginal" (Del Hierro, Levy, and Price). Cultural rhetorics practice thus challenges scholars to work against this dominant center. It is also important to acknowledge that academia and academic research have also been sites of colonization (Harris and González 7).

Stemming from a cultural rhetorics commitment to social justice, this project deliberately speaks back against the dominant contemporary ideology of race in the U.S.: a deliberate refusal to historicize that emerges in the form of colorblind rhetoric (Bonilla-Silva; Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe; Martinez). As historian Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor asserts, "[P]romoting the United States as colorblind or postracial… is used to justify dismantling the state's capacity to challenge discrimination." In this context, the state can justify actions like gutting the Voting Rights Act, destroying the social safety net, and other discriminatory practices by arguing that these structures are no longer needed in a "post-race" society (Taylor). Meanwhile, colorblind racism goes unchallenged even within the frameworks of much mainstream education on race. For

instance, speaking about a lack of racial literacy among white populations in the U.S., DiAngelo explains that "For many white people, a single required multicultural education course taken in college, or required 'cultural competency training' in their workplace, is the only time they may encounter a direct and sustained challenge to their racial understandings" ("White Fragility" 59). This lack of understanding of race and racism in U.S. society causes colorblind ideology to become naturalized while challenges to this ideology are viewed as threatening.

Because this project centers the premise that single-axis analyses (looking only at race, or gender, sexuality, or another analytical category) can be insufficient in addressing interconnected oppressions, I needed to choose frameworks capable of enacting complex analyses of such power dynamics. Further, I have chosen my specific theoretical frames of Black Feminist and queer of color thought as a way of de-centering my own experience as a white person and as an amplification strategy. The following sections further explain these frameworks and how I take them up in this project.

Black Feminist Thought

A key premise of my approach to activism and allyship emerges from the concept of intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw but theorized by black and women of color feminists before the term itself was popularized (Anzaldúa and Moraga; Combahee River Collective; Collins; Crenshaw; hooks). Crenshaw first mobilized the term to capture how black women are rendered illegible in the legal system when their oppressions are not considered as shaping each other; being either only *black* or only *a woman* elides the unique way these identities combine. However,

intersectionality is importantly not with respect to identity alone, but about regarding

broader systems of oppression. The term is grounded in the black feminist concept that

identities cannot be thought as separate from the systems of oppression that privilege and

marginalize certain bodies, thus intersectionality is not just an identity description but a

theory of systemic oppression (Crenshaw). It has also been taken up widely in rhetoric,

composition, and communication studies (Chávez and Griffin).

      While intersectionality is not a new concept, the popularization of activist

discourse has not led to changed material conditions or an end to societal inequities.

Gender studies scholar Vivian May points out: "Although intersectionality's centrality to

feminist praxis is unmistakable in its widespread inclusion in coursework, research, and

policy, being widely talked about does not necessarily signal changed social,

philosophical, or institutional relations" (96). Intersectionality may be a buzzword, but

the underlying problems that create the need for intersectionality remain unaddressed. In

a related problem, the term is sometimes divorced from its history and used as a watered-

down way to describe complex identities, but this approach ignores the true function and

analytical power of intersectionality. Thinking intersectionally also entails recognizing

the interconnectedness of oppressive practices both locally and globally. As Angela

Davis argues in *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle,* thinking intersectionally about

interconnected *movements* and not just identities is a key challenge for contemporary

activism (21). Black feminist traditions foreground an understanding of intersectionality

that does not stop at acknowledging the presence of different identities, but that conducts

a deeper analysis into the ways in which systemic inequities impact specific populations

made more vulnerable through interconnected oppressions, with a commitment to remain accountable to these populations.

Recently, black feminist scholars and activists have extended work on intersectionality to further understand the creative resistance practices of multiply marginalized communities in the context of contemporary issues, especially by unifying academic and activist work. For example, transformative justice activist and facilitator adrienne maree brown mobilizes black feminism in the book *Emergent Strategy* to advance a networked conception of activism (a concept that is especially important to this project and detailed more in Chapter Three). Academics and activists Brittany Cooper, Susanna M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn use their positions to advocate for a model of public black feminist intellectualism, exemplified in their blog *Crunk Feminist Collective* and the book *The Crunk Feminist Collection.* On a related note, activist, artist, and literary critic Alexis Pauline Gumbs takes up the work of Audre Lorde and other black feminist theorists to develop creative community projects such as the Mobile Homecoming Experiential Archive and Black Feminist Bookmobile (Gumbs; Gumbs and Wallace). Across these works, a new generation of academics and activists are mobilizing black feminist thought in creative ways.

Black feminist thought has also been taken up in rhetoric and composition to amplify the communicative practices of communities of color and theorize how intersecting oppressions shape rhetorical actions (Carey; Kynard; Pough; Pritchard; Ratcliffe; Richardson; Royster and Kirsch), a natural alignment because language is so essential to activism. As Angela Davis asserts, "[T]he question of how to bring movements together is also a question of the kind of language one uses and the

consciousness one tries to impart" (21). This focus on language points to the centrality of rhetoric to intersectional activist messaging, which not only positions rhetoric and composition as a field with important contributions to make toward theorizing and enacting activist rhetoric, but also means rhetoric and composition scholars need to look more closely at the intersectional rhetoric already being enacted by activist communities that aim to be accountable to communities of color.

In short, it remains vital to continue studying and developing intersectional strategies for activism, especially because these strategies change over time and context. Legal scholars Sumi Cho, Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall argue that, since the term intersectionality was coined, "the widening scope of intersectional scholarship and praxis has not only clarified intersectionality's capacities; it has also amplified its generative focus as an analytical tool to capture and engage contextual dynamics of power" (788). This contextual nature of intersectionality is vital to its use; as Crenshaw describes, intersectionality is more of a heuristic than a grand theory, gaining meaning through the contextual work it does (22).

One way in which intersectionality can be used as a *rhetorical* tool is as an invention strategy (heuristic) for building accountability; for instance, seeing what shifts about activist rhetoric when certain communities are centered in that rhetoric. For the academic study and uptake of activist rhetoric, centering those historically pushed to the margins can change what we are equipped to understand and to enact. Of course, enacting intersectionality requires much more than rhetorical strategies; rhetorics of activism are empty if not enacted through coalition building, challenging conversations, and other forms of difficult on-the-ground work (Chávez). However, rhetoric is still vitally

important to activism, especially activism at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, where it is very easy to reproduce existing power structures through a lack of attention to intersectionality and a lack of organized effort to center the margins in a movement's messaging. Specifically, constructing deliberately intersectional activist rhetorics as a form of movement-building can be a powerful tool to build accountability. By constructing messaging that starts with those most threatened by interconnected oppressions at a specific moment and in a specific context, intersectional movements perform an argument that energy should be focused on those vulnerable communities rather than leaving them behind as many activist movements have done.

Queer of Color Theories

Black feminist traditions and other women of color feminisms already disrupt binary conceptions of gender and make connections with queer experiences of the world. As another lens, I also engage conversations between feminist and queer of color theories, as a way of foregrounding queer understandings of gender and sexuality as analytical tools and understanding how regulatory conceptions of gender and sexuality are connected to other systems of oppression like race. Interdisciplinary scholars like Sara Ahmed, E. Patrick Johnson, and Cathy Cohen forward an understanding of queerness and race as interconnected. (Ahmed's work on queer of color thought is especially important to this dissertation and is foregrounded in Chapter Four.) In addition to a history within rhetoric and composition of productive engagements with queer theory more broadly (Bessette; Kopelson; Morris; Rawson; VanHaitsma), scholars including Eric Pritchard and Collin Craig have recently advanced queer of color rhetorics and

literacy practices as a form of intersectional analysis. Rhetoric and composition scholarship has often treated race and queer identity as separate, echoing a tendency in queer theory. As Pritchard argues, "[D]espite moments of or calls for the intersections of race and queerness to be studied, Black LGBTQ, Black queer, or queer of color critique has not been made a sustained and substantive focus of scholarly inquiry in literacy, composition, and rhetorical studies" (34). In response, Pritchard takes up queer and feminist of color thought to argue for "a sustained and substantive Queer of Color Literacies, Composition, and Rhetoric—one that cuts across Native American, Asian and Asian American, Latinx, and Black studies alongside feminist and queer theoretical approaches—that can and must be central to scholarship and pedagogy in the field that professes a commitment to social justice" (49). I follow Pritchard's example here by taking up queer of color thought in this project.

One idea from queer of color theory that is particularly influential for this project is that of *futurity*. While the concept of queer futurity—or denials of futurity—emerged from a tradition in queer theory,[1] I take up the idea specifically as described by queer of color theorist José Esteban Muñoz. By engaging in radical imaginings that drastically reconceive whom society is built to serve, rhetors can develop tools for their activism that enable them to invent ways to center their work on those most threatened by intersecting oppressions. Liberal, pragmatic politics usually only improve conditions for those already privileged—as Muñoz describes in the context of mainstream LGBTQ rights discourses,

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[1] Queer theorist Lee Edelman argues in *No Future* against a specific kind of futurity, heteronormative reproductive futurity, a similar argument to that which Jack Halberstam takes up in *The Queer Art of Failure.* From a queer of color perspective, Muñoz argues that theorists should not *deny* futurity because doing so reproduces a white queer culture that is privileged enough to embrace the idea of "no future." Instead, Muñoz argues for an alternative way of conceptualizing futurity as queerness itself (96).

liberal politics often serve "queers with enough access to capital to imagine a life integrated within North American capitalist culture" (Muñoz 20). In contrast, more radical and imaginative movements do not center on those who are already the most privileged, but instead foster "forms of belonging-in-difference and expansive critiques of social asymmetries" (Muñoz 20). From alternative social locations, communities can best invent new possibilities that might not have been conceived by anyone else, so it is vital that activist strategies for rhetorical invention purposefully move the margins to the center. In particular, Muñoz's idea of futurity as a characteristic of queerness informs my own understanding of queerness as well. As Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia,* "Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough" (96). Queerness is thus not only an identity category, but a tool to imagine futures beyond normative ways of being, an understanding of queerness that I take up across this dissertation.

Futurity is also a key concept of the black radical tradition, seen in movements such as Afrofuturism. As historian Robin D.G. Kelley writes in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, "Without new visions, we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics, but a process that can and must transform us" (xii). The imagined possibilities that emerge from this work are not only intellectual exercises; instead, imagined futures work as a movement strategy to inform activism on the ground and address specific, current issues, while also keeping sight of the larger imaginative vision of an alternative society free from oppression. This

guiding vision can also serve as a heuristic for maintaining accountability; for example, activists may ask if a proposed action remains accountable to building a better future for those most vulnerable in the context of the action. In the following section, I expand on this idea of accountability to frame it as a rhetorical methodology, which forms the central argument of this dissertation.

Intervention: Accountability as Rhetorical Methodology

Accountability is used as a concept in activist organizing to help facilitate conversations about oppression in a way that foregrounds the experiences of those made most vulnerable by interlocking oppressions in a specific context, and that asks how other communities can be responsible to those most vulnerable (INCITE). In rhetoric and composition, a strong body of scholarship in community engagement addresses how to build accountability to groups like community partners (Mathieu; Cushman; Ridolfo; Golblatt), but in rhetorical analysis—where we may deal with public texts, archival materials, or other historical and contemporary artifacts without a community in front of us—we have few tools for unpacking how examples of public rhetoric enact or fail to enact accountability to vulnerable communities. Accountability is still vital in these contexts, but we need more rigorous ways to enact it when we are not working with small, localized communities in one place and time. My work asks whether it is possible to maintain a focus on accountability to community praxis, especially oppressed communities, in complex and interconnected contexts, such as in the study of digital public rhetorics that are constantly changing and widely circulating.

I wanted to develop a methodological approach to studying social justice rhetorics in digital spaces that grappled with this complexity while also maintaining accountability. Especially important for me as a white woman studying the rhetorics of and about communities of color, it is important for me to *enact* the same commitment to social justice that I write and research about. Following these premises, this dissertation forwards scholarship on allyship in social justice through advancing a rhetorical methodology grounded in accountability. I argue that allyship is a rhetorical process that requires awareness of context and positionality, and the work of developing allies' activist rhetorical awareness must foreground accountability to vulnerable communities. The analytical strategies I advance derive from black feminist and queer of color activist community practices: asking to whom and for what a particular rhetorical action is accountable; centering those most vulnerable in a particular context while making critical connections to intersecting, systemic oppressions; and foregrounding impact over intention as a way to trace rhetorical circulation with a focus on understanding the potential consequences of specific actions for communities most vulnerable in a given context. These strategies are inherently rhetorical, requiring awareness of context, position, and audience, in addition to emerging aspects of rhetoric such as circulation. By unpacking the rhetorical dimensions of activist strategies, this project advances a methodological frame for social justice allyship.

Defining Accountability

I use the term "accountability" as it is understood in transformative justice, anti-violence, and trauma-informed activism. As social justice scholar and activist Sarah

Schulman writes in the book *Conflict is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair,* an accountability-based framework is a way to move beyond a culture of toxic blaming, cruelty, and escalation. Schulman forwards a conception of "mutual accountability in a culture of underreaction to abuse and overreaction to conflict" and explains that we live in a culture characterized by a "resistance to facing and resolving problems, which is overwhelmingly a refusal to change how we see ourselves in order to be accountable." Accountability foregrounds the fact that there is no perfect activist movement or ideal rhetorical action against oppressions, but we can develop frameworks for action that take societal inequities and our complicity in them as a starting point rather than an end goal. Further, as social and political theorist Alexis Shotwell writes, there can be no pure activist organizing in a deeply damaged world. Shotwell asks, "There is not a preracial state we could access, erasing histories of slavery, forced labor on railroads, colonialism, genocide, and their concomitant responsibilities and requirements. There is no food we can eat, clothing we can buy, or energy we can use without deepening our ties to complex webs of suffering. So, what happens if we start from there?" In response, Shotwell advocates for "complicity and compromise as a starting point for action" rather than starting from an implicit or explicit idea that in order to live authentically or ethically we ought to avoid potentially reprehensible results in our actions." Starting from this assumption that no action is ideologically pure is a way to build accountability for one's actions without becoming obsessed with purity politics or mired in guilt, and to instead work toward better futures.

Such ideas of accountability align with transformative justice, a movement ideology that starts from the premise that even oppressed communities do harm to each other, often through internalized power dynamics. It is necessary to ask how to address violence within these communities, especially because oppressed communities often cannot rely on outside structures, such as police and the state, to uphold justice in an unjust society. As opposed to other frameworks like punitive justice (focused on punishing the one who has done harm) or restorative justice (aimed toward restoring the conditions present before the harm was done), transformative justice focuses not on punishment or on restoring previous order but on imagining how structures can be transformed, starting with a particular community as a microcosm of societal power dynamics. To work toward this goal, transformative justice and trauma-informed activists have developed the concept of community accountability.

As the radical feminist of color activist group INCITE: Women of Color Against Violence defines it, community accountability is a

> process which a community—a group of friends, a family, a church, a workplace, an apartment complex, a neighborhood, etc—work together to do the following things: Create and affirm values and practices that resist abuse and oppression and encourage safety, support, and accountability. Provide safety and support to community members who are violently targeted that respects their self-determination. Develop sustainable strategies to address community members' abusive behavior, creating a process for them to account for their actions and transform their behavior. Commit to ongoing development of all members of the community, and the

community itself, to transform the political conditions that reinforce oppression and violence.

This particular vision of community accountability emerges from in the specific context of abuse and violence, but it has also been applied more broadly. As Chicana studies scholar Clarissa Rojas, co-editor of the INCITE anthology *Color of Violence,* writes: "community accountability is more than an antiviolence project. It is a liberation project that creates the potential and space for autonomous radical transformation in our lives and communities, seeking to transform the roots of violence" (79). Violence is also understood here not only as a physical act, but also as psychological and as rhetorical: systemic inequity works insidiously and persuasively to inflict violence on those who are oppressed. As Rojas also writes, community accountability can be a pedagogical strategy as well, a way of learning to listen for evidence of violence, center those who have been wounded, and commit to moving forward in transformative ways. Such a strategy can supplement critical pedagogies as a further way of, Rojas writes, "carving liberatory spaces amid the ongoing colonial violence of universities" (94). Community accountability can be a tool for learning how to recognize violence when we are socialized to look away.

Mobilizing Accountability

I became interested in connecting community accountability with rhetorical studies by wondering: Could community accountability also be a productive framework for rhetorical analysis? In the context of needing more ways to relate to each other and enact allyship across differences, I wondered if community accountability could provide

a productive model for socially engaged scholarship that more actively resists oppressions—that uses critique and deconstruction like a starting point but that more fully works toward building liberatory practices that center the needs of oppressed communities. I wondered especially if it was possible to enact community accountability as a rhetorical methodology, a way to study how activist discourse moves through complex, networked spaces like digital contexts without sacrificing a focus on how that discourse impacts vulnerable populations. Over the course of this research, I have developed practices inspired by community accountability as a methodology for rhetorical analysis and circulation.

Accountability works as a rhetorical methodology in the following ways. For one, it aligns with existing discussions of positionality and reflexivity in cultural rhetorics, especially feminist rhetorics. For example, Krista Ratcliffe's seminal work on rhetorical listening mentions accountability as one of the "fundamental rhetorical stances" offered through a rhetoric of listening meant to engage difference. Building on bell hooks' insistence that accountability is not meant to cause guilt or blame but rather to unite around a shared commitment to ending racism ("Racism" 158), Ratcliffe writes, "A logic of accountability invites us to consider how all of us are, at present, culturally implicated in effects of the past (via our resulting privileges and/or their lack) and, thus, accountable for what we do about situations now, even if we are not responsible for their origins" (31). Community accountability foregrounds structures for working across positionalities that ask allies to continue listening but also to take a more active role. For example, an over-emphasis on listening can place too much of the burden on communities of color when they are constantly asked to educate white communities. What a deeper focus on

accountability builds is a way to supplement rhetorical listening with a more active allyship process.

Community accountability as a rhetorical methodology frames emotional reactions as a rhetorical exigence for self-interrogation, and insists that relations with others across differences in positionality and power are integral to rhetorical action. It also seeks to develop strategies to foster contextual awareness of who is vulnerable and in what ways, and how this shapes any interaction. Further, a focus on the on impact on vulnerable communities becomes a key measure of a rhetorical action's efficacy. Within this framework, I focus on developing rhetorical analysis guided by questions of accountability to whom, and for what; asking who is centered and who is rendered marginal in a rhetorical action, and with what effects; and developing ways to track circulation to determine the impacts a rhetorical action has on different communities, and to analyze differential impacts as a way of discovering who is vulnerable in the context of the action and how intersecting oppressions shape that manifestation of vulnerability. Asking such questions as the basis for analysis can help move beyond a dominant/resistant framework of evaluating rhetorical actions and into a more nuanced view that is also more accountable to multiply marginalized communities.

Methods

This project develops and enacts methods under a methodological framework of community accountability, grounded in transformative justice and guided by cultural rhetorics and queer and feminist of color theories. From these methodologies, it is necessary to develop methods for gathering and analyzing data that seek to maintain

accountability to community praxes—in short, methods that perform my argument. My methods are influenced by digital circulation and networked understandings of activist rhetorics, but I offer a new angle by taking a cultural rhetorics approach to the study of digital circulation.

Digital Circulation

Rhetorical circulation provides tools for theorizing the queer activist work of circulating alternative possibilities to oppressive discourses through resignification and recomposition. Rather than studying my central cases as static objects, I study their circulation to gain a richer understanding of how these examples move through digital spaces and prompt responses.

As digital spaces continue to make communication more and more complex, many scholars of rhetoric are asking how we can re-theorize rhetoric with this complexity in mind (Hess and Davisson; Edbauer Rice; Eyman; Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson). A common thread throughout this scholarship is the idea that rhetoric is complexly networked and opens up into multiple consequences, not always following the traditional model of direct transmission from a rhetor to a clearly defined and bounded audience. Any text may circulate, have unintended effects, reach unexpected populations, and be taken up and recomposed by audiences in an endless variety of ways. Rhetorical studies has begun to theorize circulation as unpredictable by placing the burden for rhetorical meaning-making not on a singular author or audience, but on movement across many different contexts (Ridolfo and DeVoss). To theorize this uptake, we need new models beyond that of the rhetorical situation, with its assumption of an identifiable rhetor

appealing to an audience whose characteristics and ideologies are bounded and knowable, within a clear and specific context. As Catherine Chaput argues, rhetoric is located in an "embodied habituation" instead of the traditional focus on moments of public deliberation with a clear exigence and response (4). This necessitates a shift from "the rhetorical situation as a temporally and spatially fixed site of exigency, constraints, and discourse to rhetorical circulation as a fluidity of everyday practices, affects, and uncertainties" (Chaput 5-6). In this model, it is important to study the circulation of signs to understand how particular signs—and the larger discourses they are attached to— become imbued with value and have diverse impacts. Digital rhetoric scholar Laurie Gries calls this need to attend to rhetoric's divergent impacts *consequentiality*. As Gries argues, the meaning of a rhetorical production is constituted by its consequences, and meaning unfolds in various contexts, making it impossible to judge meaning only through analyzing the reception of one audience or at one moment in time (47). Gries asserts that we need "to turn our scholarly gaze toward futurity—the time spans beyond a thing's initial production and delivery—and create risky accounts of how rhetoric unfolds as things enter into complex associations and catalyze changes" (8). To create such risky accounts, we need new methods.

This project is especially influenced by Gries' concept of iconographic tracking as a research method for digital rhetorics. I build upon Gries' ideas of consequentiality and circulation to add a deeper focus on impact and accountability, from a queer and feminist of color framework that insists on evaluating rhetorical actions according to the impact on vulnerable populations. In the study of digital rhetorics, we cannot sacrifice accountability in the quest for complexity, especially not in an unjust world. I build

methods here to enact that balance between studying complex networks and enacting

accountability to specific communities. These methods supplement traditional

approaches to studying rhetorical artifacts such as images; as Gries writes,

"[R]epresentational, synchronic approaches to visual rhetoric typically entail reading

visual things like stable, fixed texts within limited contexts; analyzing the strategies

within a pictorial artifact as well as the rhetorical situation; practicing interpretation to

identify how persuasion and identification happens; and so forth" (*Still Life* 98). While

these approaches remain valuable and will inform my close readings of rhetorical actions,

it is also necessary to shift the focus onto circulation to understand how such artifacts

move and change beyond the initial moment of production and delivery, especially in

order to pay closer attention to accountability and impact on vulnerable communities.

To study circulation, Gries proposes the method of iconographic tracking in the

following stages, labeled R1, R2, R3, and R4, all of which are recursive:

- R1, "deploying digital research to collect a large data set using basic
  search engines with image-search capabilities" and archiving web page
  snapshots;

- R2, "assembling data into collection" to "locate patterns, trends, and
  relationships," which is done by generating key terms or tags and using
  software to organize findings according to tags;

- R3, taking "a more narrow, controlled approach in order to diversify and
  expand the data collection by using new search terms (generated form
  previous findings) to follow both visual and verbal threads" found in the
  previous stage of research

- R4, conducting "a close study of specific collectives to determine how an image intra-acts with humans and various technologies and other entities to materialize, spark change, and produce collective space" by mapping out "composition, production, transformation, distribution, circulation, collectivity, and consequentiality" (*Still Life* 111-13).

This recursive process of collecting and organizing data allows a researcher to track the circulation of specific artifacts across a wide variety of contexts.

To further attend to the ethical concerns raised by researching in digital spaces, I follow Heidi McKee and James Porter's heuristic for online research. To assess whether informed consent is necessary for a digital research project, McKee and Porter recommend considering the following variables: whether the material being studied is considered public or private, how identifiable the data is, the degree of interaction between researcher and participants, the topic sensitivity, and the vulnerability of research subjects (254). As part of my criteria for choosing central examples, I am only looking at activist media projects that have reached a public audience online. I use several criteria for judging the publicness of a case, guided by McKee and Porter's heuristic. For one, I judge as "public" anything that was published in a media outlet intended to circulate, such as a web magazine or newspaper. When looking at spaces that may be in a grey zone, like blogs, I use these materials with the author's identifying information (such as username) only if they have circulated widely, as evaluated through criteria like number of comments, reposts or retweets, likes, or other measures of how far something has spread. Further, for this project, I do not draw any materials from spaces

that could be considered more private or that could contain more sensitive data, like

discussion forums, because my focus is on public rhetoric and its circulation.

Using a digital circulation framework, I gathered data for this project by selecting

the three central cases and looking for evidence of their circulation and varied impacts.

This evidence took the form of online materials including each of the cases themselves,

media commentary, blog posts, artist and author statements, spinoff projects by other

creators, and examples of social media uptake. I used Nvivo, computer-aided qualitative

data analysis software (CAQDAS), to save, organize, and code this data. The following

sections detail my selection of case studies, my data collection, and coding methods.

Case Studies

I selected my three central cases according to the following criteria. I wanted to

study contemporary digital activist media projects that were attempting to speak across

multiple, intersecting oppressions, so I focused on projects that explicitly engage

interconnected issues of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity.[2] I chose these particular

axes of analysis because of my own commitments to queer and feminist activism and to

racial justice allyship. This project has been, among other things, a challenge for me as a

white queer ally to ground my work in racial justice.

I wanted to study activist digital media, specifically multimodal projects, as a way

to interrogate how activists use multiple rhetorical resources to represent complex,

intersecting issues. From this premise, I selected digital media projects that combine

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[2] I acknowledge additional axes of oppression are comparatively under-represented in my project; for example, while I engage embodiment and disability, I foreground gender, sexuality, and race. However, this gap represents an avenue for future inquiry.

multiple modes, such as the visual and the textual. For the sake of a unified methodological approach, I focused in particular on projects that mix visual art and writing. I acknowledge this led to the exclusion of other modes, including video and audio, but for the sake of boundedness I focused this study on visual and written rhetorics. For example, the hallmark of *The Identity Project* is its pairing of photographs with textual captions describing how each photo subject composes their identity, while *Black Futures Month* is comprised of daily web articles combining visual art with short essays. In the chapter on the Women's March, I maintain this focus on visual/textual rhetoric by analyzing an iconic photograph from the march, and I also engage the further element of the material by tracing the pink pussy hat as an example of both material rhetoric and digital symbol.

