

The Lesbian Avengers Fight Back

by Valerie Kameya

La mise sur pied, la croissance et le futur de l'organisme Lesbian Avengers depuis 1992 jusqu'à 1996 font l'objet de cet article.

It's time to get out of the beds, out of the bars, and into the streets. It's time to seize the power of dyke love, dyke vision, dyke anger, dyke intelligence, dyke strategy. It's time to organize and incite. It's time to get together and fight. We're invisible sister and it's not safe—not in our homes, not in the streets, not on the job, not in the courts. Where are the out lesbian leaders? It's time for a fierce lesbian movement and that's you: the role model, the vision, the desire.

We need you. Because we're not waiting for the rapture. We are the apocalypse. We'll be your dream and their nightmare.

New York Lesbian Avenger
Manifesto, Summer 1993



Each New York City Lesbian Avenger meeting opens with these words: "The Lesbian Avengers is a direct action group focused on issues vital to lesbian visibility and survival." They remind the members of the Avengers' purpose: to make it safe for lesbians to remain open about their identity and survive. This, as many of us know, is no easy feat in most parts of this country or this world.

For an organization begun almost four years ago, rumors abound regarding the origin of the Avengers. Some believe it as an offshoot of ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) without a focus on AIDS; others thought it was a separatist move borne out of frustration with WAC (Women's Action Coalition). In a June 1995 interview Maxine Wolfe, one of the six founders, disagreed, saying "That's nonsense. We wanted an organization for lesbians to focus on issues affecting lesbians."

In the spring of 1992 the Lesbian Avengers were born in an East Village apartment in New York City. Six political activists (Ana Maria Simo, Anne-Christine D'Adesky, Maxine Wolfe, Marie Honan, Ann MaGuire, and Sarah Schulman) met to discuss starting a lesbian direct action group, characterized by bold yet humorous actions. "People are always saying that lesbians don't have a sense of humor," said Maxine Wolfe. "We wanted to prove them

wrong." The group debated whether their first action should be parachuting into Whitney Houston's wedding or fighting against the defeat of the anti-"Rainbow (multicultural) curriculum" measure in New York City's School District 24. (The Rainbow Curriculum was a New York City public school initiative to teach children about multi-culturalism in a queer positive way.) Practicality determined that the latter would suffice.

Eight dykes distributed 8,000 bright green palmcards on the Sunday of Gay Pride week in 1992 inviting lesbians, dykes, and gay women who "want revenge and want it now!" to call the Lesbian Avenger hotline. The initial recruiting palmcard was designed as a filter to garner lesbian activists from the lesbian population at large (Schulman 1994). Its efficacy was proven when 50 women attended the first meeting. The first action—greeting elementary school children as they returned to school in September with lavender balloons saying "Ask About Lesbian Lives"—was extremely controversial and proved to be critical in shaping the profile of the Avengers. The membership debated whether schools

were neutral places for discussing lesbians and if introducing children to the Lesbian Avengers was to their benefit (Schulman 281). As Schulman puts it, "we lost some people and gained many more. But the debate clarified that this was going to be a movement that was not for everyone" (Schulman 281).

Despite all predictions to the contrary, the Lesbian Avengers' first action was a success. A kilt-clad lesbian marching band played "We Are Family" as 50 Avengers wore "I was a lesbian child" t-shirts and distributed the lavender "Lesbian Lives" balloons. Some parents allowed their children to keep the balloons; some forced their children to release them or to give them back. Whatever the children did with the balloons, all of them heard the word "lesbian" and were exposed to lesbians as a group of fun-loving, musical, balloon-distributing folks. Granted, this is not characteristic of lesbians as a whole, but it is certainly a more positive representation than a whispered schoolyard joke.

Lesbian avengers believe in creative activism: loud, bold, sexy, silly, fierce, tasty, and dramatic. Arrest optional.... Lesbian avengers don't have patience for polite politics. Are bored with the boys. Think of

stink bombs as all-season accessories.... Lesbian avengers are the 13th step. Lesbian avengers think girl gangs are the wave of the future. (Manifesto, summer 1993)

Loud, bold, and fierce: these words characterized the subsequent actions of the New York "mother chapter." Following the passage of the anti-gay Amendment 2 in Colorado, the Mayor of Denver visited New York City to promote tourism and investments. An anonymous lesbian faxed the Mayor's schedule to an Avenger, enabling Avengers to dog Mayor Wellington Webb's every step, keeping the press focused on Colorado's Amendment 2 to Webb's displeasure. Eight Avengers broke into the Regency Hotel dining room during the Mayor's breakfast chanting "We're here! We're queer! And we're not going skiing!" circling the room three times with placards before they were booted out. At the end of the Mayor's visit he complained that he had come to New York City to talk about tourism and investments but all anyone wanted to talk about was Amendment 2 and "Boycott Colorado" (the national boycott to protest the amendment). The extensive protests generated bad press in Colorado and in New York. Due to pressure from the national boycott (and a little help from the Avengers), the amendment was eventually overturned.

Other New York chapter activities during the first two years were building a shrine and holding a four day vigil for Hattie Mae Cohens and Brian Mock, a lesbian and a gay man who were firebombed to death in Oregon; holding a torch parade down Fifth Avenue to protest the murders; protesting *Self* magazine's trip to Colorado during the boycott. Avenger protests affected all of their targets' senses: they set off stinkbombs and plastered "Homophobia Stinks" stickers in an Army recruitment center, the Catholic archdiocese's lawyer's office, and St. Patrick's Cathedral; serenaded anti-multicultural curriculum leader Mary Cummins at her home; waltzed in Central Park and Grand Central Station and handed out Hershey's chocolate kisses proclaiming "You've just been kissed by a lesbian!" on Valentine's Day.

