

QUEERING INTERSECTIONALITY: PRACTICAL POLITICS AND SOUTHERNERS ON
NEW GROUND

By

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This thesis aims to generate knowledge and discussion about the state of queer activism in the United States by detailing current practices in queer intersectional community organizing. Although feminist scholars and activists theorize the importance of intersectionality, little is known about the practical implementation of intersectional political work. Even less research focuses on groups whose work is based in a framework of “queer politics.” This thesis contributes to our understanding of how contemporary social movement work that addresses the intersections of identity is done by Southern people who think of themselves as LGBTQ and who take a queer, or non-normative approach. This study focuses on the group Southerners on New Ground (SONG), a sixteen year old organization working to build, connect, and nurture Southern individuals who believe in liberation across all lines of race, class, culture, gender and sexuality. Informed by queer theory and social movement theory about gender, I use participant observation, interviews and textual analysis to trace the collective action frames and organizing philosophies of this self-identified queer group’s intersectional work. This examination identifies distinct and promising strengths of the group’s work outlined through the concept of a coalitional political logic. This logic,

defined by and practiced through queer notions of ‘whole selves’, self-sovereignty, counterpublics, and utopian longing, allows for the successful practice of intersectionality where other groups have struggled.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I began this study interested in examining political work that was based in the strategy and ideology of community organizing. Community organizing generates long-lasting power by increasing direct representation and fostering social reform. While the study of social movements is vast and extremely variable, little research looks specifically at the relationship between gender, sexuality, and community organizing. Rather than thinking of community geographically, but instead as a group of people with some commonality, I began to seek out groups who organized around issues of sexuality. This choice was based on my particular interest in the relationship of gender and sexuality to social movements. Scholarship in these areas often looks at the gendered nature of traditional social movements and/or the mainstream Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) movement. While scholarship certainly exists on Queer Movements, it is less common and largely focuses on movements in the United States during the 1990's. Because I believe that the ideological challenges posed by queer social movement actors toward the mainstream Gay and Lesbian Movement continue to be relevant today, I was interested in what a current queer politic looks like; particularly one that enlists community organizing as a strategy.

Examining scholarship on queer social movements led me to the work of Jane Ward. In her book *Respectably Queer* (2008), Ward offers a look at queer activists in Los Angeles and their relationship to neoliberal¹ ideas of difference and diversity. Ward theorized the increased requirement among non-profit organizations to measure

¹ My use of the term 'neoliberal' refers to a mainstreaming of leftist politics, specifically the move in LGBTQ social movements towards rights-based strategies of inclusion and political representation. See Duggan, 2003 for a full discussion of United States neoliberalism.

diversity and categorize difference in a way that was incongruent with ideas of queer resistance. This contemporary look at queer movements provides an interesting examination of one aspect of the current political queer climate. Building on her work in *Respectably Queer* (2008) and the work of other social movement scholars, Ward collaborated with Rachel E. Luft, to produce, *Toward an Intersectionality Just Out of Reach: Confronting Challenges to Intersectional Practice* (2009). This article examines the practical implementation of feminist intersectionality across institutional and grassroots social movements. Luft and Ward identify and explain five challenges to intersectional practice including misidentification, appropriation, institutionalization, reification, and operationalization (Luft & Ward, 2009). The practicality of intersectionality seems particularly pertinent to the ideology of both queer work and community organizing. Given the challenges outlined by Luft and Ward, I was interested in examining how intersectionality was practically working, or not working, for contemporary queer community organizers.

Through this process, I discovered *Southerners On New Ground* (SONG) and their work on intersectional queer community organizing. Founded in 1993, SONG is a 16 year old Southern regional organization working to build, connect, and nurture Southern individuals who believe in liberation “across all lines of race, class, abilities, age, culture, gender, and sexuality” (S.O.N.G. - About SONG, 2011). SONG is a “membership-based organization that consists of working class, people of color, immigrants, and rural LGBTQ people” (Ibid). Two co-directors currently run the organization, which has a physical office in Atlanta, Georgia and a strong affiliate program in Durham, North Carolina. *Southerners On New Ground* is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization funded

through membership dues (starting at a \$15 sliding scale annual membership), fundraising events, and by grants from foundations. SONG currently has over 700 members who they describe as “people committed to building freedom movements rooted in southern traditions like non-violent social justice activism, storytelling, music, breaking bread, resistance, humor, performance, critical thinking, and celebration” (DonateNow, 2011). This unique group of individuals working for social change provides the basis for this study.

Grounded in feminist methodology, my work aims to examine, through the words of the organization and its participants, the queer social movement work of *Southerners On New Ground*. Hopefully, this study will contribute to our understanding of how community organizing work that practically implements intersectionality is done by people who think of themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or allies (LGBTQA). Further, this look at a contemporary social movement organization helps inform our understanding of why these queer movement actors work to challenge neo-liberal politics and envision a different future. My research methodology and involvement with the group is outlined in Chapter 2. Using mixed methods that include participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis, I examine the work of SONG. Three main themes emerged from my data and are examined in Chapters 3-5.

In Chapter 3, I ground my discussion of the first theme in social movement scholarship about the concept of collective identity. Beginning with the Gay and Lesbian Movement, I look at how scholars theorize the formation and use of identity in LGBT social movement work. Queer social movements, which are often marked by their opposition to the larger Gay and Lesbian movement, critique and challenge the

essentialist nature of an identity-based political logic. This critique remains relevant today and can be examined through the work of SONG. As a queer organization, SONG values a fluidity and right to self-determination similar to historical Queer Movement actors. They however offer a new way to envision sexual identity through their concept of “whole selves.” They use this concept as an intentional creation that promotes gender and sexual self-sovereignty. Being one’s “whole self,” according to SONG, allows for a fluidity that speaks to the unstable, or queer, nature of identities. People should and can identify as they choose, when they choose and no identity is privileged within the organization. SONG goes further to explain that all parts of a person’s identity are linked to systematic and cultural conditions that speak to larger issues of oppression. Shared concerns and experiences with these larger systems link people in a way that specific identities may not.

Chapter 3 argues that SONG’s emphasis on gender and sexual self-sovereignty and ‘whole selves’ create a new way to organize politically. They are practicing a new queer politic by creating unity around individual autonomous bodies through which members report feeling whole and represented. In doing so, they offer a new model for queer politics.

Chapter 4 builds upon this model for organizing around identity and describes SONG’s work through the concept of a political logic. Elizabeth Armstrong developed this notion in her book *Forging Gay Identities* (2002). Armstrong lays out a history of the Gay and Lesbian Movement in San Francisco by examining the different political logics of movement organizations over time. She argues that crystallization occurred in the early 1970’s around an identity-based political logic that is still present today.

Dissent within the movement about this choice of political logic has been present since the beginning, including challenges from queer social movement actors. In Chapter 4, I examine another political logic, a coalitional political logic, which is being articulated and practiced by *Southerners On New Ground*. I outline SONG's coalitional political logic using Armstrong's definition of a political logic as the "background sets of assumptions about how society works, the goals of political action, and appropriate strategies to pursue desired ends" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 14).