While all the social justice issues my project engages of course emerge from deep historical roots, I wanted this project to focus on very recent manifestations of persistent social justice issues, as a way of grounding the study in contemporary exigencies *and* beginning with the work of today's activists responding to these exigencies. As a result, I looked for projects that began after 2010, and ultimately chose projects that began in 2014 (*The Identity Project),* 2015 (*Black Futures Month*), and 2016 (the Women's March on Washington). Because I completed this project in 2018, I was also able to look at each of these cases' circulation over time, making each one an evolving set of data (for example, I began writing the *Black Futures Month* chapter in 2016, then recursively added consideration of the 2017 iteration of that project). This focus on recursive data gathering over time allowed me to trace the diverse impacts of each of the central case studies, which was vital to my argument about accountability.

Data Collection

To study digital activist media projects, it was necessary to collect a large data set for each of my cases, representing not only the cases themselves but also evidence of their circulation over time. To that end, my data fell into two main categories: 1) the cases themselves, in the form of activist media projects (*The Identity Project, Black Futures Month,* and the Women's March); and 2) evidence of these projects' circulation through digital and physical spaces over time (consisting mainly of media commentary, and on a smaller scale, uptake in digital spaces like blogs and social media). Because each of the case studies thus formed a large collection of data, the qualitative coding software Nvivo provided a useful way to organize this data. My approach to collecting data for each case was slightly different, due to the nature of each activist media project, so I provide more details about I gathered materials for each case study in the individual chapters that follow. For now, the following section will detail my coding methods, which remained more unified across the three case studies.

Coding

I use coding strategies influenced by grounded theory to rhetorically analyze each of my cases and their circulation, while also acknowledging feminist critiques that no theory can truly be grounded because there is no real objectivism in research; instead, all research is constructed at least in part by the researcher's own context. However, grounded theory coding methods can act as one way to mitigate researcher bias, not eliminate it entirely. As Rebecca Moore Howard argues in "Why This Humanist Codes,"

systematic coding in humanistic research can help make sure the analysis remains grounded in the works being studied. Coding "facilitates unexpected insights and impedes the researcher's impulse to notice only the passages that support his or her preliminary hypotheses. Once the coding is finished, the interpretation begins, with the researcher working with very systematically categorized and analyzed text" (79). I have found coding to be an essential strategy in working across difference, making sure that my analysis stayed grounded in what activists were doing instead of imposing my own interpretation as a white queer woman that would not only misrepresent these rhetors' work, but could participate in an act of colonization (Bratta and Powell; Dougherty). From a cultural rhetorics perspective, I used coding methods influenced by grounded theory in order to take a "from-the-ground-up" approach to my analysis. My approach is guided by queer and feminist of color thought from the premise that "preexisting theory can be used to drive the coding, but the coding is an important intervention between theory and interpretation" (Howard 80).

After saving web materials using Nvivo's web capture feature, I imported these materials and categorized them into folders. I then moved into my first of two rounds of coding. For my first round of coding, I coded my materials in Nvivo one by one, using a mix of in-vivo coding and grounded theory coding, methods that are particularly applicable to a cultural rhetorics framework that must keep the coding grounded in the world of the subjects of the study. I coded based on actions, a grounded theory coding method that uses verbs instead of nouns to keep the analysis grounded in what the research subjects are *doing*, rather than getting too descriptive, in order to "sta[y] close to the data and, when possible, star[t] from the words and actions of respondents" (Charmaz

49); for example, instead of "visibility," I would use a code like "celebrates queer visibility" or "questions queer visibility," to make sure the code reflects the actual actions of the writers. In my coding, I focused on particular moves that I saw being made in the text and artwork; for instance, if a writer included a paragraph narrating a particular historical occurrence, I would code this "historicizing." I also used simultaneous coding to make sure I was not assigning only one code to a particular move I saw in the text or artworks and prematurely placing that move in too small a box. Simultaneous coding is an initial coding method applicable to circumstances when "the data's content suggests multiple meanings that necessitate and justify more than one code" (Saldaña 62). Throughout this coding process, I made use of theoretical memos that tracked my thinking about the data I was analyzing, the codes I was generating, and the patterns I was seeing (Charmaz 72). I then noted which codes appeared most frequently and organized similar codes together in Nvivo. For my second round of coding, I developed focused codes based on the most frequent and salient initial codes (Saldaña 155, Charmaz 57), and I recoded my data. These codes formed the structure of my rhetorical analysis.

My approach to rhetorical analysis of text and images aligns most with Karma R. Chávez's understanding of a rhetorical approach to text. Chávez argues that in light of the fact that dominant, neoliberal discourses operate rhetorically, it is important to study the activist rhetoric of those oppressed by these discourses. Chávez writes that a rhetorical approach to text entails "highlighting sources of invention, argument construction, persuasive tactics, and message strategies in, or in relation to you, the public sphere" (15). This definition of a rhetorical approach is of course not new, but by framing this approach in relation to activist rhetorics, Chávez draws attention to the fact that rhetorics

always exist in relation to the complex power structures that shape public spheres. I thus focus here on the ways in which "activists craft arguments, deploy persuasive strategies, and enact political belonging in ways that work on, with, or against… rhetorical imaginaries" (Chávez 15). In her study referenced here, Chávez supplements rhetorical analysis of texts with ethnographically informed fieldwork, and in the future I also hope to conduct more person-based research into activist movements; however, that is outside the bounds of this dissertation study.

Chapter Overview

  This dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter Two, "Building Accountability by Centering the Margins: The Intersectional Activist Rhetoric of *Black Futures Month*," centers around the *Black Futures Month Project,* a Black Lives Matter online art initiative. This is an annual project featuring daily blog posts combining visual art and essays by Black activists. This chapter conducts a grounded study of the 85 posts that make up the Black Futures Month archive. Using coding methods derived from the strategies of Black Futures Month rhetors and from Black queer and feminist intellectual traditions, especially Afrofuturism, this chapter explores how Black Futures Month artists and writers use multimodal resources to build arguments specific enough to address the needs of vulnerable community members and capacious enough to challenge interconnected oppressions. I argue that rhetoric and composition can learn much from these rhetors about developing rhetorically flexible and contextually adaptive practices that enact accountability by centering vulnerable populations. Through taking up such

strategies, cultural rhetorics scholars can help build more equitable, explicitly antiracist futures in our research, in addition to reclaiming histories of resistance.

Chapter Three, "Celebratory Queerness and Cultural Appropriation in *The Identity Project*," analyzes *The Identity Project*, an LGBTQ portrait photography project by artist Sarah Deragon, and its circulation in queer and feminist digital media. The goal of The Identity Project is to represent a wide variety of LGBTQ identities, and media reception has focused on the creative ways participants play with queer identity markers. Instead of reading The Identity Project as either a successfully resistant or failingly assimilative example of queer rhetoric, I read this project with a specific eye toward accountability to open up more complex questions. I focus on two accountability based strategies for rhetorical analysis: asking to whom a rhetorical artifact enacts accountability and how, and asking for what a rhetorical artifact is accountable and with what consequences. Ultimately, I argue that The Identity Project enables the expression of some resistant formulations of queer identity, but constrains interrogations of identities that cross axes of privilege and oppression (ex. a white queer subject using identity terms from communities beyond their own).

Chapter Four: "'White Women Voted for Trump': The Women's March on Washington and Intersectional Feminist Futures," unpacks examples of protest rhetoric from the 2017 Women's March that sparked discussions of intersectionality as these examples moved through physical and then digital spaces. Exploring specific representative images from the march, I argue for a reading of these images' circulation that foregrounds their consequentiality for communities often erased in mainstream feminisms. My reading of protest rhetoric from the Women's March also foregrounds

how this rhetoric moved in different ways through both material and digital circulation and unpacks this interplay between the material and the digital as an important way of understanding activist media in protest movements. Focusing specifically on decentering white and cisgender privilege in feminist spaces, chapter four develops the idea of *impact* as a key measure of rhetorical efficacy emerging from a framework of community accountability.

Finally, Chapter Five, the concluding chapter, discusses the field-wide and public implications of an accountability-based approach to the production and analysis of contemporary social justice rhetorics. I argue that in cultural rhetorics and in rhetoric and composition broadly, the framework I advance provides methodological tools for our field not only to study activist public rhetorics, but also to work toward socially just, antiracist futures. I also discuss the pedagogical implications of my project through accountability-based rhetorical analysis for the writing classroom. I end with the public exigence of my project, arguing that in this threatening political climate, we need better tools to advocate for communities beyond our own and to disrupt public discourses that fail to enact this accountability. I offer a framework for rhetorically aware allyship that can help those committed to social justice to develop productive ways to intervene.

CHAPTER TWO

BUILDING ACCOUNTABILITY BY CENTERING THE MARGINS:

THE INTERSECTIONAL ACTIVIST RHETORIC OF *BLACK FUTURES MONTH*

In May 2017, Black Lives Matter was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize, indicating its global spread as a human rights movement since its founding in 2012 by activists Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi. While the BLM movement is often framed as an intervention into police violence, as Cullors explains in an interview with *The Guardian,* its goals are farther reaching: "We're trying to re-imagine humanity and bring us to a place where we can decide how we want to be in relation to each other versus criminalising our neighbours or being punitive towards them" (Wahlquist). Black Lives Matter provides a model for a queer, anti-assimilationist, radical critique of societal power structures while also explicitly centering people of color and working to improve material conditions in the moment. This chapter, as part of the larger project forwarding accountability as a rhetorical methodology, analyzes how *Black Futures Month* theorizes accountability to vulnerable populations as a movement strategy for imagining futures.

Such work of future-creation participates in an Afrofuturist tradition that uses imagination as a form of creative activist praxis (see Carrington, *Speculative*; Imarisha and brown; Jackson and Moody-Freeman). This activist use of imagination also offers a way of addressing intersecting oppressions that is markedly different from academic

traditions of deconstruction and critique. As black feminist and radical social justice writer and activist adrienne maree brown writes in *Emergent Strategy*, in the paradigm of deconstruction, "We are socialized to see what is wrong, missing, off, to tear down the ideas of others and uplift our own," which is not actually a very productive strategy for activism. Instead, brown advocates for emergence, a related idea to futurity, conceptualizing emergence as a way of noticing how "small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies." In relation, "Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for" (brown). Using accountability to vulnerable communities as an invention strategy for imagining futures is one way in which Black Lives Matter works toward this type of capacity-building.

Black Lives Matter has received scholarly attention from fields such as African-American studies, history, journalism, and political philosophy (Taylor; Lowery; Ransby; Lebron; Joseph). BLM has also received some attention in rhetoric and composition, which has thus far been limited despite its presence as a major contemporary activist movement, and even more salient to our field, the central importance of rhetoric to Black Lives Matter as an activist intervention. Some scholarship has emerged but there is a need for more. For instance, in "Surviving Recognition and Racial In/justice," Wendy Hesford explores theories of recognition in the context of Black Lives Matter's actions and rhetoric. In recent *Present Tense* issues, André Carrington analyzes the construction "Black Lives Matter" using speech act theory, while James Alexander McVey and Heather Suzanne Woods explore both the organizing potential of BLM social media hashtags and their appropriation by racist groups. Santos F. Ramos, in the *Enculturation*

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special issue on cultural rhetorics, also explores harmful appropriations of the rhetoric of Black Lives Matter (Ramos). In an argument for more attention to critical race theory in rhetoric and composition, Aja Y. Martinez contextualizes the need for more tools to understanding systemic racism in the U.S. in the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a major moment that led to a greater public spotlight on BLM (10). And in a guest blog post for the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition, Pamela VanHaitsma et al explore the digital archiving of Black Lives Matter as in need of attention in feminist rhetorical studies.

In spite of these moments of attention, BLM is still widely misrepresented. In addition to common popular misconceptions of Black Lives Matter, it is also often not framed as a queer movement. This erasure of the queer threads in BLM happens in spite of its founders continually framing the movement as one founded by black queer women and centering queer and trans people. The erasure of the queerness in Black Lives Matter happens, in part, because many of those who critique its messaging are not used to making sense of intersectional movements and messaging. In rhetoric and composition, these divisions also play out, however unintentionally; we have traditions of work on rhetorics of race and queer rhetorics, but these areas of study are not usually intertwined. This division between race and queerness is one focus of Eric Darnell Pritchard's *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy,* which argues that rhetoric and composition has lacked resources for intersectional analyses in part because of "a dominant culture that renders the Black queer an invisible subject in literacy, composition, and rhetorical studies" (22). This chapter contributes to rhetoric and

composition scholarship on the intersectional public rhetorics of contemporary social justice movements at the intersection of queerness and race.

As part of a broader academic culture of erasure (Harris and González 2), the lack of attention our field has given to the rhetorical work of contemporary queer women of color not only demonstrates a major gap in the breadth of communities and practices represented, but also limits our ability as rhetoricians to understand and advocate for communities most threatened by dominant public rhetorics in this political moment. I am a white queer scholar, and I do not seek to appropriate these rhetorics, but instead to amplify them as sites of rich activist rhetorical praxis that are going largely ignored in a field that aims to interrogate how rhetoric shapes and is shaped by power relations. If we want to understand more about activist rhetorics in this contemporary moment, we need to look to the communities working at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression and developing rhetorics to accommodate expansive social critiques while also focusing specifically on those communities most threatened. To that end, this chapter offers an analysis of *Black Futures Month*, structured as following: first, I will provide context by briefly detailing the history of Black Lives Matter and the features that characterize its movement rhetoric; then, I will take a broad look at the *Black Futures Month* project, including its purpose, audience, and uses of multimodality; and finally, much of the chapter will focus on a close reading of specific themes from *Black Futures Month*.

History and Movement Rhetoric of Black Lives Matter

BLM was created by three black queer women activists: Alicia Garza, an organizer, writer, and Special Projects Director for the National Domestic Workers

Alliance; Opal Tometi, a writer, strategist, community organizer, and Executive Director for the Black Alliance for Just Immigration; and Patrice Cullors, a performance artist, organizer, Fulbright scholar, public speaker, and NAACP History Maker. Garza, Tometi, and Cullors started using #BlackLivesMatter as a hashtag after George Zimmerman was acquitted for the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, and it quickly spread and became not just a hashtag but a movement in response to widespread and systemic anti-blackness in the U.S. and worldwide (Garza). In the "Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," Garza frames the movement as an intervention by black queer women into racism and heteropatriarchy, and insists that the movement needs to counteract the erasure of queer women of color that often happens in the uptake of activist discourse; others "have taken the work of queer Black women and erased our contributions" (Garza), an appropriation with a long history; for example, the feminist movement's history of not acknowledging women of color's contributions while touting the contributions of white feminists. This erasure can be seen in the wide uptake of BLM as a movement to end police violence against black men, which ignores not only its queer women of color founders but also the systemic violence against black women and trans people. This erasure not only hurts vulnerable communities, but hurts the movement as a whole. For instance, as Kimberle Crenshaw asserts, describing the rationale behind the #SayHerName campaign that seeks to bring attention back onto violence against black women: "Inclusion of black women's experiences in social movements, media narratives, and policy demands around policing and police brutality is critical to effectively combating racialized state violence for black communities and other communities of color" ("#SayHerName").

Crafting intersectional messaging that helps build coalition *without* erasing the specific needs of especially threatened constituencies is a major rhetorical challenge for contemporary social justice movements. As scholar of rhetoric and race André Carrington writes of BLM's inclusivity, "Mobilizations of diverse participants under the herald of #BlackLivesMatter underscor[e] the inherent value of coalitions among constituencies otherwise divided by class, color, citizenship, age, gender, and ability" (3). Black Lives Matter works across multiple axes of oppression while also centering its messaging on its most vulnerable community members, such as queer people of color, not just to be inclusive but also to more effectively counter interconnected oppressions. BLM argues that many forms of oppression intersect, but the specific intersection of anti-Black racism and heteropatriarchy is at the center of these oppressions: "The legacy and prevalence of anti-Black racism and hetero-patriarchy is a lynchpin holding together this unsustainable economy. And that's not an accidental analogy" (Garza). While much BLM rhetoric does focus on police violence, as historian Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains in her history of the movement, it treats this violence as a symptom of systemic oppression: "[V]iolent policing does not exist in a vacuum; it is a product of the inequality in our society" (Taylor[3]). The depth of BLM's critique thus requires rhetoric that is capacious enough to conduct systematic analyses while also being specific enough to pinpoint the ways in which particular communities are threatened across specific times and contexts.

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[3] For several books cited in this chapter, I am referring to the Kindle edition and/or ebook editions provided by University of Louisville Libraries. As the MLA Handbook 8th edition states, because most ebooks do not have stable page numbering systems, "When a source has no page numbers or any other kind of part number, no number should be given in a parenthetical citation" (56), which is why page numbers are not provided here.

However, this deliberate rhetoric is often erased or overwritten by commentators who do not understand BLM's purposeful intersectional messaging, and misread it as disorganization or lack of a unified agenda. For instance, a 2017 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article claims that "if you want to know what that [BLM] movement is about, you won't find a Black Power-like treatise on its philosophical foundations. You'd have to cobble it together from various sources," and claims Black Lives Matter has a "scattershot ideology" and "leaderless structure" that "threatens the movement's future" (Parry). These claims are made in spite of the fact that Cullors, Tometi, and Garza outline on the BLM website a consistent and ideologically unified set of guiding principles, and specifically counter the claim that the movement is leaderless by arguing this is "a leaderfull movement" designed to challenge patriarchal models of hierarchical leadership (Black Lives Matter, "About"; Cooper, "11 Major"; "Platform"). In addition, the Movement for Black Lives, a united front of multiple racial justice organizations including the Black Lives Matter network, released an inclusive but detailed policy platform in 2016, which indicates the movement's ideology is deliberate and anything but "scattershot" (Black Lives Matter, "What We Believe").

BLM deliberately refuses hierarchical and single-issue activism because these are not only exclusionary, but they are also no longer working to address intersecting oppressions. As brown writes:

> We have lived through a good half century of individualistic linear organizing (led by charismatic individuals or budget-building institutions), which intends to reform or revolutionize society, but falls back into modeling the oppressive tendencies against which we claim to be pushing.

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Some of those tendencies are seeking to assert one right way or one right strategy. Many align with the capitalistic belief that constant growth and critical mass is the only way to create change, even if they don't use that language.

BLM aims to invent an alternative to this paradigm throughout its rhetoric. However, as is often the case, the intersectional, ideologically broad, and non-hierarchical messaging of Black Lives Matter becomes unintelligible according to the standards of the single-issue, leader-centric models of much mainstream activist and political discourse. And this misunderstanding is anything but innocent, but is instead both a product and producer of systemic racism.

Arguments for political change are commonly expected to be tailored for dominant audiences, made palatable through assimilationist messaging, and stripped of more radical content. This pressure to normativize a movement's rhetoric according to what will be most digestible to mainstream audiences is one reason why dominant feminist, LGBTQ rights, and racial justice messages have become effectively de-clawed. The deeper problem of assimilationist models for activism is that they are often capable of improving conditions for some who already have a certain degree of privilege, but incapable of deeper systemic change, failing those who are the least privileged and thus most vulnerable. Recent queer critiques have focused on challenging this tendency toward normativity in contemporary mainstream movement discourses, but these challenges often circle back on themselves in what queer theorist Jasbir Puar calls " a fatigued debate about the advances and merits of civil legitimation" (xiv). In rhetoric and composition, Jean Bessette deftly inserts rhetorical studies into the fray of these debates,

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arguing that rhetoricians can contribute an awareness of context that allows us to ask not whether something is queer or normative once and for all, but instead "Queer to whom? When? Where, and how? Normative to whom? When? Where, and how?" (157). This contextual focus is certainly helpful for studying and crafting activist messaging, but I argue here that in order to balance the need for rhetoric capable of both widespread systemic critique and improving specific material conditions for those most vulnerable, we need not only to ask what is queer and normative to whom across space and time, but also to ask to what degree does an example of queer rhetoric center its most vulnerable communities and to what effects *for those communities*.

In this chapter, I focus more specifically on the question of who is centered in activist rhetoric in order to build a model of accountability. Asking whom a rhetorical production centers, why, and how can give us more ways to evaluate the efficacy of such rhetoric—not according to its palatability to various audiences, but according instead to the degree to which it enacts accountability, for instance, to the queer communities of color most threatened in historical and contemporary contexts. Such questions about whom activist messaging centers shifts the conversation surrounding the radical or assimilationist threads in activist rhetorics more toward models of coalition, which as Karma R. Chávez describes, "do not assimilate into dominant and oppressive discourses, but they do "shif[t] among and between liberal/inclusionary, progressive, radical, and utopian political perspectives on the left side of the political spectrum in a way that points to coalition" (23). Centering accountability as the key criterion for activist rhetoric allows us to judge the efficacy of such rhetoric *not* according to its appeal or lack thereof to dominant audiences, its degree of assimilation or radicalness, normativity or queerness,

but *instead* according to its responsibility to vulnerable communities. Such a shift in focus that foregrounds accountability, I argue, is a more responsible way of studying, critiquing, amplifying, and producing activist rhetorics. And to understand what centering accountability looks like, we must learn from the communities already constructing activist rhetorics with the goal of enacting systemic critique while remaining accountable to those most affected by these inequitable systems.

By paying close attention to the rhetorical strategies enacted by activists such as the rhetors of *Black Futures Month*, scholars of rhetoric and composition can become more well equipped to evaluate arguments made in public about intersectional movements and can act as more informed allies for contemporary social justice, in addition to enriching our understanding of how intersectional activist rhetoric can work to persuade and shape perception. Specifically, these concerns ask us to think more deeply about questions such as: How can we study rhetorical productions in a way that enacts responsibility to communities of color and other populations most threatened in particular times and contexts? How can we develop criteria for rhetorical analyses that helps us understand whom a rhetorical production is centering and to what affects? How can we evaluate rhetorical productions based not only on audience but on accountability?

In order to examine in more detail how the intersectional rhetoric of Black Lives Matter gets taken up across the movement's messaging, this chapter will focus on a specific Black Lives Matter digital, multimodal project titled *Black Futures Month,* which the following section will describe in more detail. After this description, I will outline my methods for exploring *Black Futures Month* as an example of intersectional activist rhetoric, and will then detail an analysis of specific ways in which *Black Futures*

Month works rhetorically to move margins to center in order to mediate between specific and systemic in its messaging. I will end by describing the implications these rhetorical moves, capable of centering queer communities of color while also making varied critical connections, have for how we in rhetoric and composition can study, theorize, and advocate for contemporary activist rhetorics while enacting accountability to specific communities.

The *Black Futures Month* Project

Overview

The Black Lives Matter project *Black Futures Month* is an annual series, started in 2015, that aims to counter mainstream Black History Month celebrations in the U.S. *Black Futures Month* is comprised of daily blog posts during each February, each of which features visual art and a short essay. In the introduction to the first *Black Futures Month* in 2015, BLM cofounder Opal Tometi describes the project as "a month-long feature tackling 28 different cultural and political issues affecting Black lives" and explains that, during the month, "We'll hear from our leader-full movement and identify ways to take action on various issues that affect Black life, ranging from gentrification, to the transgender Black experience, to mental health and immigration." *Black Futures Month* resists any static representations of history or recovery, instead using history as one of many strategies in activist communication to work toward change in the future. As Tometi writes: "Though modern [Black History Month] observances have become routine and even commercialized, this year we find ourselves in the context of incredible and undeniable Black resistance and resilience – and so there can be no Black History Month as usual." Tometi frames *Black Futures Month* as a necessary alternative to the

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traditional, commemorative activities of Black History Month, which emphasize black achievements in the past but divert attention from resistance in the present.

Like BLM's rhetoric in general, *Black Futures Month* insists that struggle over meaning, positionality, and who is centered are essential to activist rhetorics that are truly accountable to communities of color, not obstacles preventing these rhetorics from achieving their goals. As just a sampling, writers and artists insist on the intersectionality of blackness with queer and trans issues; feminism; disability; ageism; environmental racism; reproductive justice; healing justice and mental health; immigration and undocumented activism; and Muslim faith and faith-based anti-oppression work in general, while also arguing for the interconnectedness of multiple oppressive systems, for instance through articulating capitalism with poverty, incarceration, and militarization. In its three-year existence so far, *Black Futures Month* maintains the same mission while also adapting to the context of each particular year. Each year, the *Black Futures Month* series responds to the specific events of that year with a major impact on black communities, such as the ongoing 2014 Flint, Michigan water crisis and the 2016 presidential election. Before my close reading of specific themes in *Black Futures Month*, I will first spend more time detailing the project's audiences and its uses of multimodality.

Audiences

Black Futures Month is framed as a collaboration between the Black Lives Matter Network and the *Black Voices* section of the online publication *The Huffington Post,* a popular liberal news and commentary site. *Black Voices* operates as a digital publication with its own full editorial team composed of black editors and writers under the

leadership of Black Voices Senior Editor Lilly Workneh (Johnson). The *Black Futures*
Month posts are archived as blog posts on the *Black Voices* website and, during each
February, are shared widely through Black Lives Matter's wide social media presence
during each month-long *Black Futures Month* project.

The choice to publish here indicates the organizers, artists, and writers behind
Black Futures Month are speaking to a fairly in-group community that shares left-leaning
political views, rather than trying to persuade drastically different right-wing audiences.
However, a liberal audience does not guarantee agreement with the intersectional
antiracist messaging of Black Lives Matter. Indeed, one of the major threats to the
perpetuation of contemporary racism comes not only from the right, but also from the left
in a particular manifestation of the "abstract liberalism" that is a key component of
contemporary racist ideology (Bonilla-Silva 26). *Black Futures Month* reaches an
audience comprised of different constituencies under an umbrella of liberal readers: those
already on board with the mission and messaging of Black Lives Matter, and those who
may claim to be antiracist but actually be perpetuating liberal racism, however
unknowingly. These dual audiences can be seen in some of the reception for *Black*
Futures Month posts. The posts are received positively on Black Lives Matter's social
media, indicated by positive Facebook comments, Twitter shares, and comments on the
BLM website. However, on these posts and the original posts themselves hosted on *Black*
Voices, there are often other comments that accuse the series' writers and artists, and
BLM more generally, of being "divisive" by insisting on the specificity of "Black Lives
Matter," claims that emerge from abstract liberal appeals to an assimilationist, "we're all

the same" equality discourse without attention to structural inequities.[4] From this

consideration of audience, then, it is clear that Black Futures Month is working toward

multiple persuasive goals: for its in-group audiences of fellow antiracist activists, to offer

additional strategies for deepening that work and making sure it is intersectional; and for

its peripheral, liberal audiences, to argue for the importance of Black Lives Matter and its

continued work.