Soon Lesbian Avenger chapters began springing up nationally and internationally. By the summer of 1994 there were chapters in 30 cities across the United States and one in London. Chapters were founded by women who called the New York Avenger hotline and asked for information or advice in forming their own groups. They were sent a copy of the *Lesbian Avenger Handbook* (subtitled "A Handy Guide to Homemade Revolution") and were on their own. Eventually a system of periodic national phone calls was established so that chapters could communicate with each other about their activities and plan joint actions. The Avenger communiqués (numbers one through four) moved from a New York based newsletter to a national/international scope. In 1995 an Avenger in Chicago set up an Avenger e-mail list which serves the same purpose less formally and more efficiently. On the

World Wide Web, the Avenger handbook is world-readable and accessible for downloading, and the London chapter has a web page describing their actions. However, computers have not superseded conference calls for national communications because not everyone is or can afford to be connected electronically.

Although the New York chapter serves as the founding chapter, no control is asserted over chapters in other cities. During 1993, five chapters flourished, each band of dykes coming up with more outrageous and creative actions. In San Francisco, CA Avengers roasted hotdogs at a "Bobbit-Q" to call attention to domestic violence during the Lorena/John Wayne Bobbit trials; in Austin, TX Avengers dumped a 3-foot pile of horse manure near a Baptist church marquee which said "Don't be deceived, homosexuals commit the most heinous crimes in America"; the Lansing, MI Avengers rented a plane and flew a "Lesbian Avengers are Here" banner over the Michigan State Homecoming football game. The London chapter protested the lack of immigration rights for lesbian and gay partners by going to Heathrow Airport's Terminal Two and pretending to be physically demonstrative "passengers" and "greeters" until they were chucked out. (This occurred on the day the Immigrant Rights Petition was launched.) Meanwhile, New York Avengers adopted the image of eating fire in their chant "The fire will not consume us: we take it and make it our own" as a symbol of their fearlessness and to take back a symbol of hatred used in firebombings against them. They also traveled down to Tampa, FL to protest the firebombing of lesbian PWA (person with AIDS) Dee De Barry's home. The New York City chapter also sponsored a "Freedom Ride" to Lewiston, ME to work against the anti-gay referendum with local activists. Later, members of the subgroup Civil Rights Organizing Project traveled to Idaho to work against the anti-gay ballot measure there.

Lesbian avengers scheme and scream. Think actions must be local, regional, global, cosmic. Lesbian avengers think closeted lesbians, queer boys, and sympathetic straights should send us money. Believe direct action is a kick in the face. (Manifesto, summer 1993)

A folk-wisdom adage about direct action groups posits that their lifetime is three years before they become ineffective and die out. The number of actions in the New York chapter in late 1995 and early 1996 was lower than in the first two years. Other chapters share the problem of activist burnout and seek to replenish their membership with proto-activist dykes. Can the Lesbian Avengers continue at the high-stepping pace of their first year? Perhaps not. But actions are happening nationwide as various chapters go through the cycle of burnout and renewal. On February 15, 1996 the Baltimore chapter earned national news coverage for postering pictures of State legislature delegates who voted against adding an anti-sexual-orientation discrimination clause to state law with the word

"BIGOT" across them. Meanwhile, Chicago Avengers visited "Hooters," a topless bar while sporting shirts reading "Hooteerz—we always knew it was a dyke bar!" and creating queer space within the "heterosexist, anti-woman establishment" (Chicago press release, February 12, 1996).

Will the Lesbian Avengers survive to protect the rights of lesbians in ten years? I, for one, certainly hope the answer is yes.

This article does not represent the Lesbian Avengers as a group; the author takes full responsibility for the opinions espoused within it. To order a copy of The Lesbian Avenger Handbook, send U.S. \$5 to the Avengers, c/o the Center, 208 W. 13th St., New York City, NY 10011, U.S.A. For information call (212) 967-7711, ext. 3204.

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CATHERINE LAKE

Cathari*

Neighbourhood maidens play Barbies
 up on the front porch.

I trip up the steps
 through the maze of accessories.
 Late last August, I propped
 the small-hand-sized gas barbecue
 near one of the pillars
 for the girls to retrieve.
 It stayed there all winter.

In the middle of March,
 today was a spring day near summer.

They played without jackets—
 Barbie suntanned 'til supper.
 I found a fractured yellow and orange
 pinwheel stuck
 in one flowerpot of dirt
 and sat staring,
 waiting to see the wise virgin
 spinning valiant:

my hips the centre of that wheel
 ribs heaving, limbs tied, face
 contorted with nausea, making
 awkward quarter turns.

I never could do
 a proper cart-wheel.

* A Greek convent of priestess-nuns at Sinai in the 8th century A.D. called themselves Kathari, "pure ones." Medieval Gnostics who also called themselves Cathari revered St. Catherine almost as a female counterpart of God. The term "cart-wheel" is derived from the "Catherine wheel."

Catherine Lake is a Canadian lesbian of mixed European descent. She currently lives and works in Toronto with her African-American lover of seven years, their three dogs and their soon-to-be-born biracial child. She studied at York University in Toronto and obtained a Master of Arts Degree from San Francisco State University in English and Creative Writing.