SONG's political logic is based on the idea that oppression is systematic and intersecting. Similar to feminist scholarship of intersectionality, SONG articulates this view and believes alignment and solidarity are a basis for social change. These assumptions about society fuel the goals SONG outlines for their political action. Creating shared power, the idea that power should and can be shared rather than used by some over others, represents a key goal of SONG's work. Beginning with their own organizational structure, SONG works to change power relations through community organizing. SONG also strives for individual self-determination of identity, as discussed in Chapter 3. This goal creates a valuing of multiplicity, both within individual people and in political strategy, which works to shift cultural values. SONG creates spaces where multiplicity can be valued as they work towards building communities that share the same beliefs. SONG's political logic is inherently non-competitive and works using a strategy of coalition building, or alliance for combined action. They believe that liberation depends on groups working in coalition rather than using a single-issue strategy.

To achieve this end, SONG has created a framework to help members build intersectional thinking and understand the connections necessary for coalitional work. Using four main issues (land, spirit, work/economy, and bodies), SONG examines the intersectional nature of political struggle with its members. While this work does not come without challenges, SONG works to strategically frame issues in a way that emphasizes the connections between different groups and liberation struggles. For SONG, this intersectional work always involves a bottom line of queer visibility within any coalition they participate in. Another significant strategy for SONG's coalitional work is community organizing, or working to build collective power within communities. SONG uses a variety of community organizing strategies in local, regional, and national coalitions. I provide examples of SONG campaigns at each level and examine how issues are framed and chosen to be intersectional and advance the rights of queers in local communities, throughout the South and across the nation. SONG acknowledges that perfect issues and perfect coalitions are not likely but that as an organization, they must choose specific campaigns and work to maintain the values of their political logic within that work.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I examine a history of this coalitional political logic. Coalitional work and intersectionality can be grounded in the ideology and political work of Black Feminists. While the data from my study does not explicitly connect SONG's work to this history, an examination of the development of Black Feminist political thought helps illuminate a history that clearly relates to the current political work of SONG. The development of Black women's collective identity, ideas about the

intersecting and simultaneous nature of oppression and an articulation of political coalition laid a foundation for SONG’s current use of a coalitional political logic.

Chapter 4 argues that SONG’s use of what I call a coalition political logic provides an example of a distinctly different logic, one that has not previously been identified within an LGBT or Queer Movement context. Building upon the queer identity politic of self-sovereignty I describe in Chapter 3, SONG’s political logic uses diverse strategies, based on the idea of coalition building and working within the intersections of oppressed groups. This logic, historically grounded in the movement work of Black Feminists but practiced by a group seen as distinctly queer, looks like a new queer politics, a specifically queer and intersectional political practice.

Chapter 5 discusses, in greater detail, SONG’s strategy of intentionally creating spaces and places where their members can live whole and self-determined lives. I begin with an examination of a specific SONG event, *The CampOut*, and conceptualize this space through Michael Warner’s notion of queer counterpublics (Warner, 2002). In his book *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), Warner analyzes notions of public and private and conceptualizes “queer counterpublics.” According to Warner, counterpublics are marked off from people or citizens as a whole. They are demarcated from the distinctly dominant public and characterized by their shared membership and discourse; discourse ordinary citizens would not be want to participate in. Queer counterpublics offer an alternative to heteronormativity and an altered discourse of acceptable sexual standards. The need for queer counterpublics becomes clear through a historical examination of minority exclusion from public spheres.

SONG combats such exclusion and the isolation that comes from it through the intentional creation of space. I examine SONG's *CampOut* as an alternate form of public space conceptualized through Warner's notion of queer counterpublics. *CampOuts* are organized in a way that makes them open to anyone interested in attending. This building block, what Warner calls stranger sociability (Warner, 2002) begins the event, but participants do not stay strangers for long. Strangers who gather for a *CampOut* become part of a space where their queer sensibility creates an immediate sense of belonging. SONG members speak to this belonging and the ways in which it allows for the potential of transformation. From within this space, acting out and practicing alternative modes of gender and sexual identity formation allows participants to envision and create new ways to express themselves and relate to others.

These spaces also offer participants the opportunity to envision a future that is not yet here. José Muñoz's text *Cruising Utopia* (2009) offers a conceptualization of queerness as "essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). This envisioning a queer utopia is based in a politics of emotion. Hope is both key to Muñoz's argument for the potentiality of queerness and an emotion SONG puts at the center of their thinking and their political work. One of SONG's organizing exercises, *Studio*, provides an example of how hope plays a key role key in the spaces they create. These spaces, particularly a *CampOut*, create literal moments of queer potentiality through the practice of queer performativity. They allow participants to not only envision another world, but to live in it temporarily and carry that feeling with them

even after an event is over. In this way, SONG's intentional creation of queer space sustains and rejuvenates their work towards a queer utopia, not yet here.

Chapter 5 argues that through the intentional creation of counterpublics and the performativity of queer utopian spaces, *Southerners On New Ground* sustain their investment in creating a different world. SONG's work enhances our understanding of how in our current political climate queer political actors continue an investment in futurity. Instead of accepting the ways in which queers exist in our world, SONG actively works to create spaces and communities that fulfill their vision of a queer utopia. This creation sustains the potentiality of that future while they continue to work towards it.

I conclude this study in Chapter 6 with an analysis of how each aspect of SONG's work relies upon the others. I elaborate on the connectivity of Chapters 3-5 and argue that SONG's coalitional political logic is queer because it is defined and practiced through queer notions of 'whole selves', self-sovereignty, counterpublics, and utopian longing. These practices work together to define SONG's coalitional work and allow for the successful practice of intersectionality where others have struggled. Finally, I offer suggestions for further research based on this project.

CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methods I used to study *Southerners On New Ground* (SONG), a queer social movement organization in the Southern United States. This research aims to examine the state of queer activism today and the practical implementation of intersectionality. *Southerners On New Ground* provide one example of a current queer social movement organization working from a self-defined intersectional approach.

To begin collecting data, I sent each of the co-directors of the organization an email describing my research interests and my interests in the group. I introduced myself as a graduate student and explained my university affiliation. I described that I had learned about their organization on their website and expressed interest in getting involved with SONG for this project on intersectional queer community organizing. I requested to volunteer with the group over a summer and attend the 2010 US Social Forum, a conference they would soon be participating in. I also included a short biography about myself and both my personal and educational interests. I received a response and participated in a phone conversation to discuss the possibility of becoming involved with the group. I was invited to attend the 2010 United States Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan from June 22-26, 2010 to meet the group and observe their organizing methods.

I began researching the group through their website prior to attending the conference. Documentation on the site offered information on the group's core beliefs, staff and board members, organizing strategies, and recent activities and events. This information guided my understanding of SONG and my preparation of initial interview

concepts. The website also provided a schedule of SONG ‘s participation in the US Social Forum, including activities directly sponsored and facilitated by the group and events of their “sister organizations” (SONG’s Quickglance Guide to the US Social Forum 2010!!; 2010). This guide allowed me to meet up with the group and observe their organizing strategy at the Forum.

Prior to traveling, I sought and received permission from the University Institutional Review Board to conduct interviews at the Forum. The project, entitled, “Examining the Practical Manifestations of Intersectional Queer Community Organizing,” described my interview intent for the Forum and included the informed consent document that I would use (Appendix A and B). On June 20th, I travelled to Michigan and attended the 2010 United States Social Forum in Detroit for 5 days. The United States Social Forum is described as “a movement building process”. It is not a conference in a traditional sense, but rather a “space to come up with the peoples’ solutions to the “economic and ecological crisis”. It is part of a larger “struggle to build a powerful multi-racial, multi-sectoral, inter-generational, diverse, inclusive, internationalist movement that transforms this country and changes history” (About - USSF 2010, 2010). The Forum consists of a wide variety of events including workshops, “people’s movement assemblies”, direct action, cultural events, youth activities, and grass roots fundraising. The goal of the Forum is to support social movement building. They work to create space for social movement convergence, collaboration and solidarity (United States Social Forum, 2010). Groups and individuals from throughout the United States working on a wide variety of social movement issues, including labor, climate, sexuality, education and health, etc. attended the Forum. An estimated 15,000 people participated in the event

(Howell, 2010). As a regional organization, Southerners On New Ground represented queer and trans people from the South at the Forum.