Multimodality

In 2016, the project added visual art to each day's post, which continued in 2017,

so these two years consist of paired pieces of writing and art on each particular issue. In

2015, the pieces were primarily textual and were accompanied by a stock photograph, as

is the practice in most *Huffington Post* articles. The addition of visual art by black artists

adds a further multimodal dimension to the project. As Shanelle Matthews, Director of

Communications for the Black Lives Matter Global Network, writes in the press release

for the 2016 *Black Futures Month:* "Each day in February, Black Lives Matter will

release an original piece of art and an accompanying written piece to reclaim Black

History Month and demonstrate the importance of using art as both an inspiration and an

organizing tool. Artists from across the country have been commissioned to use their

genius to promulgate the conversation about systemic racism and violence against Black

people." Like the writers in *Black Futures Month*, the artists featured are also activists

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[4] I am choosing not to reproduce original comments to protect the identities of those who have commented, and only talking about these comments in the aggregate. The artists and writers who create content for *Black Futures Month* clearly intend their work to be public, and are already public figures themselves; however, the commenters are not such public figures and I consider it more ethical to reference comments in general terms without attaching names.

who frequently use their work to share messages of social justice and advocate for black communities.
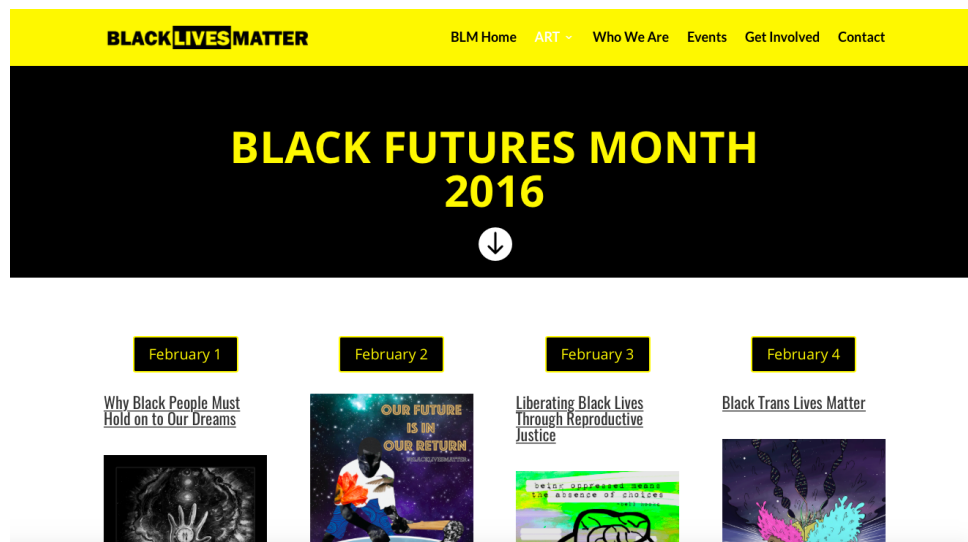
Figure 2: Black Futures Month 2016

Because the 2016 and 2017 series include visual artworks by black artists *and* short essays by black writers, the images and text accomplish different goals that unite to make the series more persuasive. As Jackie Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander write, "[C]omputer-mediated images in the public sphere bear considerable ideological freight" and can both reinforce and challenge normative representations of bodies, identities, and communities. In the case of *Black Futures Month,* the images work as visual representations of imagined black futures, carrying the ideological freight of visually portraying the desired futures as part of a strategy to imagine how society can be transformed. The images do not only represent the topic of each day's post, but also make critical connections to other topics and the intersectional mission of *Black Futures Month* in general. Additionally, the images serve as the primary means of circulating each day's post. Through their wide social media presences, Black Lives Matter and *Black Voices*

post a new image each day in February with a link to that day's full post, circulating the artworks as representations of the day's message on social media sites Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and Instagram while encouraging viewers to click through to the full post.

Methods

I proceed from a cultural rhetorics perspective of building rhetorical frameworks of activist communication from the ground up, from the rhetorical practices of communities. I place these practices in dialogue with scholarship that is also situated within these communities or that informs their traditions (ex. queer and feminist of color thought, the influence of which is prevalent in *Black Lives Matter's* rhetoric). My methodological approach is also informed by the vital importance of reflexivity and of using methods that start from and remain true to the data rather than allowing my own positionality and perspective to dominate. I am a white queer woman researching and writing about the rhetoric of Black Lives Matter. Because I am doing this work under white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, I must develop strategies to remain conscious of ways in which I may be enacting oppressive practices even while intending not to; as BLM activists consistently remind us, impact is greater than intention. I used the qualitative coding software Nvivo to analyze my data, which were the posts (writing and artwork) from *Black Futures Month*. My approach was guided by queer and feminist of color thought because the rhetors of *Black Futures Month* themselves acknowledge these influences.

Before this coding-aided close reading, I did a distant reading of the entire *Black Futures Month* project in order to familiarize myself with it more deeply and to detect trends and themes in the project. The project exists virtually in the blog archives of *Black*

Voices, interspersed with other blog posts and unified by the "black futures month" and

"black history month" tags. To construct a more unified vision of the project for myself, I

compiled a spreadsheet for my own use, with one tab for each year of *Black Futures*

Month up to the time of this writing (2015, 2016, and 2017). For each year, I entered

every post title with its author and bio, a link to the post, and for 2016 and 2017, the

name of the artist who composed the work associated with the post. After I had compiled

all of these posts (85 of them) into the spreadsheet, I moved through my distant reading

of the entire *Black Futures Month* project chronologically, from the first post of 2015 to

the last of 2017. Each time I read a post, I added a new column for that post in the

spreadsheet under the heading "key words," and made note of what themes the writers

and artists of each post identified and what communities and issues the post invoked (ex.

queer, trans, feminist, undocumented, environmental, state violence, policing,

incarceration). This strategy helped me conduct a distant reading of all of *Black Futures*

Month to see broad themes, especially the interconnectedness of these themes. After this

distant reading, knowing that I could not analyze all 85 posts in the project thus far, I

chose posts for inclusion in my research based on the key words. Because my project

focuses on the intersection of queer and antiracist rhetoric, I chose posts that specifically

invoke and connect these themes in their writing and art. I had originally intended only to

choose these posts, but my distant reading showed me that I also needed to choose others

that were not explicitly labeled "queer" in order to more deeply explore the

interconnectedness of identities and issues in this project, so I expanded to also include

posts that dealt with gender, including pieces focusing on black women or pieces that are

deliberately inclusive of trans folk whether or not the post's central argument is coded as

queer. I also included some posts that enact meta-commentary on the project to help guide my understanding and interpretation, such as the first post of each year and others where activists theorize the work being done by *Black Futures Month.* I then saved these posts using the Nvivo Web Capture feature. I imported these posts into Nvivo and categorized them into folders representing each year of *Black Futures Month*

The following analysis is structured to specifically examine how BLM builds an accountability-based rhetoric through enacting specific, consistent rhetorical practices: centering the margins to mediate between specific experiences and systemic oppressions; historicizing interconnected oppressions in the service of future-creation; and imagining futures as an accountability practice. Because I want to keep the work of the artists and writers in *Black Futures Month* central to this chapter, I have chosen to quote at length from the examples I draw from.

Accountability-Based Rhetorical Strategies in *Black Futures Month*

Centering the Margins to Mediate Between Specific and Systemic

One of the core rhetorical strategies present across BLM's messaging is the deliberate strategy of centering the margins in order to mediate between specific and systemic while keeping the focus on vulnerable communities. Moving margins to center has, of course, long been a key tenet of black feminist thought (hooks). Traditionally, a static center considered dominant is made even more stable through rhetorical strategies that push others, considered non-dominant, to the margins. This relationality between margin and center becomes more complex through intersectional analyses. As a counter-strategy to this marginalization, Black Lives Matter enacts an activist rhetoric that refuses to marginalize vulnerable community members.

To make sure that the rhetoric of BLM is centered on those most marginalized, the queer women of color founders of BLM consistently name them in their messaging ("affirm[ing] the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum"). The rhetoric of BLM refuses any easy, single-axis conception of identity politics. *Black Futures Month* could have splintered off intersecting oppressions and identities into single-axis or single-issue posts, but it consistently refuses this move, opting instead for the deliberate strategy of making critical connections between oppressions that characterizes much of BLM's broader discourse. This strategy is crystallized in an entry in the 2016 *Black Futures Month* titled "There is Freedom in the Water," in which performance artist, cultural worker, and documentarian Jamal T. Lewis writes that the movement for Black Lives must

> always consider… the bodies whom are always left behind in the quest for Black liberation: Black fat bodies, Black femme bodies, Black disabled bodies, Black stripper bodies, Black hoe bodies, Black HIV Positive Bodies, Black gender deviant bodies, Black poor bodies, Black unconventional bodies, Black depressed bodies, and Black malnourished bodies. These—and so many others—are all aspects of the Black body: messy, complicated, and whole. This is a metaphor for the movement that must be; it must hold all of us.

By drawing attention to specific black bodies who have previously been left behind, Lewis rhetorically moves these community members from the margins---"always left behind"---to the center, vitally important for a movement that seeks to improve all black

lives but will not succeed if it does not focus its attention on those black lives most

threatened by intersecting oppressions. The writers of *Black Futures Month* acknowledge

this work is a process rather than an already achieved goal. For instance, Elle Hearns, a

Strategic Partner and organizer with#BlackLivesMatter, and Treva B. Lindsey, a scholar

of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, write in the 2016 post "Sister to Sister:

Black Women Solidarity":

> Solidarity is something our movement heart is fond of, but in reality under
>
> the confines of white supremacy the practice is difficult. Solidarity for
>
> black women is often in relationship to capitalism, which creates a
>
> falsehood of our ability to truly be present for each other as black women.
>
> While Black cis and trans women are still under attack we can't move
>
> beyond mastering the art of solidarity in praxis. The move from idea to
>
> practice is unfinished.

Thinking of the "art of solidarity in praxis" is another way to build accountability. By

presenting solidarity as a struggle and a form of praxis, Hearns and Lindsey acknowledge

the larger structural barriers to solidarity (living under the confines of white supremacy

and capitalism) but also insist on solidarity's importance, especially for black cis and

trans women who are under attack.

　　While queerness is certainly not the only identity articulated with Black identity

in the *Black Futures Month* project, queer and trans identities consistently remain at the

center of the project's rhetoric alongside other marginalized identities, and the founders

of BLM have articulated the intersection of antiracism and heteropatriarchy as vital to the

BLM movement and its messaging (Garza, Tometi, and Cullors). *Black Futures Month*

enacts a centering of the margins in several key ways, engaging with past, present, and

future in a dynamic relationship, which the following section will detail more closely.

Historicizing Interconnected Oppressions in Service of Futures

"As Black women, they don't want us to win. We know that, and it has never stopped us
from doing what needs to be done- for the liberation of our people. It didn't stop Harriet,
Patrisse, Alicia, Opal, Shirley, Mother Marsha, Mother Major, Assata, Samaria, Ida, Ella,
Fannie, Rosa, Coretta, Septima, Pauli, JoAnne, Recy, Mary, Sojourner, Maria, Queen
Nanny, Nina, Miriam, Celia,and the millions of Black women known and unknown who
fought and fight for ALL of us. And it won't stop us." - Elle Hearns, BLM organizer and
Strategic Partner, and Treva B. Lindsey, Ohio State Professor of Women's, Sexuality,
and Gender Studies

In *Black Futures Month*, the role of history is not only as a recovery strategy or

method of retelling, but a tool in service of contemporary activist work. Tometi argues in

the introduction to the first *Black Futures Month*:

> As a community organizer who holds a degree in History, I understand the
>
> fascination with history. However, there is a tendency for many of us to
>
> get engrossed in the recounting of our history, which often amounts to
>
> purely intellectual activity without material action. In a day and age where
>
> every 28 hours a Black person is being killed with impunity,
>
> unemployment in Black communities is 12% and Blacks make up 40% of
>
> the imprisoned population, we can't afford to solely commemorate the
>
> past. We must seize the opportunity to change the course of history by
>
> shaping our future.

By framing *Black Futures Month's* purpose not as "solely commemorat[ing] the past" but

as a project contributing to Black Lives Matter activism that seeks to "change the course

of history by shaping our future," Tometi emphasizes the need to move away from

recounting history as a way to ignore present-day oppressions. In a contemporary context in which colorblind rhetoric is the dominant rhetoric of race in the United States, *Black Futures Month* aims to re-center black experiences of oppression through historicizing this oppression, insisting on critical connections between contemporary racism and the U.S.'s long saga of anti-blackness and heteropatriarchy.

Because the writers and artists of *Black Futures Month* are speaking to a mostly in-group audience, they are not only speaking back to broader dominant histories present in U.S. society, but also to the erasures and violence enacted by some Black History Month celebrations. For instance, in the 2015 post "Every Breath a Black Trans Woman Takes Is an Act of Revolution," Lourdes Ashley Hunter, National Director of The Trans Women of Color Collective, connects multiple levels of historicization, erasure, and oppression, centering the post on black trans women while making connections to broad contemporary and historical processes. Hunter writes that as a child, Black History Month celebrations helped her and her community members come together to historicize their experiences as a counter-strategy to dominant American narratives that erase histories of antiblack violence. Hunter writes that Black History Month helped her community "reflect on all we had overcome navigating a system designed to erase us off the face of the earth" and served as "a time that we could unapologetically acknowledge the bloody truth of this nation." Hunter directly juxtaposes dominant American narratives of history with the truth of racist oppression: "We were indoctrinated to believe America (stolen land) was discovered (invaded) by colonist (murderers, rapists, thieves) exploring the free world. We are still denied our history to this day." By placing the indoctrinations (America was discovered by colonists and explorers) next to the historical correctives of

what really happened (America was stolen and invaded by murderers, rapists, thieves), Hunter begins from an argument about the importance of historicizing antiblackness in order to counter dominant American ideologies and build community out of these shared struggles. However, Hunter then pushes toward another level of historicization that uncovers how black trans women have too often been left out of these reclamation narratives within black communities:

> It wasn't until I was a young adult that I realized that my life would be very different from what I had imagined. I had no idea that I would face brutal violence and structural oppression simply for existing. I had no idea I could be legally denied access to medical care, housing and employment. I never imagined that I would have to right for basic human rights. These experiences are similar to the ones my mom told me she experienced growing up in the 50's. Similar to the ones the history books re-written for the glorification and commodification of white supremacy. I thought the fight for Black folk to obtain civil rights in this country happened over 45 years ago. What I realized is that fight was not for the liberation of the Black Trans Woman.

Hunter historicizes her experiences of oppression as a black trans woman in terms of the erasure of racism in white narrations of history *and* the erasure of intersecting racism and heteropatriarchy even within black communities. Hunter places value on retellings of history that uncover this systemic racism, but also argues that these retellings cause suffering because they have not centered black trans women. In response, Hunter makes an argument that black trans women should be centered in contemporary discourse and

that their experiences should be historicized for a fuller understanding of the deep-rooted, interconnecting oppressions that emerge from these histories.

Media activist and human rights advocate Cherno Biko, in the 2016 entry "Black Trans Lives Matter, Too," historicizes contemporary violence against black trans women by recontextualizing this violence as emerging from a long history of antiblack violence: "[F]rom what is known, a majority of the black trans women lynched this year were either shot, burned, or stabbed to death while engaged in the sex trades. As I bear witness to these stories, I've begun contextualizing the violence against folks like us through the lens of Ida B. Wells' A Red Record, a work of investigative journalism that tracked lynchings in the 19th and 20th century. Her legacy empowered me to utilize communication technologies like social media to lift up our stories." Biko not only historicizes these recent murders through Wells' work on lynchings, but also uses Wells as historic inspiration to mobilize contemporary communication technologies, constructing an ongoing lineage of communication for counterviolence. Biko draws attention not only to this lineage of racist violence, but also to a lineage of resistance by drawing on Wells' work tracking 19th and 20th century lynchings in order to use contemporary communication technologies to publicize the need for more attention to violence against black trans women. In centering black trans women, Biko rhetorically moves margins to center through an act of historicizing that is meant to help readers understand how better to advocate for a contemporary community under threat. Biko also places black trans women at the center of Black Lives Matter: "My whole life was changed when I traveled to Ferguson with the Black Lives Matter freedom rides, in the aftermath of Michael Brown's murder. Witnessing the power and resilience of queer and

trans black women especially, gave me hope that this iteration of the movement for black

lives would not fail to center our most vulnerable and precious members." Biko directly

connects the power of the Black Lives Matter movement to its strategy of centering on

those most vulnerable, including queer and trans black women.

While this part of the post's text works to historicize contemporary violence

against black trans women, the accompanying illustration

by artist Ethan Parker visualizes the concept of circulating

these stories into the future. The image features two people

styled in a futuristic way that connotes a deconstructed

gender binary; they are connected at the shoulder, one head

with pink hair and other with blue, colors traditionally

gendered female and male. Below their shoulders, they are

shown with robot-like parts, emerging from a modified

Figure 3: "Self-Made" by Ethan Parker

symbol for transgender identity overlaid with the text

"We are black & trans" and "#BlackLivesMatter." The figures are presented as

complementary; for instance, one has a third eye, while another's eyes are covered by a

visor. From the backs of their heads, an open box full of wires is shown, and from these

wires emerge three DNA-like strands, the DNA connoting a rich history of information

passed down through time but continuing to change in the future. Brushstrokes that point

out from the central figures indicates an outward spread of communication. Taken

together, the image and text of this post work together to argue that it is important to

historicize black trans experiences in order to work toward better futures. They also play

with the simultaneous need for specificity in centering those most vulnerable, and the

need for broader and more inclusive understandings of gender. Biko centers the post's analysis on black trans women because this is the population currently experiencing the most violence, thus most vulnerable. Parker's image is inclusive of trans women but also opens up visual space for additional trans experiences.

In the 2017 post "Uncaged Black Futures Now," Black Lives Matter Urbana-Champaign organizer Kadeem Fuller makes the critical connection between contemporary mass incarceration and centuries of antiblackness:

> The era of mass incarceration is only the most recent iteration of an attempt to socially control the movements of Black bodies. Before prisons, Jim Crow worked to repress the spirit and self-determination of Black folk. Before Jim Crow, Africans were stolen from their ancestral lands, voided of family rights and lineage and forced into a capitalistic colonization project. That project continues today, and black bodies are still on the market. From the inception of the American colonies to today and from deep in the bowels of capitalist governments, laws, policies, practices and attitudes have been created to regulate the positionality of Black folk.

By focusing the analysis on the social control of black bodies, Fuller creates a unified narrative of antiblack oppression and makes connections between contemporary and historical forms of antiblackness. Fuller continues to cite works such as Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow* to Ava DuVernay's documentary film *13th* to provide a corrective history lesson tying sagas of racism from slavery to the war on drugs to contemporary mass incarceration. In addition, Fuller points to the fact that some black

bodies are more vulnerable than others: "The rise of the carceral state has only continued to take the hopes, futures and lives of many amongst us. The United States warehouses 25 percent of the world's prison population and the silhouettes in those cages are disproportionately Black women, Black trans folk and Black men." These people are often seen as "silhouettes in cages," stripped of identity and difference, but Fuller reinscribes their identities by pointing out that they are "Black women, Black trans folk and Black men," in the process also working to disrupt the common focus only on black men---the default silhouette in much public discourse on incarceration---and shift to a rhetoric that does more work to center black women and trans folk. The art heading this post by Damon Locks also features this concept of silhouetted figures, foregrounding three black figures whose features are mostly indistinct but also slightly intelligible. While Fuller's post does not center entirely on women or trans people, its presence in the full series alongside other posts that do center these communities works to create a cohesive narrative across different posts.

Other examples of historicizing as a rhetorical strategy are plentiful in *Black Futures Month.* For instance, Alicia Garza in the 2016 essay "Do We Care For The Black Women Who Care For Us?" connects contemporary gendered oppression in the home care industry with long historical processes: "The history of Black women in the economy is rooted in the legacy of slavery. Enslaved Black women were forced to provide care work, unpaid, for white families… 32% of homecare workers are Black, and 91% are women." Others specifically historicize black activist struggles in order to re-center the contributions of black women and queer and trans people; for instance, by reminding readers that the term reproductive justice was created by black women.

Writers and artists consistently work to historicize contemporary oppressions, especially for communities not often centered in such discourse, such as black women and trans people.

Further, the rhetors of *Black Futures Month* consistently historicize oppressions as deeply interconnected at their roots in order to forward an argument that antiracist activism must be intersectional to intervene at the level of society's structural inequities while also centering those most vulnerable to these inequities. Writers and artists in *Black Futures Month* insist on the interconnectedness of many aspects of systemic racism. In a 2015 post titled "End the Anti-Black Police State," political organizer and writer Charlene A. Carruthers writes, "Black people who fall outside of the protected norms of whiteness, gender conformity, heterosexuality, middle-class and otherwise so-called respectable appearances are routinely harassed, arrested, sexually assaulted, incarcerated and killed." In addition to this intersectional focus on which members of black communities are most threatened, Carruthers makes critical connections between issues often treated as disparate, arguing, "Where we go from here requires us to see that the systems that fund tear gas in Ferguson, MO, the police officers gun in Cleveland, OH, the

tanks in occupied Palestine and the detention centers in Arizona are all connected." While there may seem to be a tension between specificity and broadness in this rhetoric--- arguing for specific attention to black communities who fall outside of particular norms, *and* making broad connections between American police violence and Palestinian occupation---when examined closer, they are not actually in tension but two complementary strategies for movement-building. *Black Lives Matter* needs messaging that is both specific and capacious at the same time; it needs a rhetoric of centering the

margins to foreground those to whom it seeks to be most accountable, while also making critical connections between the intersecting oppressions that disproportionately affect those on the margins. What Carruthers does here is one example of this rhetoric in action. Of course, no one blog post can overthrow systemic racism, but it can make an argument about the type of thinking and the type of rhetoric needed to move toward this goal.

Some in *Black Futures Month* make explicit moves to center queer and trans black communities in their rhetoric by connecting racial justice activism to struggles faced by these specific communities and demonstrating how these intersect. As Isaiah R. Wilson, External Affairs Manager for the National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC), writes in an entry to the 2015 Black Futures Month titled "Black LGBT Lives Deserve Love and Liberation, Too": "We must be intentional to focus the present #BlackLivesMatter movement and any other future Black liberation movement on the needs of the most marginalized in our communities, including LGBT people. No longer can mainstream Black organizations and movements be silent on LGBT issues like the HIV/AIDS epidemic that continues to ravage Black families or the all too frequent murders of Black transgender women in our own neighborhoods." By pinpointing specific struggles---the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the murders of Black trans women--- Wilson models accountability by insisting that Black movements must speak out on specific LGBT issues.

In "Sister to Sister: Black Women Solidarity" (2016), Black Lives Matter organizer Elle Hearns and Ohio State gender studies scholar Treva B. Lindsey write, "Black women/femmes constantly are on the frontlines of movements, pop culture, and our collective visioning of our communities. We must continue being on the frontlines for

each other." It is also key that they explicitly insist on the construction "black women/femmes," in a subtle but important linguistic move against the erasure of black women who are not cisgender. They continue this process of centering throughout the essay, using specific language such as "Black cis, trans, and femme folks are still under attack." Here, Hearns and Linsey refuse to generalize "black women"---a generalization that often defaults to the already privileged thus considered default "cis women"---and instead focus their analysis on "black cis, trans, and femme folks," rhetorically challenging the construction of "black women" and in the process arguing not only for a practice of centering those most marginalized, but reconceiving what solidarity among black women---including cis, trans, and femme people---can look like. They also point out moments when the movement fails to center trans and queer people even when trying to enact solidarity: "There's a fault line in how Black cis women are embracing, acknowledging, and citing the world-making of Black trans*, femmes, and queer folks. We must work to resolve an uneven dialogical relationship for true solidarity to be possible" (Hearns and Lindsey). By insisting on the resolution of this "uneven dialogical relationship," Lindsey argue that centering and acknowledging the intellectual work of Black trans*, femme, and queer folks is an important way to maintain accountability to these communities that are both most in need of true solidarity *and* most traditionally overwritten in movement discourse.

Accountability to the most vulnerable communities in a given time and context not only helps ensure that these communities are not left behind in a movement, but also puts structures in place to improve conditions for *all* by starting with those most threatened, and in the process, challenging the systems that enact these threats with the

goal of ending systemic oppressions for all. In a 2017 post on Black Muslim futures, Miski Noor, Communications Strategist for the Black Lives Matter Global Network, argues:

> It is critical, as we build movements and political power, that we create and lift up narratives that unify us, but that also reflect the true ways in which oppression and the State operate. We do not serve ourselves, our people or our futures otherwise. We must lift up the reality that what is happening in our country and around the world is the growth of fascism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia, anti-Semitism and more---AND we must lift up the reality that all of these forms of hatred are based in anti-Black racism and white supremacy. Without making these critical connections, we do not do the important work of connecting our struggles and fighting the real enemy---white supremacy.

Noor draws attention to the necessity of *both* connecting complex issues such as "fascism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia, anti-Semitism and more," *and* centering these issues as "based in anti-Black racism and white supremacy." In addition, Noor works to center specific black communities; connecting struggles and fighting white supremacy "means supporting, loving and protecting those on the frontlines, especially youth, Black femmes, Black trans folks and AfroMuslims. This also means supporting local fights." While the article in part insists on acknowledging the specificity of Black Muslim experiences, Noor also does the critical work of connecting these struggles to other struggles against white supremacy. By insisting on *both* the interconnectedness of global antiracist struggles *and* centering Black experiences,

especially the experiences of black communities particularly vulnerable to interconnected oppressions, Noor enacts an intersectional analysis to think through the question of how movements can build connections across struggles while also putting strategies in place to refuse the erasure of Black people. And Noor takes this a step further by insisting that "youth, Black femmes, Black trans folks and AfroMuslims" as "those on the front lines," those both leading the movement and at the most risk.

The theme of immigration continues across the 2017 series as an especially important connection in the context of surges of anti-immigration legislation and public sentiment. In a piece of artwork by Cuban artist Nancy Lisandra Cepero Dominico paired with a post titled "What About Us?: The Black Immigrant Narrative" by Benjamin Ndugga-Kabuye of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, Dominico visually connects black and immigrant experiences. The image features a person with brown skin and hair holding a dandelion as the

Figure 4: Art by Nancy Lisandra Cepero Dominico

petals drift away. Above, a map of the globe is pictured, and the dandelion petals are shown spreading over each continent. The map places Africa at the center of the image and in its true size as much larger proportionately than North America, a correction only recently being made to some maps that have long perpetuated the colonialist practice of portraying North America as larger. At the bottom of the image there is text saying "*Cada persona tiene su lugar en el mundo que, no ha de ser necesariamente aquel donde nació, sino donde logra multiplicarse y crecer*" ("Every person has their place in the world. This place is not necessarily where one was born, but rather where one is able to

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multiply and grow"). The image illustrates that diverse experiences may originate with one shared identity, but spread and change across context and location. However, what remains the same is the idea of interconnectedness; that the petals in North America and in Africa and Europe, for instance, share some similar origins while also having different needs. For instance, in the text of this post, Ndugga-Kabuye writes that not identifying with the gender binary affected their experience as a black immigrant.

In all of these examples, accountability is not just a matter of accurately representing particular communities, but enacting a commitment to both *be led by* the most threatened communities and *to work for* these communities. These commitments require movement messaging that communicates an understanding of how struggles intersect while also keeping the central focus on those most vulnerable to these intersecting struggles in specific contexts. In the following section, I focus more specifically on how the act of imagining futures works as an accountability practice and a movement strategy.

Imagining Futures as Accountability Practice

"White people have long tethered the humanity of Black people to the whim of white imagination. The stories policymakers and racists tell about people like us and the places from which we come are predicated on assumptions imagined long before we were born by people who meant us harm. Those stories may be true for some individuals, but are untrue for whole communities. Those stories may have shaped the way people understand our place in the world, our trajectory and our value – but we do not assent." - Shanelle Matthews, Director of Communications for the Black Lives Matter Global Network

In a 2017 post titled "Black Friendship, Black Love," writer, organizer, and digital strategist Amber Phillips paraphrases social justice facilitator adrienne maree brown's statement that "all organizing is science fiction because we are working towards

a world that is free from oppression even though that is not our current reality." This

concept of imagining futures to work toward ending oppression is central to *Black

Futures Month*. As Shanelle Matthews, Director of Communications for the Black Lives

Matter Global Network, writes in the introduction to the 2017 *Black Futures Month*:

"[W]hen we find spaces to dream and imagine, what we once understood to be merely

possible becomes exponentially more real. When we use dreaming and radical

imagination as a strategy—like organizing, like communications, like fundraising—we

can set concrete goals based in our highest visions and work in tandem to realize them."

Imagining futures is framed here not as an abstract concept but as a deliberate activist

strategy, made to work alongside organizing, communications, fundraising, and other

strategies key to activist movements, in order to accomplish goals. Specifically,

imagining futures operates not only as a strategy to imagine a world free of oppression,

but also acts as an invention strategy to maintain accountability to vulnerable

communities by focusing on what needs to change for whom in order to work toward that

world.

Imagination as a form of resistance has long been a key element of queer and

feminist of color theory and action. As Hari Ziyad, Editor-in-Chief of the online antiracist

platform, RaceBaitR writes in the 2016 post "Like Black Lives, Black Arts Do Matter,"

acknowledging traditions of Black resistance emerging from various forms of imagining

and art:

> Through music, film, dance, poetry, fiction, prose, the stage and beyond,
>
> Black artists have created new worlds and ways of living, sparking vital,
>
> paradigm-shifting ideas or prompting further necessary questions in

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exploration of what a revolutionary future looks like. Morrison and

Hurston force us to reckon with raced and gendered violence. Baldwin

broke open for us new ways of perceiving identity and white pathology.

Ailey redefined modernity… Black art matters in creating a future free of

oppression. Going forward, we must consider how we best turn this

sentiment not just into a response to opposition - not as a question or a

debate - but into tools that help us create a Black affirming world where

opposition is altogether no longer relevant. That is the function of art, after

all.

Ziyad situates this argument in a history of black art by invoking black artists and writers

who, through their imaginative work, have also accomplished rhetorical work such as

shifting perceptions. Ziyad highlights a function of art that goes beyond critique and into

strategic imagining of what a society free of interconnected systems of oppression would

look like, and what we need to do to work toward that vision, in the tradition of

Afrofuturism. Imagination is framed as a radical activist strategy, as opposed to often

imaginatively limited liberal politics. As *Black Futures Month* writer Charlene A.

Carruthers writes, "Our freedom dreams must be radical. Our way forward must be

radically inclusive or it will repeat the same strategies, tactics, policies and ideas that

have failed our people before."

The acts of imagination in *Black Futures Month* conceive of alternatives to

systemic problems while also remaining centered on vulnerable communities and their

specific needs. As Barbara Ransby, Distinguished Professor of African American

Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, and History at the University of Illinois at

Chicago, writes in the last *Black Futures Month* post of 2017, titled "Revolutionary Musings":

> The blunt truth is that when we curtail the billionaire class's ability to exploit the system – pillaging and stealing from the rest of us – we all live much better and freer. When we can implement truly democratic decision making, rather than settling for politics as circus performance, we move farther down the freedom road. And when we own up to the bloody legacy of chattel slavery and genocide, as a nation, we create possibilities for revolutionary change – change for everyone. But it has to begin with those who have been the most marginalized and disenfranchised.

Even if these radical imaginings remain an invention strategy rather than a concrete reality, this strategy still remains vital to activism that seeks to change the system instead of assimilating into it while leaving its deeper flaws intact. In the case of *Black Futures Month*, artists and writers use radical imagination as a way to conceive of an alternative society that is not built from antiblack racism, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and other interconnected systems of domination. By imagining these alternative possibilities, these rhetors pinpoint ways in which the current order of things is not natural but is built, denaturalizing dominant and normativizing societal practices through their critiques. As Shayna Cureton, founder of the community education and empowerment initiative Abundant Beginnings, writes in the 2017 post "Black and Blooming": "Yes, the general circumstances are white supremacy, mass incarceration and gentrification. No, these are not just big words for amorphous, ethereal phenomena.

These circumstance are the concrete, daily habits of human people that directly cause the suffering of black children."

However, these rhetors do not stop at critique but instead insist on imagining alternatives as a creative activist praxis—something we can learn from in academia, which very often treats critique as a purpose in itself. Imagining futures has generative potential especially in light of the fact that oppression works in part by limiting imagination. In the 2016 post "Why Black People Must Hold On To Our Dreams," Black femme performance artist Kiyan Williams explains:

> Systems of domination wage wars against our psyches and imagination, constantly presenting us with realities in which, to put simply, Black people are dying in the present and have no possible future. The psychic oppression we experience as a result of anti-black state violence disallows the possibility for a world wherein Black people can live, let alone thrive. Under systems of domination, during times of hopelessness and pessimism, what compels us to keep fighting, to keeping on keeping on?

As Williams argues, one of the ways oppression works is by-disallowing the possibility of imagining a future. Systems of domination control the movement of bodies and the movement of minds, placing bounds on what it seems possible to imagine. In response to this "psychic oppression," Williams frames imagining black futures as an intervention that is vital to activism:

> Imagining Black futures is a critical intervention and generative practice in Black liberation. In order for me to be alive right now I had to be able to dream and conjure images of resistance, presents wherein my people

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fought and resisted police violence, futures beyond white supremacist cis

heteropatriarchy that I wanted to inhabit. Our imaginations nurture the fire

of liberation. They allows us to experiment and explore alternative

realities like: what does a world without police and prisons look like? And

how can we exist and love outside of the gender binary, transmisogny, and

systems of domination.

Williams rhetorically connects several systems of oppression ("white supremacist cis

heteropatriarchy") and frames imagined futures as a deliberate alternative to these

interconnected systems, which also requires imagining alternatives to each component of

these systems: a future that is not only antiracist, but also "outside of the gender binary,

transmisogny, and systems of domination." This rhetoric insists on the necessity for

intersectional messaging in the invention of activist futures---or else one system of

oppression may be challenged, but not fully, failing to remain accountable to community

members made more vulnerable precisely because of intersecting oppressions.

Instead of leaving anyone behind, *Black Futures Month*'s examples of

imagination as an activist invention strategy deliberately center those most vulnerable as

an argument that the most radical and anti-oppressive visions emerge from these

communities, so movements should remain accountable to them in order to really affect

change. As Biko writes in the 2016 post "Black Trans Lives Matter Too":

I dream a world in which all black lives matter. A world where we are not

poisoned by the water and genetically modified foods. I dream a world

where our black bodies are not criminalized because of sex work or

HIV/AIDS. I dream a world where we have complete and total access to

the entire universe without barriers or borders. I envision a world without

prisons and without police. I envision a world that supplies our basic

needs like, housing and medical care for all people. I dream a world

centered around black women because the black woman is god and black

girls are magic. The role of the black queer and trans prophets leading this

struggle for liberation is to usher in a new world order full of love, beauty,

compassion and empathy.

As Biko argues here, the ability to envision a world without oppression emerges from the

centering of black women, girls, queer and trans people. Centering activism on these

communities is not just a tool for inclusion; it changes the work itself. When these

communities are centered, their visions influence activist goals that more deeply

challenge systemic, interconnected oppressions. By framing black queer and trans people

as "prophets" and leaders in the struggle for liberation, Biko reframes them central to

achieving liberation, a message that does not allow racial justice movements to call

themselves successful while also leaving these people behind. In other words, centering

on those most vulnerable in imagined futures also helps to create accountability in the

present. As Chávez argues, "It is crucial to understand coalitional moments and

possibility through public rhetoric because publicity creates not only visibility and

accessibility but also accountability.., the public declarations of solidarity, alliance, and

political desires create expectations for activists to be accountable" (15). Thus, if done in

Figure 5: "Origins of Black Futures"
by Naima Penniman

a way that is rhetorically effective, declaring solidarity with a particular community or communities is not only an empty declaration but a strategy for creating accountability.

In the artwork titled "Origins of Black Futures," paired with the 2016 post "Sister to Sister: Black Women Solidarity," artist, activist, and educator Naima Penniman visualizes the importance of centering the margins to imagined futures (see Figure 5). Literally centered in the image are collaged cutouts of many black activists of different ages and gender presentations. On the edges of this center, images circulate that invoke both histories and futures. The background of the artwork is a futuristic space-themed pattern, with planets serving as a border to the central collage. Animals and flowers also form a circle with the planets, connoting life and motion. Interspersed with these images are several invocations of history, such as a clay figure of a woman and an Eye of Horus. At the bottom of the artwork there are images that evoke groundedness, such as dark terrain-like shapes on which stand giraffes and a tree. The image implies that from the grounded experiences of black communities working in coalition, as represented by the people central to the image, new and futuristic imaginings may be reached, represented by the space-themed imagery of the upper half of the artwork. To work toward these futures, activism must remain centered on these communities *and* stay conscious of histories.

These strategies for radical imagination centered on vulnerable community members also allow *Black Futures Month* to mediate between the specific and systemic. As Matthews writes, grounding imagination in the context of the early 2017 presidential executive orders targeting immigrant communities and communities of color, imagination is not an abstract idea but is rooted in the material realities of oppression, while also seeking ways to improve these realities: "Of the many things we're compelled and encouraged to do first in the face of Trump's attacks on our basic rights and humanity, dreaming isn't necessarily one of them. But in the face of unimaginable assaults on our futures, we absolutely cannot cede our ability to imagine for ourselves." Matthews places recent, specific threats, such as Republican plans to repeal the Affordable Care Act, the Flint water crisis, and ICE immigration raids, in the context of the "constant danger of physical harm" that represents systemic racism. Matthews frames imagination as a necessity in this context as a form of reprieve, but even more than that, as a vital activist strategy. Matthews continues: "We invoke dreaming and radical imagination as a survivalist movement strategy. And we use our dreams and our imagination liberally." To work against systems of oppression that violently place limits on imagination, Matthews argues, it is necessary to seek new imaginings, especially from communities whose imaginings have been most often targeted.

In some *Black Futures Month* posts, artists and writers invent specific visions for black futures. For instance, in the 2016 post "Black Futures: Imagining a World Where Ending Partner Violence Was a Priority," Yolo Akili, Founder & Executive Director of BEAM (Black Emotional & Mental Health Collective), writes that ending intimate partner violence is often considered impossible when "[w]e can't even acknowledge male

privilege, or affirm the value of black trans women's lives." Robinson insists, "How in the world can we come together and use all our power to end intimate partner violence? But I imagine anyway." This imagining takes the form of an expansive vision that addresses partner violence at the root causes, centering on those most vulnerable to invent ideas for a future, beginning from the idea that gendered socialization is one of the root causes of partner violence:

> In My Black (Feminist) Future: Gendered socialization will be declared a public health emergency. National recognition of how forced gender socialization contributes to domestic violence and mental health will be the norm. Programs will be established at black schools focusing on cultivating "responsible young people" with a number of qualities that are gender non specific and do not stem from respectability politics.

Robinson goes on to imagine specific actions that would emerge from this goal of ending forced gender socialization: "Administrative and legislative policies will be set in place that prohibit policing gender in public schools. We will have Community Healing & Accountability boards in every city." In calling for structures of accountability, Robinson specifically indicates that they will emerge from black feminist and womanist traditions: "When someone has committed harm these boards will execute alternative housing (in someone's home as a first option, before a shelter), and lead all involved through a black feminist and womanist informed accountability and restoration program where those who have harmed will face their actions to the community at large, those harmed receive protection and all are supported in healing." In addition, Robinson specifies that "These programs will be lead by members of the communities and be funded by these

communities," keeping the focus on vulnerable communities having responsibility over their own practices instead of having structures imposed from the outside that do not fit community needs. Robinson goes on to describe other elements of this imagined future, including Emotional Health Education in all communities in schools; making "services that address Black Women's healing and accountability... be inclusive and competent for Black Trans and Cis women," and utilizing Black Feminist Clinical Therapy to "creat[e] dynamic exercises, activities and clinical spaces that dismantle ideas and complexes that perpetuate transphobia, sexism, misogyny, ableism and racism," among other goals. In creating this vision, Robinson centers those most vulnerable, mediates between the specific and systemic, and draws from black feminist traditions to imagine what solutions to partner violence could look like if these solutions went to the roots of the problem by taking a multi-pronged, intersectional approach to disrupting gendered socialization and helping those who have been harmed by this socialization in an environment oriented toward healing, not punishment. This vision radically reconceives what approaches to intimate partner violence can look like by starting with those most vulnerable in order to imagine future societies that look entirely different from current society. This act of imagining is a rhetorical strategy to ask what different futures may be conceived if activists start with the needs of those most vulnerable and center these communities.

The act of imagining futures can be one strategy to create radical accountability models that imagine what a world could look like if activist movements worked toward addressing the roots of interconnected oppressions with a focus on those most threatened by these oppressions. Imagining what a world without these deep-rooted oppressions could look like can act as an invention strategy for movement-building; in imagining this

world, activists must ask whose struggles must be alleviated and what systemic barriers must be removed in order for this world to become a reality. In the process of this invention, a movement can build more accountability to its most vulnerable community members by centering its goal on the changes necessary to make a better world *for those communities*, building intentional structures to avoid the tendency of activist movements to assimilate into existing structures and only improve circumstances for those already privileged by those structures.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the intersectional rhetoric of Black Lives Matter as enacted through *Black Futures Month*, and I have charted a rhetorical framework for activist communication as deployed by the writers and artists of *Black Futures Month*. That framework relies on the rhetorical strategy of centering the margins to mediate between the specific and systemic and foregrounds accountability as a measure of activist messaging. I have also identified strategies that help accomplish the larger goal of mediating and centering the margins: historicizing oppression, connecting contemporary struggles, and imagining futures. The artists and writers mobilize these strategies in conjunction in *Black Futures Month* to construct an intersectional activist rhetoric that centers on black lives while also insisting on the interconnectedness of oppressions. I see my research here as a starting point for more attention to the rhetoric of Black Lives Matter in rhetoric and composition scholarship, especially in cultural rhetorics, and I have sought to amplify the voices of the artists and writers of *Black Futures Month*. More knowledge of these strategies and their activist uptake can help broaden rhetoric and composition's understanding of non-dominant forms of rhetorical practice, while also

preparing rhetoric and composition scholars to be better advocates for intersectional

rhetoric in the public spheres through which we and our work travel.

Because of both my project's focus on intersections between queerness and race

and the BLM cofounders' stated focus on the interconnection of racism and

heteropatriarchy, I have focused my analysis on these specific intersections in *Black*

Futures Month while also gesturing to the multiple intersecting oppressions that the

writers and artists in the project discuss. While I tried to keep queerness and race at the

center of my analysis, as can be seen from the type of intersectional rhetoric used in

Black Futures Month, any one specific intersection also branches into more complex

understandings of systems, identities, and oppressions. However, I will conclude with the

idea that this complexity is not a hindrance, but a resource. In both academic and activist

contexts, queer and feminist rhetoricians have been paying lip service to intersectionality

for decades, and we should acknowledge these histories of use while also paying closer

attention to how intersectionality is being used in practice by contemporary communities

of color.

By not focusing on the complex theorizing and activist rhetorical praxis currently

being developed by these communities, academics risk perpetuating a long-standing trend

of erasing the intellectual work of people of color, especially women and queer people.

This erasure not only continues broader exclusionary and racist practices in society in

general, but also weakens our scholarship, teaching, and community work, making us as

rhetoricians less prepared to participate in contemporary political struggles and certainly

less equipped to do so while staying accountable to the communities most impacted by

the outcomes of these struggles. In rhetoric and composition, and academic more broadly,

we are familiar with public rhetoric but we have not done as well understanding accountability. I ask those invested in feminist, queer, and racial justice rhetoric to continuously step back and ask whom the work is centering and to whom it is accountable, and in this chapter, I have explored some specific strategies for conducting analyses that ask who is centered in particular messaging and how accountability is rhetorically constructed. I have also argued that being intentional and deliberate is vital to this practice. As Ahmed writes, "There is no guarantee that in struggling for justice we ourselves will be just. We have to hesitate, to temper the strength of our tendencies with doubt; to waver when we are sure, or even because we are sure. A feminist movement that proceeds with too much confidence has cost us too much already." Because writing about activism also does not automatically guarantee accountability to the communities being advocated for, I have explored how we in rhetoric and composition can look to, credit, and center the intellectual work being done by queer communities of color to develop accountability models across multiple axes of oppression. The 85 posts that constitutes *Black Futures Month's* archive thus far---an archive that also grows each year---contain many productive avenues for inquiry into the connections between race and several other axes of identity and oppression. By paying closer attention to this rich example and others like it, we can build accountability as a new model for rhetorical criticism dealing with contemporary struggles.

CHAPTER THREE

CELEBRATORY QUEERNESS AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

IN *THE IDENTITY PROJECT*

A 2013 *New York Times* article titled "Generation LGBTQIA" claims that

younger activists are "forging a political identity all their own, often at odds with

mainstream gay culture," using new terms to disrupt gender and sexuality (Schulman).

Other recent media coverage has also highlighted an explosion of identity terms and

contemporary ways of thinking about LGBTQ identifications, especially gender

identifications; for instance, *National Geographic* has launched a "Gender Revolution"

special issue accompanied by a two-hour documentary, and Facebook now provides 58

unique options for users to identify their genders, with an additional option to write in

their own if none of the pre-provided options fit (Wong).

In 2014, responding to this growing public exigence to complicate understandings

of LGBTQ identities, photographer Sarah Deragon began the portrait project *The Identity

Project.* The project is a sprawling catalogue of a wide array of LGBTQ identities,

comprised of individual portrait photographs each paired with an identity label composed

by the portrait subject to describe their identity. As Deragon states, the project "seeks to

explore the labels we choose to identify with when defining our gender and sexuality"

and looks in particular for "participants who are POC [people of color], trans*, bisexual,

youth, elders, disabled, immigrants and otherwise identify outside of the mainstream lesbian and gay culture" ("FAQ"). The identity markers that participants choose often combine and create diverse queer identifications, such as "provocateur lesbian dandy," "sassy switch femmeboi," "other queer unicorn." Some of these terms only signify in the context of queer communities, or have
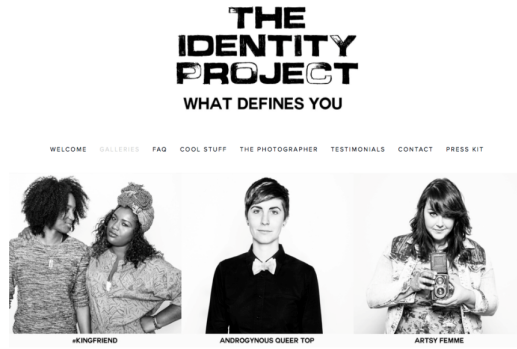
Figure 6: The Identity Project

different resonances there, while others invent and mix identifications in their choice of labels. The project compiles and archives these photographs into galleries organized by the city where they were taken (U.S. cities with the exception of St. Petersburg, Russia, where Deragon was invited as part of an underground Russian QueerFest), and collects them on a website (identityprojectsf.com) (See Figure 6).

In some ways, *The Identity Project* could be framed as a rhetorical success, an instance of a marginalized group critiquing dominant, limiting conceptions of LGBTQ identity. The project has enjoyed a wide and overwhelmingly positive uptake in liberal, feminist, and queer digital media. It raised $10,000 on the crowdfunding site Indiegogo, and it has traveled to eight U.S. cities and has started to expand internationally. Photographs from the project have been exhibited in public spaces, such as the Russian QueerFest Exhibition and an LGBTQ History Month display at Ohio State University ("Cool"). The participant testimonials included on *The Identity Project* website express feelings of gratitude for the recognition the project has given to people who have often

felt invalidated in other contexts ("Testimonials"). It has also inspired spin-off projects internationally, including a popular version of the project by other photographers in France ("Cool"). If we looked at this body of evidence of the project's reception and diverse affects, asking how it functions as a form of resistant rhetoric, we could draw conclusions celebrating the project as a queer intervention into dominant approaches to LGBTQ identities. Alternately, pointing perhaps to evidence of commodification such as *The Identity Project's* collaboration with the vodka brand Smirnoff ("Love"), *The Identity Project* could be framed as ultimately too assimilative, ineffective as a queer rhetorical production because it is limited by a logic of visibility that includes more and more groups under the LGBTQ umbrella but does not change the structural problems that continue to marginalize these groups (see Kopelson; Hennessy; Wingard). However, in this article, I want to consider what other questions we can ask that will help us read this project in more intersectional ways. *The Identity Project* illustrates tensions between a diversity-based mission of including as much difference as possible, and a mission of accountability to vulnerable communities that asks what intersections of differences make some particularly threatened. Even within groups united by resistance to a particular form of oppression (e.g., heteronormativity), there are complex dynamics that raise questions of how rhetors can advocate not only for themselves but also as allies to others. As Victor Del Hierro, Daisy Levy, and Margaret Price explain, being allies means "understanding—and feeling—what it means to interact in a space where every person is coming from multiple, overlapping communities and identities; where no one occupies the center or the margin all the time; and where privilege and oppression overlay one another like stitches in a knitted shawl" (5-6). For instance, as a queer, white, cisgender

woman, even within queer activist spaces I must remain actively engaged in examining my own positionality in relation to others with differing backgrounds in terms of race, gender, class, ability, and other axes of identity. And these examinations change according to the context, including who is present and what goals of the group are.

In rhetoric and composition, we as queer and feminist scholars, teachers, and advocates are in a position to intervene in these discussions as they unfold in the contexts of our own research sites, classrooms, and other spaces, but we also need to be better equipped to work across differences in a way that aims not only for more inclusion, but more accountability. In particular, we need more models for intersectional analyses across differences of positionality, which several scholars have also called for (Gutenson and Robinson; Licona and Chávez; Wallace). Specifically for digital rhetorical productions, as Jennifer Sano-Franchini argues, we need more strategies that allow us to "not only do analysis but also build a heuristic for a more culturally reflexive approach to analyzing, producing, and organizing bodies in digital texts" (55). This chapter aims to advance intersectionality in queer, feminist, and race-conscious cultural rhetorics work, using *The Identity Project* as an occasion for thought about tensions between inclusion and accountability in activist rhetorics. Specifically, Chapter 3 further develops a rhetorical methodology grounded in accountability by asking new questions for analysis that unpack intra-group oppressions.

Moving Beyond an Oppression/Resistance Model

One way to move toward a rhetoric of accountability is by taking a closer look at dynamics of power and positionality not just across a dominant/resistant binary, but

within spaces of resistance as well. As Eric Darnell Pritchard writes, "The dichotomous 'oppression then resistance' model is the way that literacy practices of people from oppressed and marginalized groups are generally rendered" (37), but this model is limited. It measures rhetorical resistance by the degree to which it is able to counter the dominant, rendering both of these spheres more monolithic than they are and leading to analyses that either celebrate a rhetorical action as radically resistant or critique it for assimilating into the dominant.

Stopping at the critique of a rhetorical action or artifact as assimilationist, or celebrating it as radical, misses other questions we can ask that more accurately and responsibly explore how those experiencing intersecting oppressions enact resistance, who is centered in that resistance, and with what affects. This move helps take rhetorical analyses beyond deconstruction—asking only what we are tearing down or critiquing—and into questions of how we can instead build toward more equitable practices in a given context (see Riley-Mukavetz). As Pritchard argues, "disrupting hegemonic discourses of heteronormativity cannot be fully accomplished if we only reinforce normative power by treating heteronormativity as an exclusively sexuality-based phenomenon, ignoring the way in which it remakes itself through race, ethnic, gender, class, ability, or national hierarchies in the moving target of power and privilege along identity lines" (43). Thus, we as rhetoricians cannot gain a full picture when we focus only on disruptions to systems of oppression like patriarchy or heteronormativity while ignoring these other, intersecting dynamics of power.