While at the USSF, I participated in multiple workshops hosted or sponsored by SONG including a Queer People's Movement Assembly facilitated in coalition with 14 other LGBTQ or queer groups from around the nation. Organizations participating in the coalition included, for example, *The Sylvia Rivera Law Project* which "focuses on legal services for marginalized trans and gender nonconforming people," *Affinity* which "focuses primarily on African American lesbians" and FIERCE, "a Trans and Queer youth organization" (Echeverria, 2010). I conducted two interviews on-site at the conference with members active in SONG. After revising my application with the University Institutional Review Board, I also followed up with those members whom I met but did not have a chance to interview and conducted phone interviews with those people. The group also allowed me to post a call for participants on both their website and their Facebook™ page to gather more participants. Overall, I conducted both personal and telephone interviews with 7 members¹ and/or leaders of the group which overall consists of about 700 members with varying levels of involvement. The interviews were unstructured and varied based on the participants' answers. However, generally I asked questions about the organization's history, personal experiences and feeling towards SONG, and community organizing strategies. I also questioned how the group 'does' intersectionality, challenges they face for intersectional work, and whether or not the group was 'queer.' All interviews lasted between 12 and 65 minutes. Most (5 of 7) of those interviewed were women of color, and all were between 21 and 30 years

¹ After I completed the interview phase of this study, one additional person contacted me and was interested in participating. This person was not interviewed due to time constraints.

of age, queer-identified, with regional ties to the South. In order to maintain the confidentiality of participants, I have substituted pseudonyms for all participants and removed all identifying information from quoted text.

After completing all of the interviews, I was intrigued by one of SONG's regular events, the *CampOut*, because it was regularly mentioned in my interviews. With the encouragement of SONG members, I registered for and attended the Fall Camp Out on the Gulf Coast of Florida as a participant observer. The event consisted of approximately 15 attendees (including myself) and lasted for 3 days and 2 nights. We stayed at the Gulf Islands National Shore in Fort Pickens, Florida. Over the course of three days participants relaxed on the beach, went swimming in the ocean, played games, cooked food together, and talked about their personal and political lives. Dinner was the only planned event for each day but participants generally stayed together and everyone was welcome in any of the day's activities. Generally the group was inviting and encouraging of each other's participation. One participant used his screen-printing skills to make 2010 *CampOut* postcards that we all had a chance to send out before we left (Appendix C). At the end of 3 days, people shared contact information with one another and expressed having an excellent time.

Participants in the *CampOut* were made aware of my research through our personal conversations and interactions. All participants took an opportunity to inquire about each other's lives and interests and I explained my research to each person. I made no attempts however, to solicit information for this study. Rather, I participated/observed as any member of SONG might. The event was primarily attended by queer and Southern identified people of color but was mixed in regards to

gender. Throughout the weekend and after the event, I took notes on the overall environment, the way in which the event was coordinated and how it felt to participate in this type of event.

Over the course of my research, I also examined a variety of documents published by the group. Many of these documents were located on SONG's website, including general information about the group, the beliefs they base their work on, core agreements within their organization and documentation about their overall strategic plan. I also received further documentation from interview participants. This information is not available online but is available to all members of the organization. This included an agenda for their traveling *Organizing School*, a list defining their *Key Terms*, and a document about *The Elements of Creating a Collective Space*, what they call "Alchemy". These documents were used to supplement the interview and observational data I collected from members of the group.

I also followed their online networking media, specifically their Facebook™ site. The group regularly posts links to political stories and campaigns they support. They also have produced short videos that are linked to both their website and their Facebook™ page. One video outlined their new strategic plan, unveiled in 2010 and the other spoke to issues of community organizing in the South. These videos were referenced in some of my interviews indicating that SONG's membership base uses these online sources to obtain information about the group and that these sites are part of the larger communication strategy used by SONG. The group's main website also provided me information on event plans. These included SONG's work at the 2010 United States Social Forum and the *CampOut* I attended as a participant observer.

Overall, these online resources and documents provided me further information about the group's mission, goals, day-to-day event planning and organizing strategies. All information supplements my interviews and participant observations. A textual analysis of this material contributed to my greater understanding of how the group began, the philosophies on which their organizing is built, and how they communicate with/present themselves to their members and the public.

Throughout my research I have used an overall methodology that is feminist and incorporated feminist methods, particularly in interviewing and participatory research. While participating in research events, I attempted to be as non-intrusive as possible while still making my role as a researcher known. I worked maintain on-going self-reflection and examine the emotional aspects of participant observation (Naples, 2003). My methods have worked to be non-exploitative in nature using the words of SONG members to give voice to Southern organizers working for change. My use of semi-structured interviews follows a feminist tradition used "to achieve the active involvement of their respondents in the construction of data about their lives" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 18). I have attempted to use the words and experiences of SONG's members to articulate the group's ideologies while consistently examining my role as a researcher and the power dynamics involved in conducting research (Cancian, 1992). This research offers a contribution to our understanding of current models of social change using mixed methods. Feminist use mixed methods for a variety of reasons including "the commitment to thoroughness [and] the desire to be open-ended...feminist research is driven by its subject matter, rather than by its methods" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 231). My overall philosophy on conducting research fits with the history of feminist methodology.

Over the course of six months, I gathered data on *Southerners On New Ground*, through participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis. This mixed method, feminist process allowed me to identify three key themes within the data. These themes are each examined individually in Chapters 3-5. Chapter 3 takes up the SONG's notion of "whole selves" and the navigation of identity politics within this contemporary queer social movement organization.

CHAPTER 3

“YOUR WHOLE SELF”: SOUTHERNERS ON NEW GROUND AND A NEW QUEERING OF IDENTITY POLITICS

Working at the intersections of identity and taking a queer approach challenges traditional social movement notions of collective identity (Gamson, 1995). While queer challenges to identity-based movements have been criticized (Hammers, 2008) (Jeffreys, 2003) or deemed functions of the past (Armstrong, 2002), the work of *Southerners On New Ground* shows us a new queer politics. This politic, as this chapter will show, is based on people being their ‘whole selves’ and aims to support gender and sexual self-sovereignty. Through this chapter’s examination of SONG’s work to create ‘whole selves,’ I will illustrate this new queer politics.

Identity Construction in Social Movements

Scholars attempting to understand social movement processes and actors, over time, have created a variety of explanations for the way in which movements develop and challenge notions of authority. Historically both theories of political process and resource mobilization have dominated the field (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009). In traditional theories of social movement process, like political process and resource mobilization frameworks, the cultural goals of identity movements appeared “nonpolitical.” Theories of rational and individual motivation could not explain why people were participating in these movements. With the rise of the New Left, Civil Rights Movements, and the Women’s Movement, “new social movement” scholars have developed the notion of “collective identity” as a way to better explain people’s participation without material benefit. These scholars take a cultural approach to the study of movements, developing theories of both collective identity and framing, to further expand the notion of what a social movement can be.

Collective Identity can be understood as “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity” (Taylor, 1999). Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier in their essay *Collective Identity and Social Movement Communities* (1999) outline three elements of collective identity. First, individuals begin to see themselves as part of a group when some part of their identity becomes prominent and seen as important. This notion creates a “we” that group members can feel as though they belong to. By drawing boundaries of who can belong to the group and to the “we,” groups can solidify their collective identity. This “we,” through an examination of cultural assumptions and regulations, creates a “consciousness” on which a basis for action can be built. This consciousness “presumes the existence of socially constructed criteria that account for a group’s structural position” (Taylor & Whittier, 1999, p. 122) and involves a direct opposition to the hegemonic order of society. Finally, collective identity involves ascribing value to the group’s essential differences by politicizing common personal experiences (Taylor & Whittier, 1999). Scholars have used this notion of collective action to explain the work of new identity-based social movements working to build and sustain a collective identity.

The Gay and Lesbian Movement has adopted this identity based model of social movements, so much so, it is argued to be the “quintessential identity movement” (Armstrong, 2002). This identity-based political logic “center[s] on the innovation of ‘coming out’ and ‘highlight[s] identity building, pride, and visibility’” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 21). In the Gay and Lesbian Movement, identity-building functions differently than in other identity based movements. As Armstrong’s (2002) research demonstrates, rather than relying on or requiring similarity, difference and a focus on individual expression

became the point of similarity within this movement (Armstrong, 2002). The LGBTQ rights movement has built a strong identity politic based in a quasi-ethnicity status, or in other words, the idea that gays and lesbians as a minority group, with minority status, deserve equal rights. Within this model, shared oppression and collective identity are necessary for successful resistance and political gain. The gay and lesbian movement centers around the idea, "together we are different from straight people, but as individuals, we are different from one another" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 3). This political logic has become the dominant ideology of gay and lesbian organizations formed after 1969 and continues to be the dominant political logic today.

Scholars who examine Queer Social Movements often draw the distinction between queer work and the larger Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) movement. "Queer discourse is often understood as non-reformist, in opposition to the "mainstream" gay/lesbian movement" (Walters, 1996, p. 833). The mainstream LGBT movement, as we have seen, uses an identity based/quasi-ethnic politic and works to reform the American system to gain rights for those people who fall within the categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. This mainstream movement has often been criticized for its lack of inclusivity particularly around people of different races and gender identities. In many ways the queer movement, "rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (Warner, 1991, p. xxvi). Rather than attempting to portray themselves as similar to the larger straight society, queers assert a fundamental difference between themselves and both mainstream culture and the mainstream LGBT movement. Scholars often refer to queer movement actors as "militants" describing

their politics as "reject[ing] the liberal value of privacy and the appeal to tolerance which dominate the agendas of more mainstream gay organizations" (Duggan, 1992, p. 12).

Instead, for many of these groups "the rhetoric of difference replaces the more assimilationist liberal emphasis on similarity with other groups" (*Ibid*). This difference speaks to the politics as well as the ideology of Queer Movement actors.

Ideologically, queer actors maintain that "it is socially-produced binaries that are the basis of oppression; fluid, unstable experiences of self become fixed primarily in the service of social control" (Gamson, 1995, p. 391). This ideology creates the basis for a queer politic. If socially constructed binaries are the basis of oppression, "disrupting those categories, refusing rather than embracing ethnic minority status, is the key to liberation" (Gamson, 1995, p. *Ibid*). Queer politics thus calls into question the very basis on which society is structured. They challenge "the everyday viability and political usefulness of sexual identities (is there and should there be such a thing as 'gay,' 'lesbian,' 'man,' 'woman'?)" (Gamson, 1995). This combination of destabilization and difference is fundamental to a queer politic.

Queer activism arguably began in the 1980's. The Gay and Lesbian Movement at that time was beginning to face criticism from within. Gays and lesbians of color, particularly lesbians of color, were challenging the movement for marginalizing and devaluing their unique perspectives and cultures. "The concept of gay identity that served as the foundation for building a community and organizing politically was criticized as reflecting a white, middle-class experience or standpoint" (Seidman, 1994, p. 172). These "long-simmering internal differences around race and sex" (Gamson, 1995) contributed to the categories of "lesbian" and "gay" being "criticized as disciplining

political forces" (Seidman, 1994, p. 172). Identity politics, while successful for creating collective identity within social movements, can also create challenges to movement formation and an "elite" group whose politics determine the direction of attempts at social change.

Ideas of identity formation and the development of queer politics have many important links to the lives and work of women of color. "Anti-racist, anti-classist and anti-sexist work have been important features of lesbian communities during at least the last thirty years, even though the success of that work is often limited" (Shugar, 1999, 17). Lesbians of color have offered thoughtful critiques and challenged essential notions of identity within these communities. Women like Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde asserted claims against strict lesbian identity politics (Moraga 1981; Lorde 1982), and challenged the dominant discourse of the white lesbian community through articulating their different lived experiences (Lewin, 1996). Along with other sexual minorities, lesbians of color helped lead the push for the development of a less essentializing sexual identity.

Even with this push for more inclusive sexual categories, the white male nature of queer politics is still criticized. As Dana Shugar notes,

If we deny the social power that concepts of fixed identities still carry, the goals of our activism are too easily boiled down to, by default, the agendas of white, well-to-do men whose 'queer' politics allow them to avoid any analysis of their privilege. (Shugar, 1999, p. 17)

Many see the move to queer as an erasure of the gendered component of gay and lesbian analysis and politics. Michael Warner states this concern, that notions of queer, "as a partial replacement for 'lesbian and gay' . . . attempts partially to separate

questions of sexuality from those of gender" (Warner, 1991, 16). This separation can lead to a male-centered politics according to some scholars.

In fact some scholars argue, "the queer perspective is not a gender-neutral one," (Jeffreys, 1994, p. 460). Critics contend that lesbians are welcome in queer arenas as long as they are willing to assimilate to gay male notions of sexuality and identity. Sheila Jeffreys in her book *Unpacking Queer Politics* (2003) sees this playing out in two particular ways: the notion of camp and ideas of sexual pleasure. She is particularly critical of the acceptance of sadomasochism and the eroticization of inequality she views being incorporated in lesbian sexuality from gay male culture (Jeffreys, 2003, p. 19). Some scholars, offering critiques similar to Jeffreys', even go so far as to argue, "queer lesbians are complicit in their own invisibility due to their emulation of gay men and the fact that within queer politics, gay male concerns (notably the traditions of camp and drag) predominate. This is so because 'queer' originated out of a gay male sexual freedom agenda" (Hammers, 2008, p. 152).

That said, most who embrace a queer approach view the core components of a queer ideology as a challenge to the socially constructed ideas around heteronormativity (and homonormativity) that pervade our culture. By working to dismantle binaries of sexuality, including hetero/homo, man/women, public/private, etc., Queer Movement actors challenge people to examine the very foundation on which our societal ideas on sexuality are built. Many scholars have noted however that this ideological challenge to hegemonic sexuality is not always as successful as movement actors might hope. In addition to racial and gender based critiques, scholars note that "in many instances, instead of destabilizing the assumed categories and binaries of

sexual identity, queer politics has served to reinforce simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything “queer” (Cohen, 1997, p. 438). With its attempt at a destabilizing politic, whether it is successful or not, queer movements provide interesting challenges and contributions to the study of social movements.