The major shift I am advocating here entails not only asking questions typical of rhetorical analysis, such as "what audience(s) is this speaking to?", "what kinds of

appeals are present here, and how does this construct its appeals?", and "what context(s) is this responding to?", but supplementing these moves with close attention to questions like "to whom is this accountable?" In this chapter, I unpack how these dynamics of accountability and positionality are rhetorically constructed and with what impacts. These more specific questions can engender readings that allow rhetoricians to take a deeper look at the specific dynamics of power and privilege in a given context, which can in turn tell us more about the challenges and potentials of crafting intersectional rhetorics. I demonstrate this methodology through an accountability-based rhetorical analysis of moments of tension in *The Identity Project*.

The Identity Project as Response to Hetero- and Homonormativity

The Identity Project as a site for analysis offers productive tensions for queer and feminist rhetoricians to explore. As a contemporary digital cultural production, it represents emergent queer rhetorical practices, and as K.J. Rawson has argued, overlooking such digital productions could entail "ignoring a major site of historical production" ("Rhetorical History"). In addition, because of the wide variety of identities represented in *The Identity Project,* it offers a generative site for asking questions about intersectionality in rhetorical production and analysis. Specifically, when we think about resistant rhetorical practices enacted by queer communities—such as the expansive use of identity terms in *The Identity Project*—I argue that we also need to think more deeply about how these practices intersect with other axes of oppression. This shift toward a more intersectional queer rhetorical analysis may seem subtle, but reveals productive

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questions about how those situated at the intersections of multiple oppressions both potentially disrupt and reinforce power structures and with what affects.

The Identity Project's overwhelmingly positive reception belies the tensions inherent in the project's mission of celebrating queer self-determination. The variety of identities represented in the project is framed in liberal media think-pieces as evidence of a generational shift welcoming an expansive array of genders and sexualities. For instance, in its first year of existence, the project was covered in articles with headlines such as "27 Powerful Portraits Challenging the Definition of What It Means to Be LGBT" (Bennett-Smith); "'Identity Project' Portrait Series Redefines What It Means To Be LGBTQ" (Riley); and "Powerful Photos Fearlessly Redefine What It Means to Be LGBTQIA+" (Everyday Feminism). These moves largely characterize the project as novel and as a force of change, "redefining" or "challenging" what it means to be LGBTQ, or how these identities are understood. Many commentators deploy specific examples of identity labels in the project to illustrate the wide variety of identifications represented. Marisa Riley of *Bustle* writes, "Whether you're a "queer femme wifey," a "versatile dandy boyfriend," or anyone in between (or even lightyears away from 'between'), the possibilities are endless when it comes to gender and sexual identity." These commentators, writing within the first six months of the project's existence and thus beginning to shape the public discourse on it, pull out identifications from the gallery's many captions that they mark as more uncommon than others.

However, if we consider identity terms as resources for rhetorical invention, as *The Identity Project* conceives of them, we also need to ask where these resources come from and what they do as they circulate. As Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah examine in

the introduction to the 2014 inaugural issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly,* there are

many queer "identity categories that are only now coming into wider visibility" (16), but

the potential power of new identity terms resides not in the terms themselves, but in what

work they can do, and how they are mobilized (7). *The Identity Project* presents a

rhetorical understanding of queer identity terms as a resource for invention rather than a

form of static representation. As Deragon explains, the project emerged from a discussion

about LGBTQ identifiers as a resource for invention, culturally and temporally

contingent: "This project, if anything, is showing the power of the invention of language,

and how language, like our identity, is and can be ever changing and fluid" (qtd. in Tsou).

Like many of the media commentators above, I was drawn to *The Identity Project*

because of this creative, invention-based approach to queer identity labels, and its

celebration of queer self-definition as a form of resistance. However, the more I engaged

with it, the more I also came to see the project's tensions and telling omissions, especially

with regard to intersectionality.

  The Identity Project's mission is to push against is the normativization of some

LGBTQ identities at the expense of others—specifically, increasing visibility and

acceptance for mostly white gay and lesbian U.S. citizens who are able to assimilate into

heteronormativity. For instance, advances in LGBTQ rights such as marriage equality

continue to improve circumstances for those already privileged, but do little to improve

the lives of populations such as queer and trans women of color. This normativization

represents what Lisa Duggan has termed "homonormativity": "A politics that does not

contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions… but upholds and

sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a

privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (179). By aiming to represent LGBTQ identities beyond those usually most visible, *The Identity Project* attempts to resist not just hetero- but also homonormativity. As Deragon says in an interview, "Because of the marriage equality push […] I feel like the world is like, 'OK, gay is OK. We got some people on *Grey's Anatomy* and all this shit'—but it's bigger than that. It's almost like, 'We're still here. You think you know us, [but] you really don't know us.' I wanted the project to be very queer and provoking a conversation that we're not done" (qtd in Tsou). This message—"You think you know us, [but] you really don't know us"—is key to *The Identity Project's* mission. The project attempts to counter homonormativity by representing LGBTQ identities beyond those commonly considered most normative, but it is limited in its ability to challenge dominant heteronormative *and* homonormative assumptions because both sets of assumptions are also inextricably connected to race, class, and other axes of identity and oppression. The project also demonstrates the limits of some recovery projects: in the pressure to recover and celebrate some less visible gender- and sexuality-related identities, it is boxed into a mission of celebrating these identities and is structurally unable to critique any uses of identity terms.

In the following section, I ask what *The Identity Project* misses through a focus on challenging hetero- and homonormativity without explicit attention to other axes of identity and oppression, and what this can tell us about the construction of intersectional activist rhetorics. I further my argument about centering accountability in activist rhetoric by foregrounding what questions we as rhetoricians can ask to can help us see dynamics of power and positionality that might otherwise go overlooked, and I apply these

questions to an analysis of moments of tension in *The Identity Project* that reveal the need for intersectional analyses.

Accountability To and *Accountability For* as Methodological Questions

There are two important dimensions of accountability I want to unpack further here: being *accountable to* and being *accountable for*. The idea of being *accountable to* is more audience-oriented, asking to what groups or communities a rhetorical production is directly or indirectly accountable and to what extent a rhetorical production centers those most vulnerable in the context(s) it is working within. The idea of being *accountable for* is more rhetor-oriented and involves the extent to which a rhetor examines their power and privilege in a given context as a way of being accountable for addressing power differentials in the context within which they are working. Combined, these aspects of accountability can help rhetoricians ask more productive questions about activist rhetorics that move beyond characterizations of dominance or resistance and into deeper examinations of power and privilege. The following section will demonstrate a rhetorical analysis based in the questions "to whom is this accountable in this context and to what affects?" and "for what is this accountable in this context and to what affects?" through a close reading of specific tensions in *The Identity Project* and its media uptake.

Accountable to Whom?

To determine to whom something is accountable, we can ask questions like: What communities are *included* in this, and what communities are *centered* in this, and how do we tell the difference? What audiences is this produced for, and what audiences may still

experience its impact despite not being at the center of the messaging? Centering, rather than merely adding, the perspectives of those not usually represented in a given context can help ask new and more productive questions, as Black Feminist scholars have shown (Cooper; Collins; hooks). Patricia Hill Collins writes that "those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries" (70); however, centering one group does not mean others cannot participate, but they must do so in ways that are explicitly responsible for furthering social justice for that group who is centered (Collins 37-8). Because new knowledge emerges when margins are moved to center, asking who is centered, not only who is included, is one way to access deeper questions about the transformative potential and the limits of rhetorical action in a given context.

Drawing from such frameworks that advocate centering the margins can help rhetoricians takes up queer and feminist of color thought in in the way Pritchard forwards, in order to construct "a sustained and substantive Queer of Color Literacies, Composition, and Rhetoric—one that cuts across Native American, Asian and Asian American, Latinx, and Black studies alongside feminist and queer theoretical approaches—that can and must be central to scholarship and pedagogy in the field that professes a commitment to social justice" (49). Rhetorical action that aims to *include* without also *being accountable to* specific communities risks stopping short of enacting this commitment to social justice. Inclusion may construct an image of a more diverse community but not produce a more rigorous analysis (see Kerschbaum). To explore the complexities of *being accountable to* in *The Identity Project,* I analyze a specific image from its galleries and the uptake of that image to detail the limits of activist rhetorics that foreground inclusivity over accountability, and to consider what could change if we

asked not only "who is included?" but also "to whom is this accountable, who is

centered, and why?"

One image in *The Identity Project's* first photo shoot, the Bay Area gallery,

features a person from the waist up, shirtless, looking at the camera with eyes encircled

by heavy black makeup (See Fig. 2). The person wears a necklace and has placed their

Figure 7: "Three Spirit" Photograph by Sarah Deragon

hands on the sides of their head. The image is labeled "Three Spirit." This image was featured as the first image in a series of portraits from the Bay Area gallery in a March 7, 2014 article in the web magazine *PolicyMic* titled "27 Powerful Portraits Challenging the Definition of What It Means

to Be LGBT." Soon afterward, on March 12, 2014, a post began to circulate on the social

media site Tumblr by user shitrichcollegekidssay, who argues about the use of the term

"three spirit": "I will be blunt. This is *racist*. Definitively and absolutely. The term 'three

spirit' is an appropriative bastardization of Native Two-Spirit identities, roles which have

very specific meaning that cannot be preserved outside of that cultural context." The post

goes on to explain how the use of this term ties into a long history of appropriation of

such terms, implicating the person who uses the identity label "three spirit," Deragon for

including it in the gallery, and *PolicyMic* for featuring it. According to statistics on the

Tumblr post's page, as of October 2016 it has been liked, commented on, or reblogged on

Tumblr more than six thousand times. Some users add a short commentary of their own,

reinforcing the argument in the post with elaborations like the existence of many other

terms to describe gender fluidity that are not appropriative, or pointing out possible

caveats like the fact that without full context there is no way to be completely sure that

the person in the image is white. While this post spread widely through Tumblr, I could

not find any direct response from Deragon or *PolicyMic* to this critique. My argument is

not that Deragon should be more of a gatekeeper or policer of the identity terms allowed

in her project. Instead, I want to focus on the ways in which taking a complex look at this

image and its reception as part of *The Identity Project* can reveal to whom this project

fails to be accountable and with what affects.

This widely shared Tumblr post critiquing both the "three spirit" image and

media's uptake of this image presents an important critique of the queer self-

determination celebrated across much media commentary on *The Identity Project.* As

detailed earlier, the reception of the project has focused primarily on the power of

visibility for LGBTQ individuals outside the "mainstream," and the authority to choose

one's own identity labels as a corrective to dominant policing or erasure of LGBTQ

identities, framing *The Identity Project's* forms of visibility and authority as resistant

acts. However, this Tumblr post's critique of the "three spirit" image reveals the danger

of celebrating a wholly individualistic conception of authority over self-determination.

As hooks insists, this type of liberal individualism is dangerous because of its easy co-

optation into oppressive systems (8). While there is power in queer people naming their

own identities, against a culture that often refuses the validity of those identities, there is

also a danger in celebrating queer self-identification without attention to the larger

dynamics of privilege and positionality that allow some to claim any identity labels they

want, to re-name themselves with self-invented terms or cherry-pick terms from other

contexts, while others are still struggling for the recognition of identities with long histories. Thus, while this one photograph represents only one among a vast array of images and identity labels in *The Identity Project*, it is a telling example of the dangers of purely celebratory instances of queer resistance that do not enact accountability to those whose identities are especially threatened.

Some identity terms, like "two spirit," come from specific cultural locations that have been violently colonized, and the appropriation of such identities by white LGBTQ individuals and communities participates in this act of colonization. Using those terms in a way that divorces them from their histories and cultural contexts constitutes an act often referred to as cultural appropriation. The piecing-together orientation toward identity that *The Identity Project* advocates can unwillingly reinforce colonialist processes of appropriating identities, a process that works against queer aims of challenging dominant power structures. The "three spirit" image and subsequent critique also echoes discourses on the erasure of indigenous people in queer movements and queer theory; as Qwo-Li Driskill argues, "This un-seeing—even if unintentional—perpetuates a master narrative in which Native people are erased from an understanding of racial formations, Native histories are ignored, Native people are thought of as historical rather than contemporary, and our homelands aren't seen as occupied by colonial powers" (78). Such lack of attention enacts what Malea Powell describes as a willing act of unseeing the contemporary and historical oppression of Native bodies (4). *The Identity Project's* approach to LGBTQ identities risks a similar un-seeing or flattening. The "three spirit" image, included as one in many of a uniformly designed digital gallery of photographs, at first blends into the pattern, one entry in the project's argument about complex identities.

It is listed in some media commentary as one item in a laundry list of difference; in June 2014, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* describes *The Identity Project's* gallery "a heady mix of the familiar and the unique, containing lovely twists like 'Three Spirit,' 'Sober Celibate Daddy-Father Punk,' and 'Xicanita y Cubanita,'" lumping the "three spirit" image in with others as a "lovely twist," effectively continuing to divorce these terms from their histories in order to mobilize them instead as part of a broad argument for contemporary explosions of LGBTQ identity terms.

Part of the problem here is that *The Identity Project's* intervention is framed entirely as a response to hetero- and homonormativity, but not as a response to colonization or white supremacy—which are also conditions that shape queerness and queer articulations of resistance. *The Identity Project* thus lacks any apparatus for interrogating the use of identity terms beyond the mission of celebrating queer self-determination. By trying to include everyone, it does not center anyone. By not specifically building practices to encourage accountability, the project misses a chance to enact a deeper critique into the systems that reinforce limiting gender and sexual identities---which is not only the form of structural oppression known as heteronormativity, but also constituted by colonialism and racism. This missed chance at intersectionality can teach us the affordances and limitations of discourses of inclusivity versus accountability; instead of asking "Whom are we including here?", a more productive question for challenging interconnected oppressions is "To whom are we accountable here?" This means that we must not only ask to what extent rhetorical productions are constructed as queer or normative in given contexts (Bessette), but also ask how particular constructions of queerness work within and against the larger,

interconnected contexts of heteronormativity, patriarchy, and white supremacy in which these constructions exist. One way to access these larger systemic questions is through asking to whom a rhetorical production is explicitly or implicitly accountable and how this accountability is enacted or not.

More specifically, a strategy to work against the pervasive construction of certain positions as the default (ex. whiteness, straightness, etc.) is by explicitly centering another positionality in activist messaging, and examining what positions others occupy in relation to the center. It is important that this centering is explicit and consistently enacted through rhetoric and actions, or else even well-meaning activist projects can slide into the tendency to serve those already privileged while leaving those most vulnerable behind. To explore dynamics of privilege and positionality, activist rhetorics must not only ask *to whom* they are accountable, but also *for what* they are accountable, as the next section details.

Accountable for What?

Another aspect of accountability involves asking *for what* is a rhetor(s) accountable in this context. To access this idea, we can ask questions like: Is the rhetor working against differential locations of power and privilege, and how do they account for that? To what extent can those from differing social locations than the rhetor interact with and talk back to a rhetorical action? To what degree does the rhetor work to center the voices of those most threatened in the context the rhetorical action is responding to? Is the model only additive (adding more people, more voices, more diversity) or does it

build structures for accountability (asking what about the action *changes* if different people are centered in that action's development)?

It is important to frame the idea of *being accountable for* one's privilege in a given context as different from *apologizing for* that privilege. Apology in antiracist discourse often serves as a form of self-defense in which the privileged insist they did not intend a racist act, which re-centers the privileged in the discussion and allows for an avoidance of accountability (Ratcliffe 88-9). As opposed to apologizing for one's privilege, being accountable for one's privilege and one's interactions with others in contexts that involve power differentials invites a more productive set of concerns. Thus, I want to clarify here that my goal is not to condemn *The Identity Project* or Deragon as a rhetor in a way that assigns blame. My goal is instead to use *The Identity Project* as an occasion to ask how we as queer and feminist rhetorical critics can engage in intersectional readings of cultural productions like this one.

In a reading strategy for accountability-based rhetorical analysis, one way to move away from assigning blame and toward interrogating accountability is to ask what is marked and what is unmarked in the context under study. As Moraga explains, sometimes asking what is absent can tell us even more than examining what is present: "It is not always a matter of the actual bodies in the room, but of a life dedicated to a growing awareness of who and what is *missing* in that room; and responding to that absence. *What ideas never surface because we imagine we already have all the answers?"* (xix) In the case of *The Identity Project,* whiteness and cisgenderedness are two telling absences in the galleries. As of this writing, in the nine galleries of photographs and identity labels, the word "white" does not appear at all. Only one photo

features the word "cisgender" ("black gay queer feminist cisgendered man"). This leads to instances where, for instance, a white, cisgender individual may be able to identify as just "lesbian" while those who do not occupy these usually invisible subject positions may append other identity labels to the term, such as "trans lesbian" or "lesbian of color"; here, the image of the white, cis lesbian has inadvertently reified conceptions of the white, cis gay subject as universal, a problem that queer theory and activism has long enacted at the expense of queer and trans people of color. As Tammie Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middelton, and Ratcliffe write in the introduction to *Rhetorics of Whiteness,* "If a sentence states that a man walks down the street, he is assumed to be white; thus, whiteness haunts the term *man* as a racial identity marker and, thus, functions as an unstated norm" (4) However, as Annette Harris Powell describes, whiteness is not a universal but "the normative principle that defines the American experience historically, socially, and politically" (21). As a normative principle, whiteness is intricately tied to heteronormativity, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression, meaning that resistant formulations of queerness that only challenge heteronormativity without considering these other systems will inevitably remain limited, and often "haunted" by unmarked whiteness.

Staying conscious of the fact that many *Identity Project* photo subjects are multiply marginalized and trying to work against that marginalization, participant choice cannot be left out here, and I cannot infer anything about the participants based only on their images and chosen text (for instance, a trans woman may choose not to identify as trans in this context, or a person of color may choose to foreground other identity labels for the purposes of this project, choices that are valid just as their opposites are).

However, it is telling that the project did not *enable* any participants to identify as white, and only a limited number to identify as cis. This lack white or cisgender identifications is not the specific fault of the participants; it is instead a limitation of the project's messaging and mission, which shape participant actions such as their choice of identity labels. The overall attitude of the project indicates that participants should choose identity labels they are proud of and want to celebrate. Of course, the celebration of whiteness or cisgenderness would be at odds with the mission of the project and would be deeply troubling in itself, as these are categories already unfairly privileged in society. However, there are other ways to examine privileged categories like whiteness, especially as a mode of critique; for instance, as Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe write, naming whiteness can serve "to name the terms and engage them as a means of understanding their operations and collaborating in the dismantlement of their oppressions" (8). A wholly celebratory orientation toward resistant rhetoric does not allow for a deeper examination of the dynamics behind who gets to choose which identity labels, what they do with them, and what histories of power and oppression are engaged in these choices.

As "The Identity Project Story" on the website explains, "Sarah believes that The Identity Project resonates with people because the photo project pushes up against the preconceived notions of what it is to be LGBTQ in today's society. Not only are the portraits striking, the participants in the project are playing with language, making up entirely new terms (transgenderqueer or inbetweener) and showing pride in their complex and ever changing identities." These ideas—pushing against homonormative, preconceived notions of LGBTQ identity, playing with language to make up terms, and showing pride in identities—enable certain kinds of action but constrain others. They

enable the construction of counter-messages to hetero- and homonormativity, but not interrogations of how these are deeply connected with other systems of oppression. Celebrating an acontextual queer self-determination thus risks reinforcing a discourse of individualism that goes hand in hand with assumptions of white universalism that, as whiteness scholar Robin DiAngelo explains, "allows whites to view themselves as unique and original, outside of socialization and unaffected by the relentless racial messages in the culture" (59). *The Identity Project* does not interrogate the racial messages that always intersect with and shape heteronormativity. This lack of connection leads to juxtapositions where a white person may be able to claim a totally invented identity term because of the presumption of being "unique and original," next to someone claiming a term with a long and complicated history as a way of locating themselves in that history—ideas that are very much an unexplored tension across the photographs. A deeper challenge to hetero- and homonormativity as it shapes queer choices to identify would thus need to intersect with racism and other axes of oppression in order to develop a fuller understanding of the power dynamics that enable and constrain certain kinds of identification.

By aiming for inclusivity but not building structures for enacting accountability, *The Identity Project* inadvertently reifies the white queer subject as able to claim an identity as "just" queer, or trans, or anything else they choose, without interrogating these positions and the reasons why they are able to claim them without question. And because these interrogations are not deliberately foregrounded in the project itself, the absences get reproduced in the media uptake of *The Identity Project* that echoes and amplifies its celebration-of-individuality tone. However, interrogating one's own positionality in

relation to others is a key element of an accountability-based activist rhetoric. Del Hierro,

Levy, and Price explore how engaging with others across differences brings to light the

need for "a willingness of all present bodies to mark themselves in public, as part of a

larger effort, and in relationship to each other" (8-9). Such "marking" or identifying is not

only a celebration of individual bodies, but also a deeper consideration of relationality in

the contexts of interlocking systems. Pritchard describes unmarked positions as "the

slippages around identity, power, and privilege that every scholarly discourse aimed at

social justice must confront," arguing that "such slippages cannot be corrected through

silence, present-absence, guilt, or overlooking the calls and models for intervention.

Rather, redress means action" (44). Thus, my purpose here is not to condemn *The Identity*

Project specifically, but to look at how it privileges queer identity above other axes of

identity and so enables such "slippages" to occur where certain dynamics of power and

privilege are left unmarked, and what this can tell us as scholars of resistant rhetorics.

Naming privileges is not an end goal in itself, but asking whether forms of

privilege are named in a specific context and why can be one strategy that encourages

participants to ask deeper structural questions, like why might a particular environment

be predominately white or cisgender; what impediments may there be to changing this

dynamic; how it could be different; and what those present see or do not see based on our

positions. Even within marginalized communities, there are multiple dynamics of power

and oppressions that require examination, and by developing strategies to pay closer

attention to these dynamics, rhetoricians can expand our analyses to accomplish more

intersectional and social justice oriented work.

Conclusion

An intersectional approach to rhetorical analysis and action can tell us much about how the construction of activist messaging invites or encourages specific responses, which may be inadvertently limiting and may work to reinforce oppressive power structures even while nominally challenging them. *The Identity Project's* messaging in part enables participants to participate in an act of resistance against a dominant culture that polices or silences their identities, refusing them the authority to describe their own embodied experiences. However, the messaging here also constrains the ability of participants to not only celebrate, but also interrogate their identities. This interrogation would be most useful for those who may not think to identify as something like "white" or "cisgender" because the interrogation itself might reveal that they had been considering those terms as invisible defaults that did not need to be marked because they have a built-in universalism encoded into them. For example, participants could be invited to interrogate the idea that cisgender is a universal norm, whereas transgender is represented as a deviation from the norm—as opposed to a view that cisgender and transgender are different ways of relating to the gender one was assigned at birth, or even that assigning gender at birth can be understood as a form of coercion. This interrogation can reveal how the framing of cisgender as a default or universal is a function of a dominant culture that is oppressive to transgender people—a culture deeply in need of disruption and troubling.

For activist rhetorics, instead of only celebrating diversity, being *accountable to* vulnerable communities in a given context and *accountable for* the positionalities one brings to this context can enable deeper interrogations of societal power structures. For

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instance, what would *The Identity Project* look like if its mission were to be specifically accountable to trans women of color? It would be quite different from what it is now. A project like this, perhaps instead of trying to include everyone, could center on and enact accountability to a specific community *and* work in coalition with other projects who are primarily accountable to other communities. No one project can represent all LGBTQ communities or solve all problems related to systemic oppressions, but coalitional models can get closer, especially if we think of not only adding more diverse identities but instead launching structural challenges to the interlocking oppressions that privilege and deny those identities.

As queer, feminist, and race-conscious rhetoricians move toward expanding our analyses into more sites of cultural production and continue investigating what changes about our rhetorical theories and praxes through the incorporation of more communities, we also need to ask how we can do this work while remaining conscious of the fact that all axes of identity and oppression are always in dynamic relationship with other identities, histories, and systems of power. This chapter has advanced strategies for rhetorical analysis and production that ask not only what axes of identity and oppression are included, but also what is centered and with what impacts, which can provide a richer picture of intra-group dynamics such as those represented in *The Identity Project*. Even within queer spaces, rhetoricians must maintain attention to accountability in order to avoid reproducing the oppressions we are fighting against.

CHAPTER FOUR

"WHITE WOMEN VOTED FOR TRUMP":

THE WOMEN'S MARCH ON WASHINGTON

AND INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST FUTURES

The January 2017 Women's March on Washington has been called possibly the

largest protest in U.S. history, with sister marches in many U.S. cities and internationally

on every continent including Antarctica (Vick). The marches, which took place the day

after the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States,

represented an uprising against the systemic, interconnected oppressions that have

characterized American society for hundreds of years but that have only recently been

crystallized for some in the form of Trump's election. The Women's March has since

given rise to not just a protest but a movement, but this movement has continued to

struggle with many of the tensions inherent in forming coalitions against multiple forms

of oppression. The Women's March's policy platform has been called "beautifully

intersectional" by some (Vagianos), but the march and resulting movement has also had

to contend with legacies of white privilege, erasure of trans women, and other histories of

oppression in feminist movements.

In response to decades of "white feminism" and the stark statistic that 53% of

white women voted for Trump while 94% of black women voted against him (Beckett et

al; Tyson and Maniam), leaders, organizers, and participants in the Women's March movement have striven to enact intersectional principles and refused to marginalize women of color in its platform and messaging. This commitment to intersectionality can be most readily seen in the Women's March Unity Principles policy platform, framed on the website with the statement, "We must create a society in which women - including Black women, Native women, poor women, immigrant women, disabled women, Muslim women, lesbian queer and trans women - are free and able to care for and nurture their families, however they are formed, in safe and healthy environments free from structural impediments" ("Unity"). Media outlets from *NPR* to the *New York Times, Huffington Post, Vox,* and *USA Today* featured coverage of the march that explicitly invoked intersectionality and grappled with its complexity while also advocating for its importance; on the other hand, some coverage also reinforced decades-old tendencies to misguidedly condemn intersectionality as divisive.