Queer politics challenge the usefulness of collective identity as a social movement strategy. This debate over collective identity exists both between the Gay and Lesbian and the Queer Movement as well as amongst scholars. Joshua Gamson’s 1995 article *Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?: A Queer Dilemma*, discusses the challenges that the notion of ‘queer’ poses for the identity based logic of the mainstream Gay and Lesbian Movement.

Queerness in its most distinctive forms shakes the ground on which gay and lesbian politics has been built, taking apart the ideas of a ‘sexual minority’ and a ‘gay community’ indeed of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ and even ‘man’ and ‘woman’. It builds on central difficulties of identity-based organizing: the instability of identities both individual and collective, their made-up yet necessary character. (Gamson, 1995, p. 390)

While this debate will likely continue, the very existence of queer political actors continues to challenge our knowledge and assumptions about sexuality and social movements.

Thus the strong claims of queer politics and theory - that this is not how it must be, that political and social organization can and should be more true to the inessential, fluid, and multiply-sited character of sexuality; and that gay-ethnic movements make a serious error in challenging only the idea that homosexuality is unnatural, affirming rather than exposing the root cultural system. (Gamson, 1995, p. 400)

From the height of its popularity in the 1990’s to the continued struggle of queers today, Queer Movement work challenges the hegemonic order and attempts to smash the boundaries our society holds dear. The emergence of queer movements and the queering of identity politics has created a different set of challenges for collective

identity in social movement organizations. These challenges continue to be relevant in today. Some scholars¹ believe that the Queer Movement is a thing of the past, particular to the 1990's and the AIDS Crisis, and a radical wing of a movement that has been sidelined by the neoliberal corporate politics of the mainstream LGBT agenda today (Armstrong, 2002). However, I believe this mainstreaming and today's popularity of the LGBTQ movement that focuses largely on stable identity categories in obtaining rights, provides a continued space for queer critique. Queer movements build a politics around embracing the fluidity of identity. As Lisa Kahaleole Chang-Hall astutely notes, "our identities never become final because new experiences continue to affect the way we see ourselves, and these new identifications in turn affect the kinds of experiences we can have and the kinds of communities we can create" (Chang-Hall, 1993, p. 229). This version of identity formation opens the door to community organizing and collective action that was once bound up in identity categories and exclusivity.

SONG's Queering of the 'Self'

Southerners On New Ground seek to create a space in which the politics of identity are never final and rarely privileged. While as an organization they are committed to centering the experiences of people of color, they actively work to create a space where participants feel as though they can be their "whole selves." SONG is known and referred to by its members as a queer organization. One member describes initially getting involved in "an organization that was known for being very queer."

¹ Armstrong's work implies the notion that a Queer Movement, particularly one that occurred in the 1990's, was unsuccessful and has disbanded. This notion can also be inferred given scholarly analysis of queer action and politics focuses largely on Queer Social Movement groups of the 1990's, like Act Up! and Queer Nation (see Walters 1996, Gould 2002, Highleyman 2002 as examples).

Avery, a member who does not self-identify as queer explains the queer nature of the organization further,

Avery: I think as a queer organization that they focus on a lot of the specifics of how a queer identity affects life, affects what folks go through, affects the frame that people see things through, affects how other people interact with someone. They use that as an analysis and a major component of their work but not to the extent where it excludes other components of who people are [and] that's what's important about how they are doing it.

While members and the organization use the term, they understand that not everyone does and that it is not a term or identity necessary for participation. Kim notes, “not everybody is on board with the term queer so especially around elders, I think that we try to use the term...LGBT.” Jamie, a leader in the group, explains,

Jamie: There are some elders that would really be opposed to SONG being seen as a queer only space because they just don't identify that way, they would never identify that way, but they identify very strongly with SONG. So we try to keep an openness around that.

Many participants do identify strongly with the term and use it regularly. The term means different things to different members. For example, “when I say queer, to me, it makes me think of not just thinking about sexual orientation, but thinking about gender expression and gender identity and sexual identity.” Rather than relying on traditional identity categories or using the term ‘queer’ as a stable category in and of itself, SONG works to create fluidity through new concepts of self-determination. It is this concept of self-definition that SONG members hold as most important, and for some, the term queer is a way to express that.

In relation to identity, SONG members speak often of their “whole selves.” One SONG member, Avery, described the concept when I asked about how he got involved in the group:

Avery: It's totally incredible, the people, and I think that's what really drew me in and kept me in, was the amazing people and the whole self deal, the intersectional politics of everything that you're bringing with you and you don't have to leave something behind just because you're in an organization that's focusing on one issue...[with] SONG, [there is] the idea of taking everything that you have and bringing that all together because it influences everything that you do, that's what kept me.

SONG defines the concept of “whole selves” on their webpage as an *Essential Concept of SONG*. They state, “SONG creates spaces in which all of a person’s identities are honored and affirmed – no one is asked to prioritize one over the other, and no one is left behind. We believe in building, renewing, and supporting Southern activists” (S.O.N.G. - About SONG, 2011). Many organizers who now work with SONG, have previous experience working in other organizations and on issues that may not be considered “queer” issues. These members often express a relief and excitement upon joining SONG. Kim, a very active member, expressed a surprised excitement upon finding SONG. She explains, “oh my god there is this place that I can be my full self that actually invites all of the different pieces of who I am, like Black, daughter of immigrants, partnered with a man, non-monogamous, all of these things in one.” This possibility was expressed and thoroughly valued by many of the members who spoke with me throughout this project. This concept is also a very intentional creation of SONG.

The concept and this feeling expressed by members has everything to do with what members and leaders call “valuing people’s self-determination” or personal sovereignty. On their website, SONG defines “self-determination” by stating, “SONG creates spaces in which people can grow and be challenged, and are expected to strive to be their best whole selves. SONG expects that members will not hinder the self-determination of others through acts of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, hatred,

and intolerance" (S.O.N.G. - About SONG, 2011). Jamie, a leader in the organization further explains this notion:

Jamie: We really started to think and talk about gender and sexual sovereignty. Being the idea that, gender and sexual self-determination is to an individual what sovereignty is to a community and drawing from really profound work and amazing work in indigenous communities all over the world about sovereignty. But the idea is that what's crucial to SONG space, is that folks get to decide who they are, who they love, and how they live their lives. That's what's important to us.

This intentional move is one that is clearly felt by members of the organization. As one member explains, "SONG has really incredible values that are very explicitly put [forward] ... a lot of that is valuing people's self determination to be able to define who they are and trusting that we know our own experience better than anyone else does." Kim offered the example, "if I'm in a tutu and tiara and I say I go by male pronouns and I go by 'he' and 'his', then I expect to be held up and honored in that way and to determine my own identity in that way." People, in SONG's view, define themselves and each definition is equally valued and respected.

This concept of a person's 'whole self' means that what an essentialist identity logic might consider incongruent or outside of a collective identity is not the case for SONG. The group's notion of bodily sovereignty creates a space for people to identify in any way they choose without the privileging of certain forms of identification. This concept allows for a certain type of fluidity not only of identification but speaks to the ever changing and unstable nature of the identities that are or can be chosen. Jamie explains, "it's going to be very much less important whether people identify in any particular way as long as they are able to identify the way that they want." SONG thus allows its members to self-define the important aspects of their identities and political lives.