The Women's March origin story shows how the march evolved within the context of mainstream feminism's denial of women of color. The idea for the march started as the Million Women's March, appropriating the labor of the people of color who organized the 1995 Million Man March and the 1997 Million Woman March (Lemieux). The name was changed to the Women's March on Washington, and the march leadership changed, with women of color activists Tamika Mallory, Carmen Perez, and Linda Sarsour becoming co-chairs (Lemieux). Women of color leadership certainly made the march stronger and more intersectional, but as activists of color also pointed out, labor again fell onto these women of color to remedy a situation caused by white women. As cultural critic Jamilah Lemieux wrote in her viral *Colorlines* article "Why I'm Skipping

the Women's March on Washington," "I'm really tired of Black and Brown women routinely being tasked with fixing White folks' messes. I'm tired of being the moral compass of the United States." And as women's rights activist Brittany Oliver pointed out, "Recruiting women of color afterwards is a step in the right direction, but not the answer. The success of individuals don't equate to the masses of people who are suffering," people whom mainstream feminism still leaves behind.

For the study of contemporary social justice rhetorics, the Women's March will surely become a touchstone moment for rhetoricians to pay attention to. However, with the enormous scope of the march and the movement is has given rise to, and the diverse array of voices commenting on and shaping the march, it is and will continue to be challenging for us to interpret in any meaningful way. In addition, the fact that the march has been called by some highly intersectional yet has been critiqued by many women of color and trans women points to the need for more attention in queer and feminist rhetoric to the intersectional rhetorical work of activists of color, and more theorizing of how scholars of queer and feminist rhetoric can advocate for this work from our own social locations.

In rhetoric and composition, scholarship on coalition politics has helped us explore how activists articulate specific intersectional identities and missions, such as queer migrant activism (Chávez; Licona). Moreover, cultural rhetorics encourages us to consider the specifically located and culturally shaped rhetorical practices of communities (Bratta and Powell; Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab). But we also need more work exploring how to advocate for each other when the people in the room (or the academic journal, the conference venue, the classroom, the protest march) all come from

different backgrounds and occupy different positions in relation to societal power. We can attend to the culturally specific nature of rhetorical action but also investigate how these culturally situated rhetorics come in contact with each other, how they overlap, and how they sometimes collide, in the context of complex dynamics of privilege and marginality. Using the Women's March as a starting point, this chapter develops strategies for conducting rhetorical analyses of contemporary social justice movements across axes of difference. Specifically, this chapter argues for greater attention to circulation as an element of social justice rhetoric because circulation can help shift attention onto the concept of impact over intention, a valuable analytical tool that can help privileged allies cultivate increased awareness of a rhetorical action's consequences for communities other than our own.

In her editor's letter about the Women's March in *Composition Studies*, Laura Micciche closes by asking: "What is the responsibility of writing teachers and scholars? To what principles of language and action are we accountable? How can our work serve a greater good? And how can or should 'we' (understanding this pronoun as an assumption I am making) address the personal toll of political and cultural anxiety as it invades our work and our work lives?" (12). I do not answer these questions definitively here, but I do offer some ways forward to think through them, speaking from my own perspective as a queer, white, cisgender feminist, occupying intersections of privilege and marginality. This chapter focuses on two particular tensions in the discourse surrounding the Women's March on Washington: women of color exclusion and transgender exclusion. I explore these discourses in the form of their uptake in the media buzz surrounding the Women's March immediately after the event in January and February 2017. Of course,

these problems are not at all new, but the fact that they keep recurring shows us that we still need new ways to talk about them.

Scholars of activist rhetorics will likely be researching events such as the Women's March on Washington for a long time, and teaching with materials such as media discourses surrounding the march, and we need ways to do these things that refuse to continue feminist histories of exclusion and that commit instead to a more just and equitable feminist future for those historically wounded. For instance, women of color have been calling on white feminists for decades to help build coalitions meant to improve the lives of all women, including queer and trans women of color (see Lorde; hooks), but as we can see from the fact that these struggles continue to play out in contemporary contexts, white feminists continue to overlook calls from women of color, or to mishear them. Those of us who analyze activist rhetorics need to do this work while honoring and amplifying the strategies and voices of women of color and trans women, but we cannot continue to place the work of enacting intersectional feminist praxes only on these communities, while ignoring the need for others such as white women to take on more of the responsibility. Thus, in this chapter, I offer some ways forward for privileged allies to enact greater rhetorical awareness when analyzing activist rhetorics across differences.

Being the Killjoy/Killing Joy as Feminists

In this chapter, I draw from Sara Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy within feminist spaces, and her framework of thinking through interactions across difference as a productive breaking, through which feminists also come to see who we are hearing as

killing *our* joy. This shift toward a feminist rhetorical awareness also requires a shift toward valuing impact over intention, or what Laurie Gries terms the consequentiality of rhetoric (7). In this section, I will first expand on Ahmed's use of the feminist killjoy as a way of thinking about how women of color relate to mainstream feminism. I will then connect Gries' concept of consequentiality to activist orientations toward impact over intention, and expand consequentiality as a way for white and cis feminists to practice greater rhetorical awareness as we move through activist spaces.

Ahmed uses the feminist killjoy as a figure to explain moments of feminist disruption and challenges to the normative. A killjoy is "the one who gets in the way of the happiness of others by the way she appears." For instance, by disrupting the scene of a family dinner table by pointing out a sexist comment, the feminist is assumed to kill joy, to be a disruption. However, "If to be a killjoy is to be the one who gets in the way of happiness, then living a feminist life requires being willing to get in the way" (Ahmed). All the more frustrating is the fact that the killjoy is often blamed for causing the problem she is pointing out. The killjoy is thus a figure who is often not heard, whatever her message may be, because others have already perceived her as the problem and so are unable to listen.

The feminist killjoy is a rhetorical figure, changing positionality depending on context and interactions. For instance, Ahmed explores the complexities of being a killjoy *within* feminist spaces. Women of color, Ahmed explains, are often seen as "a feminist killjoy who kills feminist joy" by bringing up racism in feminist circles, as trans women are seen as killjoys by bringing up transphobia. Thus feminists must not only embrace being the killjoy, but think more carefully about who we recognize as killjoys: "[T]he

figure of the killjoy is not a figure we can assume we always somehow are: even if we recognize ourselves in that figure, even when she is so compelling, even when we are energized by her. We might, in assuming we are the killjoys, not notice how others become killjoys to us, getting in the way of our own happiness, becoming obstacles to a future we are reaching for." In short, "Activism might need us to involve losing confidence in ourselves, letting ourselves recognize how we too can be the problem. And that is hard if we have a lifetime of being the problem." It is exactly this contextual nature of the killjoy, or the act of killing joy as a feminist, that makes the figure a useful one for rhetoric and composition. We can engage the responses to moments of killjoyness with attention to context, who is present, who is absent, and the affects and emotions surrounding the killjoy moment in order to understand "how others become killjoys to us," and what we need to unpack about our own positionalities to understand *why* we perceive others as killjoys.

Ahmed thinks through such conflicts within feminist spaces through metaphors of breaking, fragility, and bumping against each other. Ahmed writes in general, "Part of what makes diversity work 'work' is the effort to find ways to survive what we come up against; to find ways to keep going, to keep trying, when the same things seem to happen, over and over again" (3210). And an important part of this work is not only continually coming up against the larger, dominant society, but also coming up against *each other* in activist spaces. As opposed to attempting to resolve these differences or find a solution, however, Ahmed argues for another way to think about intra-community conflict from a social justice perspective: "The resolution of difference is the scene of much injustice." However, Ahmed offers a reframing: "The bumpier the ride could be an expression of the

degree to which one style of embodiment has not determined an ethical or social horizon. Rather than equality being about smoothing a relation, perhaps equality is a bumpy ride." In order to *value* breaking and bumps in the ride as moments that have something to tell us, instead of seeking resolution or smoothing over differences, feminist rhetoricans need to develop ways to measure the efficacy of our feminist rhetorics not by our intentions but by the varied impacts these rhetorics have for different groups, not only those similar to us. "Impact over intention" is a common tenet of social justice organizing and education, and many argue that it is especially important for privileged allies to listen to marginalized people who tell us the impact our words and actions have, regardless of our possibly good intentions (Utt).

Impact can also be understood as connected to the idea of *consequentiality* that has been gaining traction in the field of rhetoric and composition. Gries asserts in *Still Life with Rhetoric*: "I resist that notion that something is rhetorical just because it has been intentionally created to persuade and has been delivered to a particular audience with that intended goal in mind. Instead, my understanding of rhetoric is that all things have potential to *become* rhetorical as they crystallize, circulate, enter into relations, and generate material consequences, whether those consequences unfold in conceptual or physical realms" (11). In Gries' framework, the meaning of a rhetorical production is constituted by its *consequences*, not by its rhetor's goals for persuasion (47). In addition, meaning unfolds in various contexts, making it impossible to judge meaning only through analyzing the reception of one audience or at one moment in time. Gries' view of consequentiality as the most important element of rhetoric requires that we shift our view toward futurity, which can be difficult in a discipline traditionally turned toward histories.

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Gries argues that we need "to turn our scholarly gaze toward futurity--the time spans beyond a thing's initial production and delivery--and create risky accounts of how rhetoric unfolds as things enter into complex associations and catalyze changes" (8). In this chapter, I create one such "risky account" of feminist rhetorics at the Women's March on Washington, analyzing how symbols and actions used at the march by white and cisgender feminists had unintended but material effects on women of color and trans feminists. In the section below, I focus on one photograph that spread virally after the march and came to exemplify the failure of white feminists to be responsible allies to women of color and trans women.

"White Women Voted for Trump"

Some of the tensions within the Women's March are best illustrated by a protest sign by Angela Peoples, activist and co-director of the LGBTQ equality organization GetEqual. I will use this image as a starting place to begin my discussion of the dynamics in the Women's March. The sign features Peoples, a black woman wearing a hat that says "Stop killing black people," in the foreground looking cynically to the side while casually eating a lollipop, with a sign that says "Don't forget: White women voted for Trump." Directly behind Peoples, there are three white women standing on a wall, all wearing pink "pussyhats" and all on their smartphones, with one of them taking a selfie and smiling widely.

Figure 8: White Women Voted for Trump by Kevin Banatte (featured in USA Today)

The image, taken by Peoples' boyfriend Kevin Banatte, went viral online after the

march. Asked about reactions to the sign, Peoples responded in an interview:

> [The photo] tells the story of white women in this moment wanting to just
>
> show up in a very superficial way and not wanting to do the hard work of
>
> making change, of challenging their own privilege. You're here protesting,
>
> but don't forget: The folks that you live with every single day—and
>
> probably some of the women that decided to come to the march—voted
>
> for Trump, made the decision to vote against self-interests to maintain
>
> their white supremacist way of life. (qtd in Obie)

Peoples also spoke about how the image captures ongoing white privilege in mainstream

feminism: "I know that a lot of the organizers, particularly of the D.C. march, did a lot of

work to make sure that the speakers were diverse, that the issue points reflected black

folks' experiences; but there's also this reality that when we talk about feminism in this country, the faces have been white. Without an effort by white women especially to make sure those spaces are reflecting the diversity of women and femme people, we're not going to make the progress we need to" (qtd in Obie). In the viral spread of the image of Peoples, the face of mainstream feminism is still white---the white women in the background, seeming joyful to be at the march, surrounded by similar faces. As the image spread virally, commentators used it as a symbol for the conversations feminists need to have about erasures and violences against women of color. An article in *USA Today* describes the photo as "quietly tell[ing] a powerful story about the cracks in America's feminist movement" (Dastagir), and *The New York Times* asserts that the photo "cuts to a truth of the [2016] election: While black women show up for white women to advance causes that benefit entire movements, the reciprocity is rarely shown" (Wortham).

Before I move on in my analysis, I first want to describe part of my own experience at the Women's March on Washington. Even though we did not meet, I shared the city that day with Peoples and with the white women in the photograph. This is how I looked at the march on DC: a white, cisgender, femme lesbian woman, wearing a pink pussy hat, one hand locked with my partner's—also a femme lesbian, and makerof the hats—and the other hand holding up a sign saying "Respect Women of Color." I was dressed for the chill: a fleece-lined orange rain jacket over a striped shirt and workout zip-up, black skinny jeans cuffed over lace-up ankle boots. All I had carried with me on an overnight bus from Bloomington, Indiana to D.C. was stuffed into the march-regulated 7-by-4-inch crossbody purse that I had dutifully purchased at a Goodwill the day before leaving. This is how I moved through D.C. during the Women's March, the body that

was pressed against other bodies down the streets. There were selfies. I probably could have been one of the white women in the background of the photo of Peoples, with only a slight shift in timing and our trajectories through the march that day. I could be a stand-in for any number of white women at the march. People might notice my queerness, my main signifier of difference, or not. (The white woman in the middle of the photo is wearing rainbow arm warmers.) My femininity is that of a queer femme, deliberately, and I performed my queerness at the march; my feminist outrage was for all, but focused on my queer and trans family who suffer under heteropatriarchy. Either way, I move through the world in a privileged body, white, able, cisgender. I also know the privilege my body gives me, as someone whose gender is not questioned or denied, whose whiteness makes people assume I am not threatening. I felt joyful at the march. These are all things I must be aware of.

The photograph of Peoples resonated so widely in part because women of color were already rightfully pointing out the potential exclusions of the Women's March in light of the failure of white women to advocate enough for women of color in the 2016 presidential election. A lot of the discussion stemming from this image involved white women being oblivious to our own failed responsibility to work to improve conditions for all women, especially women of color, not only for women "like us." Many progressive white women did not see ourselves as implicated in Trump's election even though 53% of us nationally voted for him---a response captured by the responses from white women at the march that Peoples described, such as "Not this white woman," or "No one I know!" Liberal white women saw ourselves as a distinct demographic from the *other* white women who voted for Trump---*those white women over there,* not in any way

connected to us. And indeed, many progressive white women have escaped antifeminist communities and purposely distanced ourselves from any conservative roots or connections---a distancing that is often especially necessary for women who are also queer. For instance, before the 2016 election, I saw white women who supported Trump in my Facebook feed, women from previous eras in my life, and I unfriended them. In my mind, it was evidence that ties needed to be cut, that we no longer had any connection worth sustaining if they could vote for him. I know many women who did the same, and in a certain way it is a self-protective measure, which I perceive as intimately connected to my queerness as well. However, this impulse to deny association with white women Trump voters---and by extension to deny implication in the ways in which white women historically and contemporaneously perpetuate white supremacy---is exactly what Peoples' sign calls us white women out for. The issue, in the end, is not whether I could or should have reached out on Facebook to a woman I hadn't spoken to face-to-face in fifteen years and asked why she supported Trump; that is impossible to answer and a pointless exercise. The issue is instead why being told that there are any similarities between myself and her makes me deeply uncomfortable.

It is time for white feminists to feel more discomfort. Encounters across difference are deeply infused with emotion, so calls for more intersectionality cannot become a mere intellectual exercise but must also find ways to work with emotional responses to activist communications, including discomfort and anger. Given that responses to being challenged in activist circles are often visceral and defensive---"Not this woman"---scholars of activist rhetoric need to incorporate the circulation of these emotions into our rhetorical analyses so that we can interrogate them. Especially for

privileged allies, cultivating a specific type of activist rhetorical awareness can help

manage these reactions by placing more attention onto the potential consequences of their

circulation, knowing when it may be harmful to express certain reactions and when they

may have a different impact than intended. As Peoples responded to white women at the

march denying her sign, "I'd say, '[Fifty-three percent] of white women voted for Trump.

That means someone you know, someone who is in close community with you, voted for

Trump. You need to organize your people.' And some people said, 'Oh, I'm so ashamed.'

Don't be ashamed; organize your people" (qtd in Obie). Feminist rhetoricians also need

to interrogate our own characterizations of women of color and trans women's emotional

responses, such as readings of anger or accusations of divisive aggression.

The stance that Peoples was protesting—commonly referred to in a shorthand

way as "white feminism"—is a particular set of historically and culturally inherited ways

in which white women commonly enact our understandings of feminist activism. Just as

all rhetorical practices are culturally situated (Bratta and Powell), so are all articulations

of feminism. White feminism *is* thus culturally situated and located in specific histories,

but another problem is that in mainstream discourse this kind of feminism is just called

"feminism," while "other" kinds of feminism are deemed culturally located (black

feminism, Latinx feminisms). In fact, all feminisms are culturally located and historically

shaped. White feminism has been shaped by centuries of white women advocating for

ourselves and excluding women of color, or wrongfully assuming a trickle-down effect

for women of color after liberation is achieved for white women. Instead, a social justice

framework insists that liberation for all can only be achieved through liberation for the

multiply marginalized, and that if anyone is still oppressed, this is not justice (Lorde).

However, because "white feminism" is portrayed as just "feminism," as universal, in feminist spaces, women of color are often read as interruptions to this unity--as killjoys---and white women do not realize we are characterizing others this way. We are used to being the killjoys ourselves, to being the ones protesting Trump, or standing up in a department meeting or at the family table to fight sexism. However, because of this readiness to inhabit a killjoy stance in relation to the behaviors we come up against, we are ill equipped to admit that we are viewing someone else as the killjoy: the woman of color who brings up race in a discussion previously focused only on sexism, or the trans woman who points out that the gendered language being used to describe sexist behaviors reinforces a man/woman binary to the exclusion of other genders. There is a feeling among white women that such actions are derailing the conversation, inserting divisions, or a perception of anger or hostility. As Ahmed insists, framing women of color as inserting anger into feminist spaces assumes that these spaces are owned by white women: "To hear feminist of color contributions as interruptions is not only to render racism into a breaking point, but to construe feminism as a conversation that starts with white women" (3500). Similarly, in discourse on the Women's March, white, cisgender women were characterized as joyfully resistant while women of color and trans women were characterized as interrupting this resistance.

Discomfort, when it enters into feminist spaces of resistance, can be seen as an intrusion into the joy of celebrating that resistance. Many described the Women's March as a joyful event, a sentiment that can be summed up by one comment in the *Time Magazine* cover story: "Many said it was the best they've felt since Election Day." *The best they've felt since*: the rupture of Election Day, the triumph of patriarchy, alleviated

by feminist joy and community. The white women in the background of Peoples' photo have "pleased grins beaming from their faces" and one seems "to be taking a triumphant selfie" (Wortham). In contrast, women of color's and trans women's responses---not as widely publicized in mainstream media as this "joyful" characterization of the march---featured different expressions of emotions. For instance, while acknowledging that trans issues were part of the Women's March platform and the featured speakers in D.C., transgender activist Evan Greer also expresses frustration at continued trans exclusion: "I felt a little better each time someone acknowledged that trans people's lives matter. But as the hours passed, the pit in my stomach grew. I realized there were more cisgender men onstage than transgender women. And the people around me didn't notice. I wanted to cry." In Greer's concluding statement on the march, she expresses a wary balance of sadness and hope: "I walked away from the Women's March holding back tears. But I'm also holding hope. I am ready to fight tooth and nail for the liberation of all women. I ask the same of cisgender feminists as we prepare for the battles ahead."

White women have historically demonstrated an inability to really listen to women of color and trans women, which perpetuated itself in the Women's March and the media buzz surrounding it. For instance, Lemieux expresses skepticism about white women's allyship. While those at the march advocate for women's issues, Lemieux asks, "Will the Women's March on Washington be a space filled primarily with participants who believe that Black lives matter? I'm not sure, especially considering the attitudes of some who have publicly stated that they don't want to hear calls for attendees to check their White privilege at the proverbial door." Lemieux concludes, "I'd like to see a million White women march to the grave of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth or Audre

Lorde, or perhaps to the campus of Spelman College to offer a formal apology to Black women. It's time for White women to come together and tell the world how their crimes against Black women, Black men and Black children have been no less devastating than the ones committed by their male counterparts" Lemieux's analysis, like Peoples' photograph, expresses deep frustration that while black women have historically shown up to advance women's issues, white women have not shown up in force to advance racial justice.

Moreover, when women of color raise concerns related to racial justice in feminist spaces, white feminists have a history of viewing these women as adding hostility to the space—as the killjoys. This is not a new point, but the fact that it continues to play out shows how white feminists still need to pay closer attention to whom we consider to be "hostile" or "divisive." For instance, in Peoples' interview on the photograph, she responds to black women expressing the hurt that comes from the contrast between white women showing up for each other at the Women's March, but not showing up for black women at other marches. Peoples states:

> When black women expressed those feelings, I saw white women and gay men [saying it's divisive]—some of the same shit that people are saying to me about the poster. That also hurts because we're only being seen when we're coming together behind you. When we're speaking about our pain, when we're asking you to show up, then it's divisive, then it's somehow detrimental to the broader cause. That's simply not true. (qtd in Obie)

Yet in spite of Peoples specifically speaking against accusations of divisiveness in response to black women's pain in feminist spaces, some of the many comments on this

article continue to do this same thing. The article has received 563 comments as of this writing, many of them from white women expressing iterations of the phrases "Not this white woman!" that Peoples heard at the march. Many of the comments on the *Root* article featuring Peoples' interview in relation to her photograph feature white women accusing women of color for being angry. White women express outrage over Peoples' call to "organize your people," distancing themselves from the segments of white society that brought Trump to power. One commenter calls the suggestion for white women to organize their people a "false division" between white women and women of color, echoing the accusations of divisiveness that Peoples specifically spoke out against. Several white commenters also strongly object to being grouped with the rest of white society, the society that elected Trump—a form of race-blindness that allows whites to dissociate from their own racial backgrounds (DiAngelo 54).

White feminists are *not* taught to see their perspectives as specifically and culturally located, or the place of white privilege in that locatedness, no matter what other intersecting identities we have, just as white people are not taught to see whiteness as a racialized identity (DiAngelo 57). We celebrate our killjoy stances as the opposition to patriarchy, positioning ourselves so that if patriarchy would just realize the truth of our killjoy commentary, we would all be better off; however, we also see women of color as the killjoys to this image of united feminist opposition. Ahmed describes the figure of the women of color feminist killjoy as "a feminist killjoy who kills feminist joy. To talk about racism within feminism is to get in the way of feminist happiness. If talking about racism within feminism gets in the way of feminist happiness, we need to get in the way

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of feminist happiness." And white women must learn to hear this talk about racism not as getting in the way, but as part of feminist happiness---to live in a world that is feminist.

Centering Black Feminism in Women's Movements

Black feminism can provide models for cross-community allyship; as Peoples says, "I would actually say to white women, if you want to be a part of a powerful movement that's going to get something done, you need to get behind and trust black women, trust black femmes, trust black trans women. Because we are making this way out of no way. If you're a white woman thinking, 'What's next? Everything seems insurmountable,' welcome to the fucking party. Listen to a black woman" (qtd in Obie). As activist Brittany Oliver asserts: "What I'm trying to say is… this is real life. This is serious. These are Black people's lives at stake. I have a right to demand more because my ancestors paved the way for me to do so." In a follow-up in January 2017, Oliver also writes:

> Overall, if you want to march to represent inclusion, by all means, stand in your truth. But afterwards, if the current social, political and economic state and conditions of Black people continue, be bold enough to stand up and say enough is enough because you know what's real outside of the catchy buzzwords and phrases that claim we are all the same. In theory we are, but our current laws, systems and institutions prove otherwise. That's it. No magic. No tricks.

Oliver's response captures the confusion that many white, cisgender women expressed during and after the march about how to stand in solidarity with women of color and trans

women, in addition to the larger cultural conversation on the left about how to be allies to each other in social justice struggles. Oliver points out that one of the main obstacle to realizing "what's real"—the interconnectedness of oppressive systems, institutions, and laws---is claims that "we are all the same," which follow colorblind logic. The fact that white, cisgender women struggle so much to figure out how to be better allies—expecting "magic" or "tricks"—indicates both the depth of white socialization that leads to deep discomfort discussing race, and the need for white feminists to stop looking for tricks and start reflecting on how women of color and trans women's issues are our struggles too. As Peoples states in her interview:

> We don't need [white women] to take on a new set of issues; we need them to understand the impact of these particular issues when it comes to race and gender and different experiences. They need to make adjustments to how they're organizing, what they're advocating for and how they show up to these systems based on that understanding. (qtd in Obie)

Starting from a place that is specifically meant to work for trans women of color, for instance, is such an adjustment in organizing brought about from a shift in understanding the purview of "feminist issues." Peoples' foregrounding of *impact* here reframes the focus of feminist rhetoric directly onto the consequentiality of that rhetoric. Peoples argues that white women need to understand the impact of "women's issues" on a variety of communities, especially those made vulnerable through intersecting oppressions, and to begin our organizing from our understanding of that impact---what mainstream feminism has historically failed to do.

Shifting our attention to the consequentiality of feminist rhetoric can help get us closer to a model of rhetorical activism that foregrounds accountability to vulnerable communities. Social justice rhetoric involves awareness of when to speak and when to listen, when to take the floor and when to step back and make space for someone else---strategies that women of color often learn organically as a way of moving among multiple discourses and contexts, but that white women may never learn because we assume our positions to be universal (Ratcliffe). However, to more deeply enact accountability to communities made most vulnerable in a given context, there needs to be another step—one that does not rely entirely on privileged allies asking to be educated by others, which can involve placing more labor on communities of color. Privileged allies, such as white scholars studying intersectional social justice rhetorics, also need rhetorical strategies to do more of the work ourselves, which means we also need better ways to imagine how rhetorical actions may circulate in unintended ways and have unexpected impacts on other communities.

Consequentiality and Impact

Instead of finding ways to increase this rhetorical awareness of when to assert one's position and when to step back and listen, privileged allies often become defensive. For instance, white women often lash out at women of color and assume that women of color are insisting on white women taking on an acontextual, passive stance---that we need to be quiet or cannot assert any opinions. This exact assumption by white women came up after activist ShiShi Rose created a Facebook post on the Women's March

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official page titled "White Allies Read," in which Rose calls on white allies to rethink their positions in relation to communities of color:

> Now is the time for you to be listening more, talking less, observing, taking in media and art created by people of color, researching, unlearning the things you have been taught about this country. You should be reading our books and understanding the roots of racism and white supremacy. Listening to our speeches. You should be drowning yourselves in our poetry. Now is the time that you should be exposed to more than just the horrors of this country, but also the beauty that has always existed within communities of color. Beauty that was covered over because the need to see white faces depicted was more important. (Rose)

Here, Rose is asking white women to learn about the beauty of communities of color---the art, books, analyses, media, resilient and communities of activism within these communities. Many white people know the atrocities and the "horrors of this country," but we do not know how people of color have created beauty in spite of these horrors. White people need to be aware of the horrors, of course, but we also desperately need to know more about this beauty.

However, despite Rose's calls for us to look more at the beauty emerging from communities of color and to learn from it, the post was read as angry by many white women. The post gathered 7,500 Facebook reactions and comments, including many defensive responses. A *New York Times* article on dialogues about race in the Women's March quoted Rose's post and a response from a white woman, Jennifer Willis, who had cancelled her trip to the march after reading the post. Willis is quoted in the article saying

"This is a women's march… We're supposed to be allies in equal pay, marriage, adoption. Why is it now about, 'White women don't understand black women'?" (qtd in Stockman). Willis assumes that women of color's concerns are interrupting this quest for unity and allyship. In response to this defensiveness, Rose insists in an interview with *Paper Magazine* that the automatic defensiveness of white women when asked to educate ourselves about women of color's work displays a remarkable lack of contextual awareness from white women. When we hear anger from women of color, or hear a woman of color asking us to do something, we feel outraged that someone is telling us how to act---we turn suggestions into dictates. We mis-hear women of color telling us what to do, when actually women of color are asking us to develop greater rhetorical awareness of how to use our positionalities. Rose states:

> There is room for white women to be thinking about their issues, and being uplifted by all of their sisters, and there's room for white women to be on the sidelines and allowing their sisters of color to have the floor. I think people read that article in the New York Times and read my post that I had made to white allies on the Women's March page, and I think that they thought that I was saying, 'You guys just sit there, and don't ever talk, and don't talk about any of the things you go through, and just shut up.' I never said any of that. (qtd in McCartney)

Here, Rose is not asking white women to be silent or to pretend to never have experienced sexism in our own lives; she is instead calling for white women to be more aware of the contexts we move through and who else is there. But to create this room, we need to focus not only on how we are crafting resistant feminist rhetorics and what

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resources we are using to create those rhetorics, but also the consequentiality of feminist rhetorics.

This capaciousness and contextualization is a much more powerful vision of feminist activism than the more negative ways in which discussions of racism and transphobia are usually framed. These discussions are usually framed as originating from women of color killjoys, as negative insertions into positive feminist spaces or as dangerous breaks in unified struggles. This framing of discussions of race in feminist circles as negative is repeated in headlines surrounding the Women's March, such as "Women's March on Washington Opens Contentious Dialogues About Race," "Women's March on Washington provokes heated debate on class and privilege" (*New York Times*), or "Race And Feminism: Women's March Recalls The Touchy History" (*NPR)*. Discussions about race and feminism are "contentious," "heated," "touchy." It tells us something important that these discussions are connected consistently with negatively-inflected emotions. *Heated* connotes anger, while *touchy* implies someone may be acting too sensitive. Ahmed writes: "[W]hen feminists of color talk about racism, we stop of the flow of a conversation. Indeed, perhaps we are the ones who interrupt that conversation. The word interruption comes from rupture: to break. A story of breakage is thus always a story that starts somewhere." Again, race is an interruption into an assumed feminist unity.

However, as women of color and trans women have been pointing out for a long time now, unity is a dangerous concept to call for when the purpose of that unity is to smooth over differences. As writer Zoe Samudzi explains on the *Black Girl Dangerous* blog, "In commenting on the problematic aspects of the Women's March, racialized and

trans and disabled and other women were condescended to and chastised, generally by white women. They were met by the same predictable retorts about their 'divisiveness,' the same dog-whistle code for 'non-compliant' and 'uncooperative women.' Ideas about 'unity' and 'sisterhood' were also employed to shut down critique, as were ideas about 'progress' and 'efforts.'" Women of color were viewed by white women as the killjoys to feminist unity and sisterhood. Comments on aspects of the Women's March that were exclusive or could be made better were heard as violent and divisive because white women often lack the awareness to hear these comments instead as necessary and important. Instead, women of color's concerns are heard as interruptions, obstacles to smoothing over the problems and creating unified feminist messaging. But as Ahmed reminds us, "Smoothing things over often means: eliminating the signs of injury to create a fantasy of a whole. Smoothing things over often means: eliminating those who are reminders of an injury."

The real silencer of conversation is not women of color's commentary, but white women's defensiveness. It is all the more troubling that our defensiveness is often cloaked under the seemingly positive idea of "unity." What we really need in feminist movements is neither acontextual calls for "unity" or defensive accusations of "divisiveness"; we instead need the skills and rhetorical awareness to negotiate dissent as a source of change. Conflict is an inevitable aspect of a culture inheriting deep histories of oppression, and feminist rhetorics that ignore conflict through premature calls for unity often do even more damage (Jarratt 121). However, privileged allies are often ill equipped to *see* this damage because they are focusing on their own desired impact for their rhetorical actions—such as an impact that would increase unity—and refuse or are

unable to grasp that their actions have different impacts for different communities. Especially in an inequitable society, this unevenness in impact becomes an especially important component of rhetoric. To enact more responsible rhetorics, then, those who study and produce feminist rhetorical actions need ways to reframe conflict as an opportunity to trace the circulation of rhetorical actions' impacts on different communities, with an eye not toward preventing all conflict, but instead toward understanding how we can better enact accountability to the needs of communities facing intersecting oppressions.

Similarly, Ahmed asks feminists to develop "a different orientation to breaking" (3560) that reframes divisiveness into productive dialogue. What if breaking points were " the very points we might aim to reach" in feminist activism? Such an orientation toward breaking shifts away from the negatively inflected accusations of "divisiveness" or "debate" that characterize feminist dialogue, and moves toward imagining breaking as a way to explore new directions for feminist futures: "When we say we have reached a breaking point, we often evoke a crisis… when what you come up against threatens to be too much, threatens a life, or a dream, or a hope. A crisis can also be an opening, a new way of proceeding, depending on how we do or do not resolve that crisis; depending on whether we think of a crisis as something that needs to be resolved." Discussions about race, gender, and other intersections of identity and oppression do not need to be framed as divisions or debates, words that work rhetorically to shape our perceptions of feminist dialogue as negative. In a division or debate, there are "sides," there is the connotation of clearly delimited locations: over here, over there, once and for all. However, reorienting ourselves to view rhetoric in terms of consequentiality, or impact over intention, can help

us move past this location- and time-bound way of thinking about feminist "debate."

Gries asks what changes when we think of rhetoric as "an unfolding event--a distributed,

material process of becomings in which divergent consequences are actualized with time

and space" (7-8). This unfolding and process of becoming resonates with Ahmed's

concept of a crisis or breaking point as an opening, a new way of moving. Feminist

rhetoric, like other forms of activist rhetoric, have no once-and-for-all resolution.

However, when we develop a different orientation that views breaking points as

productive, we can open our imaginations up to what new consequences might unfold for

the various communities involved in the breaking point. We can create a future-oriented

intersectional feminism.

This understanding of rhetorical consequences in activist movements presents

rhetorics as enmeshed and interconnected, yet also changing across the contexts of

different communities. In contrast, one of the most striking characteristics of the

photograph of Peoples and her "White women voted for Trump" sign is the *dis*connection

of the white women in the background. They are focused elsewhere, from their vantage

points unable or unwilling to see the words on Peoples' sign. Their focus in the

photograph is on their phones, toward unknown connections---the friend texting, the

news article being read, the selfie being posted on social media, or innumerable other

options. This is not a clichéd screed against technology and the ways it can divide us, but

instead a provocation to look at what we can learn about our positions from the white

women in the photograph and their relations to other elements present in the composition.

The white women are alone, connected to each other and the invisible interlocutors in

their phones, but disconnected from the larger composition of the photograph, like white

women have historically not seen ourselves as connected to the struggles of women of color (Lorde). However, effective activist rhetoric needs instead to understand how deeply interconnected our struggles are, and thus how a rhetorical action's impact on a specific community also impacts other, interconnected communities, for better or worse. In the following section, which more closely addresses concerns of trans women at the Women's March, I continue exploring these questions of positionality and consequentiality by analyzing another example of protest imagery with drastically different impacts on different communities: the "pussy"-centric imagery of the Women's March.

A Cisgender Women's March? The Question of Transgender Inclusion in Feminist Imagery

While there are many dimensions of transgender inclusion in the march that I could examine here, I am keeping the focus on the photograph of Peoples and shifting my attention to another visual feature: the white women in the background are all wearing pink "pussy hats." While not officially connected to the official Women's March, the pink, cat-eared handknit or crocheted hats worn by many marchers quickly became a symbol for the marches. The pussy hats originated with Los Angeles artist Krista Suh, who wanted to create a visual symbol that marchers could organize around. With the help of other artist friends, Suh created a website for the idea, The Pussyhat Project, where she made knitting and crochet patterns for the hats available, and the design took off. Photographs of the worldwide Women's Marches feature the "sea of pink" visualized in Pussyhat Project illustrations by Aurora Lady, an artist and friend of Suh ("The Pussyhat

Project"). The pussy hat achieved first a viral spread online and then a stunning visual presence at the worldwide Women's Marches. As Gries describes, such virality, or "the tendency of things to spread quickly and widely," often has an affective component: "Things are especially contagious when they propagate affective desires that induce unconscious collective identifications and unconscious imitative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors" (87). In the case of the pussy hat, it connected to many women on an affective level and prompted identifications because of the already existing collective outrage over Trump's blatant sexism.

The pussy hat was a direct response against Trump's sexist comment that as a star, he could "do anything" to women including "grab 'em by the pussy," caught on video and made public one month before the presidential election ("Transcript"). As a way of channeling the collective outrage that a man could make such a comment, have it publicly exposed, and still maintain enough support to win the presidency, much anti-Trump protest imagery turned the comment on its head by reclaiming "pussy" as a site of empowerment instead of abjection; for instance, popular shirts and signs with statements like "This pussy grabs back," examples of what *Guardian* writer Nicole Puglise calls a "combative meme" (Puglise). As Micciche writes, "Trump's sexist, racist rhetoric has awakened a sleeping giant. Millions of self-proclaimed nasty women[5] (and their partners) and pussy power advocates around the world, spanning all identity categories, are building coalitions, putting boots on the ground, giving money to endangered causes, and living out the truth that social change efforts are never complete" (9-10). However, these

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[5] After Donald Trump referred to Hillary Clinton as a "nasty woman," Clinton supporters, and feminists in general, took up the term quickly and widely, elevating it to another iconic protest phrase at the Women's Marches.

responses focus overwhelmingly more on sexism than on racism, especially as taken up under the framework of "pussy power." While the pussy hats may have been deemed frivolous at first, they caught on widely and were worn by many women at the worldwide marches (including me). As *New York Times* writer Amanda Hess writes, "The handmade pink 'pussyhats' that many marchers wore — a reference to Donald Trump's caught-on-tape boasts about grabbing unsuspecting women by the genitals — had been sneered at in the days before the march. They were called corny, girlie, a waste of time. Seen from above, though, on thousands of marchers, their wave of color created a powerful image." The pussy hat rode this trend of reclaiming "pussy" to become a symbol of the Women's March, featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* and the *New Yorker* to represent the marches.

However, like with the larger trend of pussy-based anti-Trump rhetoric, the pussy hat came under scrutiny for forwarding a model of feminism that may equate womanhood with bodies that look particular ways or have particular genitals. The creators of the pussy hat insist that their design did not intend trans exclusion through using the word "pussy": "We chose this loaded word for our project because we want to reclaim the term as a means of empowerment. In this day and age, if we have pussies we are assigned the gender of 'woman.' Women, whether transgender or cisgender, are mistreated in this society" ("FAQ"). And in an interview, Suh further articulates "I think 'pussy' refers to the female anatomical part, but it's also a word that's used to shame people who are feminine … whether they are men, women [or] genderqueer. And I think what it comes down to is that femininity is really disrespected in our society" (qtd in Compton). However, it is necessary here to pay attention not only to the intentions of the

hat's creators, but to the hat's varied impacts. The hat created a sense of connection and unified resistance in a lot of women, as shown by its viral spread and the "sea of pink" that materialized at the worldwide marches as millions of women donned the handmade hats. But another consequence was that trans women felt excluded or wary about the march due to the pussy-based imagery that dominated the scene.

Trans women activists critiqued the hat and other such imagery for using "pussy" as a symbol of womanhood. In the image of Angela Peoples and her protest sign, the white women in the background are all wearing pussy hats, and they stand in stark contrast to Peoples' ball cap that says "Stop killing black people." In this section of the chapter, I ask, what should we as feminist rhetoricians make of the pussy hat as protest rhetoric? I explore how we can listen to the critiques from trans women and women of color and explore multiple interpretations of the hat that will not sediment it as having one meaning, but pay attention to the unintended meanings it may communicate and what that can tell us about crafting feminist rhetoric, especially with accountability to especially vulnerable women in the current political context. At the march, I was a white woman wearing a pussy hat, and I too had enjoyed the subversive use of "pussy" and other such wordplay and imagery that had proliferated in anti-Trump rhetoric since the election. As a queer femme, I was on board for the reclamation of imagery traditionally gendered feminine, such as the color pink, as resources for subversive gender performances and political commentary. But I am also a cis queer femme, and after the march continue to puzzle through the rhetoric of my body at the march in relation to others there, in the teeming streets that shut down traffic and cellphone service in the heart of D.C.

Like I did, many found power in the pussy hat as a form of craftivism, a way of reclaiming usually denigrated "feminine" activities (such as knitting or crocheting) and imagery (such as the color pink) and fashioning these into resistant sites of power. The creators of the hat state on the website that the purpose is not only to create a unified symbol of feminist resistance, but also to bring women together in the act of making the hats: "Underlying this project is the idea that in the process of making pussyhats, participants would be connecting with each other and laying the groundwork for future political activism" ("FAQ"). The pussy hat participates in a long tradition of feminist material cultural production that has been examined in detail in rhetoric and composition (see Goggin; Goggin and Tobin; Kraemer-Sohan; Mattingly). Micciche situates the imagery at the Women's March in the context of other protest art: "Social protest is a kind of art making, and there was no shortage on display at the women's march… We saw dark humor mixed with intelligent messaging and pop culture-inspired barbs. Feminist activists have a long tradition of recognizing the power of outrageousness and humor to animate an issue for a broad swath of people" (11). However, what has been not fully engaged in reclamations of women's protest art is the question of not only what examples of cultural production enable, but what they constrain. When we look at multiple consequences of a symbol like the pussy hat, not just those that are celebrated, we can tell a more complex story.

White, cisgender feminists must be especially careful not to reproduce the tendency of feminist imagery to reinforce histories of exclusion. For instance, as women's rights activist Brittany Oliver writes, "Sorry, but I just can't ignore Susan B. Anthony who stated, 'I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or

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demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman.' The white pantsuit worn on Election Day was made possible by white women suffragists who stepped on the backs of my ancestors." These symbols such as quotations by Anthony or wearing "suffragette white" are often seen by white feminists as expressions of joyful resistance. The feminist symbols used in contemporary activism can also reinforce histories of racism and violence against trans women within movements. When do our acts of resistance shut out others more vulnerable? The pussy hat is a contested symbol, resonating with so many in different ways as a powerful subversion or as a trans-exclusive symbol .There were also subversions *of* the subversion, such as pussy hats knit in the pattern of the transgender pride flag. Here, I foreground trans women's critiques and consider what responsibility white, cisgender feminists have to these critiques when creating protest imagery.

When we reclaim and subvert derided elements of the "feminine" such as the word pussy, what are we also leaving out? That is the question that especially white, cisgender feminists do not ask ourselves often enough. We find power in symbols traditionally degraded as feminine and may reclaim those symbols to instead find power in the feminine, a powerful subversion and a statement of resistance in patriarchal society. Such delight in feminist subversion abounded at the Women's March and focused largely on reclamations of "pussy" in light of Trump's comments. Micciche expresses joy upon seeing such subversions: "The humor and creativity of women's resistance made me feel less despondent and made me laugh, the kind of laughter that hovers on the edge of mourning. That joy-grief response was largely inspired by the subversive humor everywhere on display at the march," such as a woman dressed as a vagina and other appropriations of "pussy" (10). However, feeling such joy---even if

"joy-grief," or joy as momentary relief from grief---can also engender stances that are on guard and hostile toward potential killjoys. Trans women were framed as killjoys of the subversive resistance referenced by the "pussy power" imagery. Even though we may delight in subversive responses to Trump's sexism, we must also ask what these responses enable and constrain---while also being aware of impulses to dismiss critiques of these subversions as killjoy moments. Instead, we should listen to the killjoy. When we reclaim the "feminine" symbolic as a rhetorical resource and run with it, we must also ask what we may be leaving as *untapped* resources for resistance.

Many trans women, nonbinary people, and allies responded to the pussy hat with questioning, skepticism, or outrage. In an article for the feminist magazine *Bustle*, "If You're Not Talking About the Criticism Surrounding the Women's March, Then You're Part of the Problem," writer Mariella Mosthof writes, "The Women's March was filled with pink knit pussy hats, giant uteruses, and signs declaring the autonomy of both, along with that old feminist chestnut 'No uterus, no opinion.' It all had the effect of inextricably linking womanhood with body parts." Importantly, critics explain that this linkage of womanhood with particular body parts has an impact on trans women even if that was not intended. For many trans women, such imagery is inextricably connected to histories of erasure—histories that can be unintentionally evoked but equally painful. A trans writer who goes by only her first name, Amelia, writes in a blog post titled "My Experience as a Trans Woman at the Women's March on Washington": "For a trans woman, being in a crowd of women—or even just a small group—shouting about their pussies and uteruses can be a terribly exclusive experience. It's an environment that says you're not welcome because you don't meet the prerequisites for membership. Even if you're included as a

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woman on some level, language that equates womanhood to genitals can undo that."
Amelia continues to unpack the complexity of women reclaiming symbols of femininity
while also being careful not to exclude those who do not identify, or are unable to access,
the same symbols. For instance, Amelia writes that as a trans woman she also sees the
power in holding a pussy sign and "talk[ing] about my genitals and not be ashamed of
them." However, it is also important to remember that not all trans women share the same
positions either:

> I have a lot of privilege that allows me to feel included and only slightly
> different. The reality for many trans women is different from this, though.
> Many—likely most—are excluded and treated as different. One group's
> language of empowerment and reclamation can be the language of
> oppression to another. I don't know where the exact line is between the
> two, especially given that it can vary from individual to individual. People
> with vaginas should be able to talk about their bodies and take ownership
> of them. However, at the same time, it is important to consider your
> overall message. Is your language equating your vagina to your
> womanhood? Does it exclude trans women? Does it exclude trans men?
> Does it exclude anyone? Does it ignore the oppression of women of color?
> (Amelia)

What these conversations can teach us is that it is necessary to not only invoke feminist
symbols in a celebratory way, but maintain a deep focus on the contexts and histories
through which feminist symbols have emerged and traveled, and study the varied
consequences that these symbols enact as they keep moving through time and space.

As writer Evan Greer explores in an *Advocate* article titled "The Women's March Left Trans Women Behind, the genital-based imagery was a problem mostly in terms of the larger issue of lack of trans inclusion at the march, and in feminist activism in general. For instance, any trans exclusion in the symbolism surrounding the march was happening in the context of trans women not being represented nearly as much as cis women:

> The march was powerful. The organizers did an incredible job of lifting up the voices of women who are often pushed to the sidelines. But by the end of the day, I was left feeling sad — shattered, really. Because while the Women's March made history, it left behind one of the world's most marginalized groups of women: transgender women. By my count, there were three trans women onstage during the six-hour program, which included more than 60 talented and notable speakers and performers.

When Greer said this to another woman nearby, the following interaction happened: "A kind but misguided cis woman attempted to reassure me. 'One thing at a time, dear,' she said." This misguided assurance of "one thing at a time" echoes long feminist histories where mostly white, cisgender feminists assume a "trickle-down" effect through which the most privileged women will gain more rights and recognitions first, then that will benefit all women. In fact, as we can see from centuries of feminist organizing failing to improve conditions for the women most vulnerable, the "trickle-down" effect is not only *in*effective but also damaging. At feminist events such as the Women's March, such histories are ever-present. As Mosthof writes, trans women feared "their existence would be pushed even further into the margins in service of mainstream, cisgender women's

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issues," a fear activated and reinforced by white and cis feminists' lack of attention to the impact of their chosen symbols and actions.

It is also important to highlight that there was no one "trans response" to the pussy hats. For instance, there were subversions of the pussy hat itself. Queer, disabled activist Rachel Sharp posted an image of a pussy hat knit in the colors of the transgender pride flag on Twitter, which she then made for trans people as requested through subtweets and messages (Sharp). A crocheter known as Kathy S. also posted a pattern for the hat in the trans flag colors on the pattern-sharing site Ravelry, calling it an "Inclussy Pussy Hat" ("Inclussy"). These and other crafters reshaped the pussy hat's messaging to be deliberately trans-positive. In addition, as trans woman writer Katelyn Burns writes in an essay titled "How 'Pussy Hats' Made Me Feel Excluded—And Then Welcomed—At The Women's March," there was no one unified story at the march about interactions between cis and trans feminists. For instance, Burns tells the story of how she was given a hat by a cisgender woman who had made extras, and despite initially feeling wary about the hat, Burns accepted it: "I weighed the decision in my mind. These hats inherently other me from womanhood, and yet . . . I was really fucking cold, and this stranger probably just wanted me to be warm. I accepted and donned the hat." In spite of this positive interaction, however, Burns warns that cisgender feminists also need to do more: "I understand the overwhelming offensiveness of Trump's pussy-grabbing brag. But trans women are also groped, and for them, sometimes a grope from a strange man can turn deadly in an instant. I'd like to see more acknowledgement of the gendered violence faced by trans women of color alongside the intense imagery of pink vaginas and uteruses." Here, Burns recontextualizes the feminist responses to Trump's sexism in the

bigger picture of systemic violence against all women, including an often greater risk to trans women of color, but also takes the hat in the specific context of the moment ("really fucking cold"). The problem is not that hat itself, but the need for attention to that bigger picture and how some women are made more vulnerable than others by the systems that oppress us all.

Ultimately, the pussy hat and related symbolism *enable* a certain response to Trump's sexism---a response praised in much mainstream coverage of the Women's March. For instance, as the *People Magazine* cover story on the Women's March described, "Wearing pink cat-eared caps and toting signs, men, women and children protested a President who traffics in insults (against Mexicans, women, the disabled), discounts conflicts of interest, lost the popular vote by 2.9 million and takes office with the lowest approval rating of any Commander in Chief in four decades. To them, historic moment felt more like hostile takeover" (Westfall). Similarly, the *Time Magazine* cover story illustrates, "What Trump dismissed as 'locker-room banter'—'I moved on her like a bitch . . . Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything'—gave Jan. 21 its palette (pink), its signature attire (the pussy hat) and its rules of engagement" (Vick). This impetus toward "hostile takeover," reclamation, or recovering space in the face of outrage is a powerful call to action for many feminists. One consequence of this particular kind of feminist imagery is this wide call to action and feeling of inspiration and power in the face of Trump's sexism.

However, the specific focus on these responses to Trump's sexism *constrains* other responses that could more effectively challenge that sexism at its interconnected

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roots with other oppressions---the deeper threat of the Trump presidency and the histories it has emerged from. For instance, Mosthof asserts:

> Reproductive rights are a huge issue. Women's healthcare is under attack. Cis women reclaiming their vulvas as a political act in protest of their bodies being the sites of violence is powerful. There is absolutely room to stand up for all these ideas in an intersectionally feminist movement. But when we center these narratives as the be-all end-all of womanhood and what we're fighting for, we cut ourselves off from meaningfully including marginalized bodies and identities.

Like much feminist discourse at the moment, there are multiple tensions in Mosthof's call for an intersectional feminist future. We need to "meaningfully include" those multiply marginalized in a variety of ways, and ask more questions about who and what is being centered---moves that simultaneously point us toward expansion and inclusivity on the one hand, and specificity on the other hand in choosing what narratives to center. But mostly, Mosthof is asking cis white feminists to center a different narrative than what we are used to: "There is room for both reclaiming 'pussy power' as a cis woman and acknowledging the specific struggles of other marginalized gender identities. It's all feminism, and it's all important. But considering trans folks get so much less airtime, it is the responsibility of cis women to use their relative power and privilege to uplift them and amplify their voices." The issue here is what is amplified and what is not. In the mainstream coverage of the march, reflecting what seems to be feminist consensus about what matters and what symbols represent those concerns, trans voices have not been amplified. This lack of attention to trans issues in feminism is especially important in

light of the historical erasures of trans women in feminist movements---a history that must be deliberately countered or it will continue to reproduce itself.

Conclusion

One way to work toward disrupting histories of exclusion—to work, as Ahmed urges, *toward* breaking and not toward premature calls for unity—is by reframing impact over intention as a key element of a feminist rhetorical awareness. Privileging impact in our rhetorical analyses of feminist activism means turning our attention to rhetoric's consequentiality, using emerging tools in areas such as circulation studies to explore not only an example of cultural production but also the diverse consequences it sparks over time. In addition, impact over intention for feminist rhetorical analysis means we must draw from a variety of frameworks to help us see what we might not otherwise see; for instance, combining queer and feminist of color frameworks to conduct intersectional analyses, as I have done here.

Ultimately, privileged allies need to do more work developing and implementing tools for seeing what we might not know how to see. Fellow scholars researching activist rhetorics can re-orient our reactions and perceptions in ways that can be difficult but are essential to moving forward to create more equitable scholarship, teaching, and activism. In this chapter, through my analysis of points of tension in the Women's March as exemplified in Peoples' photograph, I show how white and cis feminists are used to being the killjoy to others and may not recognize when we are viewing women of color as killjoys to us. In relation, we need to do more work. Beyond common exhortations such as "check your privilege," privileged allies need to cultivate a deeper rhetorical

awareness of the contexts and histories surrounding what we often view as interruptions in feminist space. We need to stop hearing women of color and trans women's critiques as ruptures in feminism or threats to a unified movement. Instead, we can view such breaking points as ways to create better futures—not smoothing over the breaks and letting histories repeat themselves under the surface until they break through again, but embracing the breakages as analytical tools.