Kim: Who I have sex with doesn't define who I am or what I do in that. I could have a sexual identity as a top or as a bottom, or as a femme or whatever, and I could have a sexual orientation that looks different than that and a gender expression that looks different depending on the day, or not, or a gender presentation that changes or doesn't. I could be super high femme, wear a dick and be a top, or a bottom *and have that all not be inconsistent.* (emphasis mine)²

This ideology of sovereignty allows SONG to look at the intersections of identity and promote the freedom of self-determination. SONG recognizes that no person's oppression is based simply on their sexual orientation but all parts of their identity, whatever they may be, are influenced by systematic and structural conditions. Kim suggested, SONG is "intentionally saying that we see those [structural conditions] and we are responding to them and I'm not limited by this label of gay." In other words, SONG's notion of self-determination allows them to work collectively on what might be called queer issues without organizing in terms of a confining gay or lesbian collective identity.

Leaders within SONG speak to the issue of traditional identity politics and queer politics in interesting and telling ways. When asked whether the group was a queer organization, Jamie explained, "there are some really important questions around that." These questions speak to larger issues with identity politics as well as the specific location of SONG in the South. She notes, "a lot of Southern people don't identify as L, G, B, T, or Q." Explaining further she offers an example,

Jamie: what we see in the South is that a lot of people who experience what would be referred to as trans-phobia are in fact gender non-conforming. They may not identify as trans. But let's really look at this slice of oppression, it's about not conforming to gender, it's not about whether

² Due to the nature of this quote, it was specifically formatted for easy of understanding.

you identify as trans or not. Every single drag queen in every small town in the South might not say, yes I'm a tranny, they might or they might not, but they're still at risk for getting [in that fight³] at 2 o'clock in the morning every time they walk about of the club. *It's not really about how people identify* (emphasis mine).

This explanation suggests that regardless of how people choose to identify, they share common concerns and experiences throughout their everyday lives. Identities are not only personal, but also hold significant meaning for many people. “For a lot of elders, people have gone through a *lot* to be able to call themselves lesbians. They don’t necessarily want to lose that and I never want to take that away from anybody” (emphasis original). Whether young or older, SONG maintains that all of its members, and all people, have a fundamental right to self-determination.

Analysis

SONG clearly takes a different approach to social movement strategy and identity formation than many identity-based social movements previously examined by scholars. By queering identity politics and not relying on a rigid collective identity that draws distinct boundaries between an “us” and a “them,” SONG offers a distinct model for organizing. While scholars have suggested that historically “queer politics presented incisive and persuasive critiques of gay identity politics but did not provide a persuasive alternative to it” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 182), SONG’s current queer politics offers a quite persuasive alternative.

More than seeing ‘queer’ as a way to deconstruct or devalue identity categories, SONG understands the importance of identity in the lives of its members. Their emphasis on gender and sexual self-sovereignty and ‘whole selves’ creates a new way

³ Bracketed text represents an unclear portion of the recorded interview and the author's best interpretation of Jamie's words.

to organize politically, while avoiding the rigidity of traditional identity based models. They are practicing a new queer politic not present in many queer movement groups of the 1990's, where members were expected to embrace an anti-identity logic (Seidman, 1993). By working to create unity around individual autonomous bodies in which people feel whole and represented, SONG creates a space through which a person's "whole self" can be valued in whatever form it arrives. In doing so, they offer a new model for queer politics.

This model successfully sustains an intersectional approach to organizing around issues of gender and sexuality. An ideology of being one's "whole self" opens up the possibility for building across and amongst different notions personal identification rather than relying on similarities as a basis for collaboration. This notion of "whole selves" lays a building block for SONG's larger intersectional politic, examined in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4

“WE ARE ALL PART OF ONE ANOTHER”: INTERSECTIONALITY AND A COALITIONAL POLITICAL LOGIC

Southerners On New Ground’s model for queer politics, based on the ideology of being one’s “whole self,” creates the possibility of building between different notions personal identification. This Chapter¹ elaborates on that possibility by examining the specific political beliefs and practices of SONG. Using the notion of a political logic (Armstrong, 2002), I argue that SONG’s use of what I call a *coalition political logic* is one example of a political logic that has not previously been identified within an LGBT or Queer Movement context. Building upon the queer identity politic described in the previous chapter, SONG’s political logic uses a variety of strategies, based in the idea of coalition building and intersectionality between oppressed groups. This logic, historically grounded in the movement work of Black Feminists, but practiced by the group in distinctly queer ways, presents a new queer politics.

Political Logic

Elizabeth Armstrong’s foundational text *Forging Gay Identities*, while not a history of the Gay and Lesbian Movement in itself, provides a historical background for LGBT politics. Although her examination focuses specifically on San Francisco, her larger analysis of what she calls the political logic of the movement is useful in a larger context. Beginning with homophile organizations of the 1950’s and working through the millennium, Armstrong offers an idea of how the politics of the Gay and Lesbian Movement have changed over time and argues for a crystallization of a political logic in the 1970’s that still exists, albeit modified, in the Movement today.

¹ This Chapter relies predominantly on interviews conducted with the two Co-Directors of SONG and organizational documents.

Most useful for this thesis, is Armstrong's examination of what she calls a *political logic*. "Political logics are background sets of assumptions about how society works, the goals of political action, and appropriate strategies to pursue desired ends" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 14). Similar to the idea of a master frame (Snow & Benford, 1988), Armstrong's concept incorporates a distinctly cultural approach to social movement studies. David Snow and Robert Benford's (1988) article *Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization* argues that social movement participants actively engage in meaning making within a movement. What they call *framing*, works to "assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions" (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198) in ways that mobilize participants, garner support from the public, or challenge their opposition. Snow and Benford add this idea to traditional social movement theories of political process and resource mobilization. While this theory begins to take a cultural approach to studying social movements, Armstrong's notion of *political logic* pushes the cultural aspect of social movement scholarship further to examine a wider range of collective efforts while allowing for a greater distinction between types of collective action (Armstrong, 2002). These distinctions of different political logics outline a history of Gay and Lesbian politics in San Francisco.

Armstrong begins with early homophile organizations of the 1950's and their use of an *interest group political logic*. This logic assumes that "American society is composed of intersecting constituencies, each of which has a fair opportunity to influence policy according to their interests" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 16). Within this logic, problems that might arise in society can be corrected through reform, particularly when a group creates a unified voice to advocate for rights. The larger the group, the more

legitimate they are considered. By influencing elites through traditional democratic channels, interest group politics produce “large single-issue organizations, each of which attempt to monopolize a particular cause” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 18). Early Homophile groups, like the Daughters of Bilitis, used this logic to begin the process of gaining rights for gays and lesbians in the United States. These Homophile organizations legitimized creating public organizations of homosexuals and started the idea that homosexuals are a group deserving of rights (Armstrong, 2002, p. 3).