If activist rhetoric is a complex network of actions made by and for diverse community members, then we need ways to understand that rhetorical actions can have drastically different consequences for different people (for instance, whether "pussy" in protest rhetoric is heard as an empowering form of resistance or an exclusionary repetition of cisgender-centric histories). By paying closer attention to these moments where we can see diverse impacts unfolding, rhetoricians can track how a specific action is taken up, heard, and understood by different parts of an activist network. The focus that I add here is specifically on foregrounding accountability to the most vulnerable communities in that network when we analyze these diverse impacts. For the study of activist rhetorics, I offer one way forward to help us remember our histories but move beyond endlessly repeating them, and instead take part in the creation of feminist futures, hearing women of color's and trans women's calls not as a source of strain but instead as an invitation to find ways to do better.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

I started this project by asking how queer-identified rhetors use digital spaces to construct alternative representations, and over the process of this research and writing, came to understand that my questions were much more complex than that. I began the dissertation process in spring 2016, meaning the presidential election cycle leading to the election of Donald Trump coincided with my research and first steps in the drafting process. The 2016 election results disrupted several assumptions behind my research and my life as an academic and as an activist. Like many others in my demographic—young, liberal white women—I was surprised by the election results. Until late at night on November 6, 2016, I had not believed Trump could win over Hillary Clinton and did not even seriously entertain the idea. Obviously, this assumption was destroyed after the election, and along with it several others. Although I already identified as a social justice activist, had studied queer theory, intersectional feminisms, and critical race studies, and was clearly critical of an American history and present defined by racism and colonialism, the election shook me from a complacent belief that a progress narrative was underway toward more justice and fewer inequities. I saw that the reality of living in the U.S. today for many means that Trump is by no means an exception, but instead a symptom of a deeply damaged society founded on colonialist violence, and that no "progress" can be assumed or taken for granted with this history.

In terms of the research I have presented here, I responded to the above realizations by challenging myself to ask more uncomfortable questions—questions like: What does it mean to be a white woman researching and writing about racial justice? Is responsible allyship possible across differences, and what does that look like? How can I treat race as not an added analytic to queerness, but instead center race and a commitment to racial justice in my analysis? How can I amplify, but not appropriate, the work of queer and feminist communities of color? These questions were not only ethical but also methodological questions, which has led to the focus of this project: developing methods and methodologies to study *and* enact social justice in rhetoric and composition research. I have sought to develop a flexible heuristic grounded in the concept of accountability to assist scholars—and teachers, administrators, and activists—working in complex spaces to address concerns of diversity, inclusion, and equity, especially across differences. Specifically, I take away from this research the following conclusions:

1) Allyship is a rhetorical process that requires *accountability* to communities with lived experiences of intersecting oppressions in a given context, with the purpose of developing tools for analysis and action that center those communities' experiences, needs, and generative resistance practices.

2) Accountability is a rhetorical methodology that can help allies see what we are not socialized to see by foregrounding questions that move beyond rhetor, audience, and context, and into questions that access a more nuanced analysis of power and oppression. An accountability based framework enacts the following strategies:

a. Foregrounds questions of who is *centered* and who is rendered marginal in a rhetorical action, and with what effects.

b. Makes questions of accountability *to whom* and *for what* central to rhetorical analysis (of texts, images, video, audio, or any other rhetorical actions or artifacts).

c. Provides methods for tracing the different *impacts* a rhetorical action action has on different communities, by asking questions like: Who is vulnerable? What is the impact on those most vulnerable?

Because of this focus on tracing impact, this methodology is especially suited to studying the complex circulation of digital rhetorics, although it can also be applied to other contexts. While this methodological framework does not provide solutions to all the difficult concerns of allyship across differences, it does offer new questions that we can ask in specific contexts. Accountability will look different in different contexts, and that is part of my point about allyship as rhetorical. We need strategies to understand and enact rhetorical actions to accomplish allyship in ways that can adapt to new contexts but not lose a focus on accountability to vulnerable communities.

I have detailed this methodology through the three central case studies that form the body of this text, using each chapter and case as a way to think through particular aspects of an accountability based rhetorical methodology. All of the chapters delve into specific questions and strategies for rhetorical analysis that foregrounds the concept of accountability.

Chapter two begins with the work of rhetors in the *Black Futures Month* project to develop the idea of "centering" as a rhetorical practice. Asking whom a rhetorical action

centers moves beyond questions that stop at "who is included?" and into a deeper

exploration of privilege and marginalization. If people are included in a community,

discussion, or rhetorical action but their needs are not *centered*, then that action will

likely reinforce oppressive power dynamics. As a result, I argue that asking who is

centered changes a rhetorical action. Further, chapter two foregrounds the idea of

centering particular communities as an invention strategy for imagining futures. The

prompt behind *Black Futures Month* is to imagine what futures could be possible if the

needs, experiences, and generative resistance practices of currently marginalized

communities were instead centered in activist movements (for example, what new futures

would be made possible by centering the experiences of queer and trans women of color).

Chapter two performs my argument about allyship by beginning from embodied

experiences of oppression, which are framed as the place where theory must emerge from

in order to challenge societal oppressions at their interconnected roots.

Building upon the concept of centering, chapter three details the concepts of being

accountable to and *accountable for* through its analysis of *The Identity Project*. I argue

that, when attempting to advocate for others both within and beyond one's own

communities, rhetors should interrogate who our actions are meant to be accountable to

(e.g., what communities, groups, demographics) and what we ourselves are accountable

for (e.g., privilege, our own social location). Grounding a rhetorical action in such

questions does not guarantee effective allyship, but it does provide a generative way to

think through issues like the design of a project or the choices behind a rhetorical action

with a specific focus on *being accountable*. Asking questions of accountability instead of

only audience, for example, can help a rhetoric consider not just questions of "who is this

aimed toward?"—which may end up causing a message to assimilate into existing norms but leave behind those most vulnerable in the context—but instead questions like "to whom is this accountable?" Further, chapter three unpacks the importance of being *accountable for* one's own position as another way to think about positionality and privilege beyond guilt, apology, or limitation. Being *accountable for* one's position instead asks rhetors to use that position as a critical resource.

Chapter four elaborates the concept of *impact* as vital to a rhetorical framework grounded in accountability. Building on work in digital circulation that frames the meaning of a rhetorical action as dispersed and unfolding over time, I establish *impact* as a vital measure of accountability—specifically, impacts on the communities made most vulnerable in a given context. I argue that the rhetorical efficacy of an action can be measured according to its impact on vulnerable communities, with the knowledge that who is vulnerable changes depending on the specific context, requiring a form of activist rhetorical awareness capable of understanding that vulnerability. To detail this awareness and the concept of impact, chapter four focuses on the Women's March on Washington and two examples of highly circulated protest rhetoric from the march: the photograph of black queer activist Angela Peoples holding the "White Women Voted for Trump" sign, and the pink pussy hat. For both of these images, I also trace the interplay between material and digital circulation because both images moved back and forth between these media over time (for example, the pussy hat began as an illustration, then became a form of material rhetoric at the marches, then continued as an iconic image and digitally circulating symbol afterward). I use these cases to show how both of these images had differential impacts across communities, and how foregrounding communities made

vulnerable in the context—such as trans women of color who have historically been excluded from mainstream feminisms—allows for a reading of these images' circulation that foregrounds accountability for activist rhetorics.

The above chapters, taken together, offer a specific but flexible framework as part of a rhetorical methodology grounded in accountability. While this is an important contribution, there are also several limitations to this study, which I detail in the following section.

Limitations of the Study

While this study makes a new contribution to cultural rhetorics and the study of contemporary social justice, it also has several limitations that I want to acknowledge here. As with many dissertation projects, a major limitation is time. I chose to limit this study in particular ways bounded by the time available, which meant that I also had to set aside other plans and possible directions. I chose to focus on the three central case studies as a way to keep the project bounded, but I also acknowledge that this focus leaves out many other exciting sites of social justice rhetoric. The choice of case studies has been influenced by my own digital and social media habits, inevitably leaving out other materials due to my own biases as a researcher. In addition, because of the circulating and changing nature of digital rhetorics, there came a point for each case where I had to stop collecting data—with the acknowledgement that the activist media projects I studied would continue to move, get taken up, commented on, and remixed in the future.

In addition, because of my project's focus on analyzing only public, online discourse surrounding the case studies, it is limited in its inability to engage more directly

with community voices. I chose to focus this dissertation on the study of public circulation, while leaving open the possibility of combining that with other methods later, such as interviews. However, this has also been a limitation because I did not have direct access to participants as I would have in an interview study. This has challenged me to ask ethical questions about representing the work of others when I do not have a community in front of me to ask or collaborate with. However, these have been generative questions that can also offer productive interventions into rhetorical analysis and the study of public circulation, in addition to other text-based methods like archival research.

Another limitation of the study lies in a difficulty of doing intersectional analyses: the need to narrow the focus onto particular dynamics also inevitably leaves out axes of identity and oppression. For example, my project most explicitly engages gender, sexuality, and race as not only identity categories but as analytics. However, I have not yet engaged as fully with additional axes that structure societal power dynamics and resistance, including ethnicity, nationality, and disability. In an anti-immigrant political climate, it is necessary to ask questions that trouble concepts like citizenship and that bring ethnicity and nationality into the analysis, which other have engaged (see Chávez; Licona) but that my project has not fully explored. Issues of disability and embodiment represent another future direction for research. For digital rhetorics, it is important to ask questions about risk and surveillance in digital spaces—like trolling and doxxing—and how these unevenly threaten the bodies that are already marginalized. In this project, I have not had the space to engage these questions in as much depth as I would like, but these are generative directions to pursue.

In spite of the above limitations, this project offers a productive intervention into cultural rhetorics, digital rhetorics, and the study of contemporary social justice movements. The next section discusses the implications of this research.

Implications

For Rhetoric and Composition Research

Recent calls in rhetoric and composition, especially in cultural rhetorics, have highlighted the need for new approaches to rhetorical analysis and criticism that foreground social justice (Bratta and Powell; Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab; Del Hierro, Levy, and Price). Beyond questions of inclusion and reclamation, such calls ask scholars to think more deeply about how to research and write about power, privilege, and oppression in a way that is ethical and responsible to communities under threat. Further, these calls ask how studying the rhetorical practices of communities previously rendered marginal can help us develop new rhetorical theories and methodologies. My research responds to these calls by developing a set of strategies for doing the work of social justice rhetorics, especially in complexly networked contexts like digital spaces. Specifically, the accountability based framework I develop offers a way for scholars to research the rhetorical practices of communities that are not bounded by location or time, a necessary intervention as the field moves more toward the digital. We have a strong and valuable tradition of research with bounded communities, like community-engaged research, but few tools for enacting accountability to community praxis in these complex and interconnected contexts. The framework I develop in this project responds to this

problem by developing more methodological tools for ethical social justice research in digital spaces.

For Writing Pedagogy and Administration

While my project is not explicitly pedagogical in focus, it does have several implications for pedagogy and for writing program administration. The questions of accountability my project foregrounds are transferable across contexts and can apply to pedagogy and administration as well as research. Specifically, the framework I develop here can help teachers and administrators respond to a threatening political climate by working to advance diversity, inclusion, and equity in our courses and writing programs.

At the level of pedagogy, asking questions like "who is centered?" and "to whom and for what is this accountable?" can provide productive directions for course design, assignments, and assessments. For example, we might ask how it would change a History of Rhetoric course to center communities that have historically been rendered marginal, and how that challenge can offer a generative way to help students think through the exclusionary dynamics of history. Further, in contexts such as First-Year Writing, questions like "to whom and for what is this accountable?" can help us guide students through difficult questions of positionality, especially when asking students to research and write across differences. In addition, a focus on accountability also invites us to ask questions about whom our writing assessments are meant to serve, how, and why. For example, we may find that traditional grading structures fail to enact accountability to increasingly diverse student populations, which can begin an invention process to

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investigate what other structures may work better (as scholars such as Asao Inoue and Carmen Kynard have already done).

On the broader scale of writing program administration, a framework grounded in accountability asks administrators to consider questions of how to build ethical and sustainable programs designed to be accountable to populations made vulnerable within the university. Further, the framework I provide offers way to work within inherited institutional structures that are flawed and imperfect. Instead of aiming for an impossible ideological purity, administrators can use an accountability-based heuristic to imagine what may be possible within the given institutional constraints. In institutions, a "dominant/resistant" binary does not serve anyone because it is much too totalizing. Instead, we need ways to work within, against, and around the flawed structures that we inherit while also working to center the needs of communities made especially vulnerable through the flaws in the system. The framework I present here offers one starting point for this kind of invention work.

For Social Justice Activism

Though the primary focus of my project is an intervention into research in rhetoric and composition, with implications for pedagogy and administration, I also offer ways forward for social justice activism and allyship outside the context of the academy. At this contemporary moment, many are asking how to be better allies to communities beyond their own, and it is clear that this is a struggle with no clearly defined answers. Here, I do not offer a map or a set of instructions, but I do offer a framework of

generative questions that can help potential allies think in productive ways about their actions. For example, asking questions like "what is the differential impact of this action across various communities?" can work as a tool to expand allies' awareness of how actions affect communities in vastly different ways according to axes of power and oppression. Such questions can serve as productive ways to invite allies to consider how their actions may have unintended impacts and to take responsibility for those impacts, without becoming mired in guilt or apologizing (as often happens in the trope of the well-intentioned ally). The framework I develop here can also work as a productive way to engage allies in conversation within social justice spaces.

Conclusion

While this is the end of a dissertation project, it is the beginning of what will likely be a life's work, especially because the central questions of this project are not only scholarly but also personal. The social justice issues I write about—queer, feminist, racial justice, and other interconnected concerns—impact my life and the lives of my friends, family, and academic community including fellow scholars and students.

If I can condense my findings from this research into one key takeaway, it is the idea that those committed to social justice must keep working not only to develop advocacy strategies and connect across differences, but also to imagine different futures. My research topics are heavy, and it is easy to become frustrated, outraged, or depressed when writing about social justice. However, through this work, I have also come to believe even more strongly in imagination as a powerful activist resource, following the lead of queer and black radical traditions that insist not only on critiquing extant power

structures but on imagining what could be different. Imagining better futures that center the needs and experiences of those currently oppressed is not just a creative exercise, but also a vital movement strategy. In a damaged and threatening world, it is a survival strategy to imagine otherwise.

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to My Relatives and Practice All Our Relations." Enculturation 21 (2016). Web.
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    Where We Go From Here." *The Huffington Post*. 1 February 2015. Web. 9 April

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on-washingtons-beautifully-intersectional-policy-
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VanHaitsma, Pamela et al. "Teaching & Researching Feminist Rhetorics: Digital
Curation as Collaborative Archival Method [Blog Post]." *Coalition of Feminist
Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition.* N.p., n.d. Web. 30 April
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<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/24/magazine/who-didnt-go-to-the-womens-

march-matters-more-than-who-did.html?mcubz=1>

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ziyad/black-arts-do-matter_b_9334674.html>

CURRICULUM VITAE

Laura Tetreault
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University of Louisville
Department of English
2216 S 1ˢᵗ Street
Louisville, KY 40292

EDUCATION

University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
Ph.D., Rhetoric and Composition   May 2018
Dissertation: "We're Asking You to Show Up": Accountability as Rhetorical Practice
for Queer, Feminist, and Racial Justice Allyship
Committee: Karen Kopelson (director), Mary P. Sheridan, Kiki Petrosino, Danielle
DeVoss

Emerson College, Boston, MA
M.F.A., Creative Writing (Nonfiction)   May 2013

University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI
B.A., English, summa cum laude   May 2010
Minor in Writing and Rhetoric

PUBLICATIONS

Book

Horner, Bruce and **Laura Tetreault,** eds. *Crossing Divides: Exploring Translingual
Writing Pedagogies and Programs.* Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2017.

Refereed Journal Articles

Horner, Bruce and **Laura Tetreault.** "Translation as (Global) Writing." *Composition
Studies* 44.1 (2016).

Tetreault, Laura. "Responsive Inquiry." *JAC* 34.1-2 (2014).

Book Chapter

Brydon-Miller, Mary, Patricia Gayá, Paul Noone, Alice Willatt, Cassandra Book, Stephen Cohen, Amy Nichols, **Laura Tetreault**, and Bronwyn T. Williams. "Pass the parcel: The Ever Expanding Impact of Critical Utopian Action Research." In H. P. Hansen & L. T. Clausen (eds.), *Festschrift Volume for Birger Nielsen.* In press.

REFEREED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"Politics, Language, and Social Justice in the Classroom." Kansas City, MO: Conference on College Composition and Communication.	2018
"Feminist Rhetorics of Advocacy: Enacting Intersectionality and Centering Women of Color." Dayton, OH: Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference.	2017
"Queer Archives, Producing Public Memory, and Activism." Portland, OR: Conference on College Composition and Communication.	2017
"Rhetorical Action as Motion: The Circulation of Queer-Feminist Digital Arts Activism." Louisville, KY: Thomas R. Watson Conference.	2016
"The Digital Extracurriculum: Online Circulation as Queer Rhetorical Practice." Houston, TX: Conference on College Composition and Communication.	2016
"Queer Women's Slam Poetry as Embodied Performance." Tempe, AZ: Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference.	2015
"Translation as Negotiation: Theorizing the Translation Process in Composition." Tampa, FL: Conference on College Composition and Communication.	2015
"Responsivity as a Mode of Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration." Louisville, KY: Thomas R. Watson Conference.	2014
"Transgressing Boundaries Between the Academic and Creative Essay." San Antonio, TX: Rhetoric Society of America Conference.	2014
"Rethinking Creative Nonfiction as Alternative Intellectual Inquiry." Indianapolis, IN: Conference on College Composition and Communication.	2014

AWARDS AND HONORS

Social Media Curator Grant ($300). Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition.	2017
Gloria Anzaldúa Rhetorician Award ($750). Conference on College Composition & Communication.	2017
University Fellowship. School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies, University of Louisville. (First-year and dissertation fellowship.)	2016-2017, 2013-2014
Graduate Student Council Travel Grant ($350). School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies, University of Louisville.	2016, 2015, 2014
Graduate Travel Award ($100). Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference.	2015
Graduate Student Union Research Travel Grant ($100). University of Louisville.	2015, 2014
Gesa E. Kirsch Travel Award ($270). Department of English, University of Louisville.	2014
Graduate Writing Award. Department of Writing, Literature, and Publishing, Emerson College.	2012

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT AND TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University Teaching Experience

University of Louisville   2013-present
Department of English
- ENGL 101: Introduction to College Writing
- ENGL 102: Intermediate College Writing
- ENGL 306: Business Writing
- ENGL 306: Business Writing (Communication and Advocacy)
College of Business
- BUS 301: Business Communication

Emerson College   2011-2013
Department of Writing, Literature, and Publishing
- WR101: Introduction to College Writing
- WR121: Research Writing

Tutoring Experience

University of Louisville   2014
University Writing Center and Virtual Writing Center
- Held in-person and virtual consultations with undergraduate, graduate, faculty, and staff writers. Created a digital video tutorial for the Virtual Writing Center.

Emerson College   2010-2012
Lacerte Family Writing and Academic Resource Center

- Held writing consultations for undergraduate and graduate students, including a large population of international students.
- Assisted with the assessment of the undergraduate peer tutoring program to demonstrate success to administrators. Provided a summary by organizing collected data.

University of Rhode Island   2010-2013
Talent Development Program
- Provided specialized tutoring support for two sections of WRT100 over four consecutive summers. Held writing consultations with Talent Development first-year undergraduate students at URI, who are recruited from Rhode Island high schools in underrepresented neighborhoods.

Writing Center   2009-2010
- Held writing consultations for undergraduate and graduate stud Mapping Tutorial Interactions research study by analyzing the directive techniques in recorded tutoring sessions.

Community Teaching

LGBTQ+ Writing Group   2016-present
University of Louisville
- Founded a writing group for LGBTQ+ and allied student writers as a partnership between the University Writing Center and LGBT Center at UofL.
- Facilitated monthly meetings for writers to share creative work.
- Organized public readings during Pride Week at UofL.

GLASS Community Center   2010-2011
Boston, MA

- As a volunteer writing instructor, co-designed and co-facilitated fall and spring sessions of weekly creative writing classes for adolescent LGBTQ writers.

Wordjam   Spring 2011
Boston, MA
- Co-designed and co-taught a weekly creative writing class in a branch of the Boston Public Library.

ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE
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BizComm Writing Lab Coach   2017-present
College of Business, University of Louisville
- Collaborate with College of Business Faculty to develop a competency-based business communication curriculum.
- Coach College of Business undergraduate, MBA, MAC, and PhD students in professional written and verbal communication across genres.
- Promote the BizComm Writing Lab by meeting with faculty and providing in-class presentations.
- Develop criteria for and judge the annual College of Business Fast Pitch Competition.

Assistant Director of the University Writing Center   2015-2016
University of Louisville
Regular Duties
- Supervised and mentored a staff of 11 MA student consultants. Led a monthly mentoring group, offered day-to-day support, and guest-taught two class periods of ENGL 604 (Writing Center course for all first-year consultants).
- Managed the Writing Center's social media presence by maintaining a blog, Twitter and Facebook accounts, and online How I Write series.
- Planned events such as the annual staff orientation, Directors' Day Out, and Dissertation Writing Retreat.
- Facilitated workshops to courses across the university on the writing process and engaged in faculty outreach.
- Held writing consultations with undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff.

Special Projects
- Designed and implemented six new Writing Center events including student writing groups, panel discussions, and readings.
- Initiated and developed partnerships with campus organizations including the Creative Writing Program, the White Squirrel undergraduate literary magazine, and the LGBT Center.
- Created an LGBTQ Writing Group in partnership with the LGBT Center at UofL. Facilitated monthly meetings for LGBTQ and allied student writers.

Program Assistant   2012-2013
First-Year Writing Program
Emerson College

- Designed and led professional development workshops for graduate instructors, adjunct instructors, and lecturers.
- Participated in mentoring group sessions for new graduate instructors.
- Wrote all content for the revised First-Year Writing Program website.
- Archived program materials from the 1980s to the present for assessment purposes.
- Served as a research assistant to the First-Year Writing Program Director. Researched recent scholarship in rhetoric and composition relevant to concerns of the program and presented research during program meetings.

SERVICE

Featured Presenter, Campus Workshops

"Building Successful Dissertation Committees." English Department, University of Louisville.   2017

"Creating Online Teaching Portfolios." English Department, University of Louisville.   2017

Research Methods Panel. Guest Presenter, Dr. Andrea Olinger's Methods Seminar, English Department, University of Louisville.   2017

"Revising for New Purposes." Dissertation Writing Retreat, University Writing Center, University of Louisville.   2016

"Document Design: CV, Syllabi, Assignments." English Department, University of Louisville.   2016

"Finding An Audience: A Panel Discussion on Creative Writing Submissions." University Writing Center, University of Louisville.   2016

"Many Voices: Writing About LGBTQ+ Issues." University Writing Center, University of Louisville.   2016

"LGBT Issues at the University of Louisville." English Department, University of Louisville.   2016

"Technology for Effective Teaching." School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies, University of Louisville.   2015

"Taking the First Steps: Applying to and Being Successful in Doctoral   2014
    Programs." School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies,
    University of Louisville.

"Applying to PhD Programs in English." English Graduate Organization,   2014
    University of Louisville.

"Applying to Graduate Programs." First-Year Writing Program, Emerson   2013
    College.

"The Teaching of Style in the Composition Classroom." First-Year   2013
    Writing Program, Emerson College.

Departmental Service

Working Group for Equitable Graduate Student   2016-present
Sustainability
English Department, University of Louisville
- In collaboration with other English graduate students and the UofL Cultural
  Center, founded a group to advocate for equitable practices in recruitment
  and retention, especially for underrepresented communities.

Research Assistant   2014-2015
Dr. Bruce Horner, University of Louisville
- Researched scholarship on translingual pedagogy and translation theory in
  composition and literature. Provided translated summaries of French
  articles on cross-language scholarship and pedagogy.

Archival Research Assistant   2014
Dr. Brenda Brueggemann, University of Louisville
- Conducted archival research through the digitized Library of Congress
  A.G. Bell Family Papers and the Bell Historic Site holdings for the book
  manuscript *Posting Mabel: An Epistolary Biography of Mabel Hubbard
  Bell.*

Peer Mentor, English Department, University of Louisville   2014-2016

English Graduate Organization Committee, University of   2014-2015
Louisville

Professional Development

Rhetoric Society of America Summer Institute,   May 2017
Indiana University
- Seminar on Queer Archival Immersion
- Workshop on Archival Rhetorics, Rhetorical Archives

Community Engagement Academy, University of Louisville   Spring 2016
- Participated in a series of workshops designed to teach knowledge and skills related to interdisciplinary, community-engaged research. Assisted in a needs assessment for the initiation of a campus partnership with the Parklands of Floyd Fork.

Digital Composition Colloquium, University of Louisville   Summer 2015
- Participated in an inaugural colloquium to integrate digital composing into ENGL 101 and 102 courses. Created a Concept in 60 Minutes video as a model assignment.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition
Conference on College Composition and Communication
National Council of Teachers of English
Rhetoric Society of America

SKILLS

Web design:
- HTML
- CSS
- Adobe Creative Suite

Languages:
- French (reading/writing proficiency)

GRADUATE COURSEWORK

Pedagogy
  Teaching College Composition (UofL)
  Writing, Language, Cognition, and Culture in Curriculum Design (UofL)
  Teaching College Composition (Emerson College)

Rhetoric and Writing Studies
  Research Methods in Composition (UofL)
  History of Rhetoric from the Renaissance to the Present (UofL)
  Composition Theory and Practice (UofL)
  Community Literacy (UofL)
  Watson Seminar: Emerging Genres (UofL)
  Archival Research for Writers (Emerson College)
  Directed Study in Rhetoric and Composition (Emerson College)

Literature, Critical Theory, and Cultural Studies
   Disability Studies (UofL)
   Queer Theory (UofL)
   The Cultural History of American Authorship (UofL)
   Contemporary Theories of Interpretation from New Criticism to the Present (UofL)
   Alien Epistemologies (UofL)
   Translation Seminar: Theory and Practice (Emerson College)
   Seminar in Contemporary Nonfiction (Emerson College)
   Seminar in Poetry (Emerson College)

Creative Writing
   Poetry Workshop, John Skoyles (Emerson College)
   Nonfiction Workshop, Richard Hoffman (Emerson College)
   Nonfiction Workshop, Jabari Asim (Emerson College)
   Nonfiction Workshop, Jerald Walker (Emerson College)

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