Next, Armstrong discusses the Gay Liberationists of the 1960’s. According to her analysis, these liberation organizations were torn between a *redistributive political logic* and an *identity political logic*. A redistributive political logic “advocated the overthrow of capitalism, believing that change would come through a total transformation of society. They supported black power, women’s liberation, and other nongay causes” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 20). These groups used large-scale political activism to change society, including tactics like marches and demonstrations. This logic however was continually in contention with and challenged by a new type of identity politics developing at the time. This identity political logic “centered on the innovation of ‘coming out’ and ‘highlighted identity building, pride, and visibility’” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 21). Difference became a point of similarity because historically identity movements create communities of similarity. The gay and lesbian movement centered on the idea, “together we are different from straight people, but as individuals, we are different from one another” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 3). This political logic became the dominant ideology of gay and lesbian organizations formed after 1969 and continues to be the dominant political logic today. This coalescence of an identity logic has happened, however, “in

such a way that the pursuit of interest group was defined as complementary” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 23). By examining this history and these different political logics, Armstrong shows that “the gay identity movement crystallized in the early 1970’s. Before this moment, the project of expanding homosexual social space did not have the stable, organized properties of a field” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 23). In her book, she discusses not only the crystallization of the field, but the implications that this institutionalization had on the growth of the movement. These implications included the exclusion of non-white and non-male people and influenced the prospects for future change.

Exclusion, dissent and infighting have always been part of the Gay and Lesbian Movement. In his book *Dividends of Dissent* (2008), Amin Ghaziani traces a history of the US Gay and Lesbian movement by specifically examining the presence of conflict and dissent. Beginning in the 1970’s Ghaziani examines the politics behind Gay and Lesbian marches on Washington focusing on the debates present among local and national movement groups. Building on Armstrong’s analysis, Ghaziani contends, “the movement’s internal diversity...makes it ripe for a focused study of dissent” (Ghaziani, 2008, p. 8). Each time a march was organized, leaders grappled with infighting around the politics of identity. These debates waivered between “activists embracing a liberal, quasi-ethnic, minority model of identity” and “radical groups advocat[ing] a ‘non identitarian’ politics of difference that called attention to internal differences and questioned the stability of essentialist identity claims” (Ibid). Arguing about the details of the march allowed activists to continually define the movement, set strategies, and examine collective identities. By the year 2000, the “radical groups” who throughout the

1980's and 90's successfully pushed a coalitional platform of multi-issue social justice politics were outweighed by national corporate organizations promoting an interest group politic (Ghaziani, 2008). Throughout these four marches, women, indigenous people, people of color, bisexuals, trans-people, and queers all worked to challenge liberal models of identity and organized around a different, less essentialist politic.

The Queer Movement of the 1990's, including groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation, was one of many challengers to the exclusionary nature of the larger Gay and Lesbian Movement. To this end, queer politics made a return to the redistributive political logic of the earlier Gay Liberation Movement. "Turning to redistributive politics could have provided a coherent way to reorganize the movement . . . but the vision of a multi-issue, multiracial social justice movement was a hard sell in the political climate of the 1990's" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 182). While this return was not adopted in the 1990's, queer groups today have not fully abandoned it.

SONG's Coalitional Political Logic

Based on this concept of political logic created by Armstrong, I argue that an additional political logic exists in the work of some queer movement actors today, specifically in the work of *Southerners On New Ground*. Again, Armstrong defines political logics as "background sets of assumptions about how society works, the goals of political action, and appropriate strategies to pursue desired ends" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 14). Each part of this definition provides the basis for an in-depth look at the work of SONG and how that work resides in a specific new political logic.

SONG's Assumptions About How Society Works

The idea that oppression is systematic and interrelated is the key foundation for SONG's political logic. Feminist scholarship offers us a developed way to think about

how oppressions are interrelated. Systematic oppression involves the exercise of authority or power in such a way that a given group or social category of people are subordinated in an unjust manner. When oppression is institutionalized through laws, organizations, government, and societal norms, it is distinctly thorough and regular. To see oppression as interrelated implies that each subordinated group in a system of oppression is connected in some way. This is best understood by the feminist concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality, a phrase coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) and further developed by other feminist scholars (Collins 1998, 2000, McCall 2005)², examines how various socially and culturally constructed categories of oppression interact on often simultaneous levels, contributing to a system of social inequality. Today, a large amount of feminist scholarship acknowledges that various forms of oppression such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, etc, do not act independently of one another but instead, interrelate creating a system of oppression that reflects an "intersection" (Collins, 2000).

Intersectionality as defined by SONG refers to "how all of our lives, issues, and identities are connected...we work across race, class, culture, gender and sexuality and don't leave people or struggles behind. We want to build a whole world from whole selves" (S.O.N.G. Key Terms, 2008). Similar to the academic understanding of the term, SONG uses this concept of intersectionality in their organization's political logic. These connections are part of their core belief system, or in Armstrong's terms, their "assumptions about how society works" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 14). SONG states,

Race, Class, Culture, Gender and Sexuality are intrinsically connected.
Oppression is systemic and intersected, as are its methods and the people

² For social movement scholarship on intersectionality see Abraham (1995), Kuumba (2002) and Lawston (2009).

targeted by it. Alignment and solidarity among those who experience injustice provide the possibility of broad-based social change (Beliefs Our Work is Based On).

These beliefs shape the work of SONG and other groups with whom SONG chooses to work. In organizations with a different logic, identities can be seen as separate, static, or only important in certain situations. SONG on the other hand notes, “people who are multiple identities are often asked to fragment themselves. We believe everyone should be able to bring their full selves to this work” (Beliefs Our Work is Based On). The multiple identities of movement actors are not just present, but important to intersectional work. SONG’s political logic is built upon and dependent on their approach to identity and the notion of “whole selves” discussed in the Chapter 3. One SONG leader noted how this multiplicity and connection are imperative to their work. “We’re seeing that actually our fates are really deeply connected around this [type of] work.” What is really central here is “how much we’re willing to see those connections and it’s how much we are willing to build in those communities.” Communities always contain people with different and multiple identities. The work of seeing those connections and building between them, rather than upon them, directs the goals of SONG’s coalitional politic.

SONG’s Goals of Political Action

Basic assumptions about society fuel the goals of political action. In the coalitional political logic that SONG articulates, these goals start from the premise of, “creat[ing] shared power—power with instead of power over” (SONG Organizing School-Facilitator’s Agenda, 2008). This statement challenges the systematic nature of oppression suggesting that in society, power should and can be shared rather than used by some over others. This also means that the use of power within an

organization ascribing to such goals must be considered. In the case of SONG, core leaders make an agreement to “not initiate or perpetuate [abusive] power dynamics. Specifically, we agree to not use our privilege around age, race, culture, language, gender, immigrant status, or ability to intentionally hurt or disadvantage any other members” (SONG Leaders Core Agreements and Code of Conduct For Our Work Together, 2008). This required leaders to constantly ask themselves, as Angel did, “how do we make sure that we are engaging in fights that do not come at someone else’s expense?” She further explains, “a lot of single issue campaigns and fights that people have been working on have very much [come] at other people’s expenses. They are specifically not talking about trans people of color because they know it is going to be the one factor that is going to make their side been seen as too threatening or to anti-assimilationist.” SONG’s does not agree with this strategy but rather works against taking or using power while ignoring the struggles others. While not often discussed, some SONG documents talk about how they “agree to use our privileges whenever possible to support SONG’s work and membership” (SONG Leaders Core Agreements and Code of Conduct For Our Work Together, 2008). Through this agreement, SONG acknowledges how power in our society can be abusive to a variety of groups but commits to only use that power dynamic, created by institutionalized oppression, to their benefit but never against one another³.

Another goal of *Southerners on New Ground* that defines their coalitional political logic, is their goal of creating a world defined by individual self-determination. As

³ SONG’s work around shared power is similar to what Winnie Breines observed in the student movements of the *New Left* and called “prefigurative politics” (Breines, 1989). While Breines concludes that the *New Left* and student groups practicing prefigurative politics struggled to maintain this foundation, I argue that SONG’s successfully maintains it.

defined by SONG, self-determination is “the ability of a person or community to make choices for themselves about their own lives, bodies, and futures” (S.O.N.G. Key Terms, 2008). Often explained with the slogan, “nothing about us, without us!,” this goal explains “what SONG wants for all oppressed people!” (*Ibid*). Individual self-determination changes the way society views people, their identities, and the choices they make. According to SONG’s coalitional political logic, in a society of systematic oppression these choices are limited and heavily shaped by societal norms so the goal is to create a world where there is freedom for self-determination of identity. Thus SONG works to gradually create spaces, places, and cultures that value self-determination. This can happen in a variety of ways.

We value different approaches, skills, leadership styles and we understand and value that we often have different needs in our various communities. We do not believe in social, political, or religious fundamentalism; the idea that there is “only one” needed or transformative skill or approach. We are always creatively looking for ways to incorporate many ideologies, approaches and skills in service of community liberation. (SONG Leaders Core Agreements and Code of Conduct For Our Work Together, 2008)

This openness allows SONG to “value multiplicity” not just in individuals and their identities, but also in the goals and work of the organization. In order to shift ideas about power and create individual self-determination, SONG also stresses the necessity for shifting cultural ideas and creating space for these ideas to flourish. These spaces serve multiple goals and purposes.

SONG develops spaces—of mind, body, and spirit—and practices that welcome each person’s whole self and identities, create a culture of hope, encourage the development of one’s best self, and inspire vision for the combined individual and collective good. (Beliefs Our Work is Based On)

In a society filled with systematic oppression, envisioning this culture allows participants to concretely understand what an end goal might feel like. SONG begins this work by

asking, as one leader did, “what does it mean for people to be able to have a right and access to place in order to be able to a part of whole communities?” They answer by asserting, “people do not have to leave [the South] in order to have wholeness, but that we really need to hold our own communities accountable around creating wholeness.”

This accountability is a process and a struggle that SONG continues to pursue. Because these spaces are not easy to find, for SONG, “sometimes that means we create a temporary expanded space so people can think what it feels like, feel what it feels like, and then move on from there.”

This idea of space is important to SONG’s coalitional political logic where intersectionally building together can combat a larger society that oppresses. These spaces allow people to live their lives in a way that may not otherwise be possible. Jamie noted, “I think our community has a deep longing to expand the space so that they can stay home, or so that they can come home, because they love the South, they love the communities, they want to stay here; but they want—we want—to have space to be able to live as ourselves with dignity openly.” According to SONG’s website, the South is a region that has a deep history of oppression and a “physical geography of white supremacy and poverty” (S.O.N.G. - Why the South?, 2011). This history and the resulting physical and cultural conditions makes it a particularly challenging place to practice anti-racist queer intersectional work. Creating space within the South is significant because while SONG clearly acknowledges a history of oppression, they know the South

is also more than that. It is a place of redemption and hope for many—a place where folk reconcile with past in an honest and painful way, a place where people can stay in lands riddled with pain and remember old traditions, and birth new ways. (Ibid)

These “new ways,” including space and the ability to simply live, speak to the goals of their coalitional political logic. An example of this intentionally created space is SONG’s event the *CampOut*. This seasonal camping trip allows members to come together for “a weekend of SONG Kin rest, renewal, fun, and political conversation” (S.O.N.G Spring CampOut, 2008). This event creates a space in which people can live openly and with dignity. “One of the most common things that groups and members say about why SONG is crucial in their lives is the way that SONG can create a space for conversation and community that makes people feel whole, connected, and courageous” (Alchemy: The Elements of Creating a Collective Space, 2008). Based on my participation in the 2010 Fall *CampOut*, the space created by SONG provides this opportunity and these connections allowing SONG’s members to develop a sense of themselves that may not be currently available, especially in the South, but that they struggle towards with their political work. A fuller examination of SONG’s intentional creation of space is the subject of Chapter 5.

This logic and these goals are intrinsically non-competitive, according to SONG. Because oppression is interrelated in SONG’s coalitional logic, it is important for individuals, groups and organizations to work together to challenge systematic oppression. As one SONG leader explained, “there is only one set of issues that impact the entire human family living in the South. There is only one set of conditions; there are just really different locations in that.” The view is that one human family shares goals that are linked together by their desire for liberation. This means, more concretely, “there is not . . . a BP oil spill only for queer people or only for people of color. There are those conditions [of an oil spill] and then there’s your location, which

means everything in how you are affected.” Larger conditions, like in the case of the BP oil spill in the Gulf Coast, affect many different types of people, but each person’s individual location shapes how they are affected, not the social location of a group or identity category. People’s different and specific locations inspire the multiplicity present in a coalitional politic. For SONG, a core goal is changing society’s power dynamics. This concept works because as SONG states, “people are experts on their own lives and have the right to self-determination. It is through people’s stories that we learn the conditions needed for change, hope, resiliency, and survival” (Beliefs Our Work is Based On). These conditions shape the overall strategies of a coalitional politic, as I will detail in the next section.

SONG’s Strategies Deemed Appropriate to Pursue Desired Ends

In SONG’s coalitional political logic, the basis for strategy is the notion of coalition. Coalition is an alliance for combined action. Groups and organizations that use this logic, see social issues as interrelated and therefore they must be addressed together. As one SONG member argues, “there’s no time left for single issue organizing.” But making that move is not always easy. She further explains, people must be “committed to moving past our own scars and our own pain around homophobia and trans-phobia and moving in those scars and being a part of that work.” That work, as challenging as it may be, cannot be done alone. Groups must work together coalitionally for liberation. “There is no liberation, not even survival, in isolation. Our liberation depends on us coming together across lines of difference. Our hope for change is bringing people together in multi-issue, multi-cultural community organizing” (Beliefs Our Work is Based On). SONG promotes an understanding of the ways in which people’s experiences are linked even if they are not directly related. Leaders hope to that “even if’s not a direct

relationship, I understand what my alignment to [another person's struggle] is.” This understanding of alignment shapes their framework for capacity building within communities.

SONG uses a specific framework to build capacity throughout the South that focuses on the intersectional nature of issues. They developed this framework “because we had been asked … how do you teach intersectionality?” This core component of their political logic is not an easy one to practically implement. As Angel, a leader in SONG explains, if “we’re asking people to learn about issues [of intersectionality],” people often wonder, “do I have to be someone from the Gulf Coast learning everything I can about Appalachia? Is that what’s going to make me an intersectional person?” Having a framework to build intersectional thinking and understanding helps SONG develop this core value with its members.

Angel: One of the more practical ways that we talk about it is in the SONG organizing school, the main sort of like flagship capacity building program we have. We wanted to be able to talk about the issues that affect our base in the South and their relationship to four main issues:…land, spirit, work/economy, and bodies as in individual physical bodies and collective bodies.

These four main issues were chosen because they are issues that SONG leaders heard people talking about repeatedly, ones that “everyone has a relationship to.” For example, a SONG leader explained, “around bodies, everyone has a relationship to bodies, whether it is their own physical body or their relationship to collective bodies… issues around reproductive justice, issues around disability, issues around anti-violence work.” Land is also an issue that SONG sees as affecting everyone. “Everyone has a relationship to place… whether it’s their own community, or issues of Black land and the Black Belt and the South, whether it’s in relationship to housing, access to housing,

affordable housing, communities based housing, etc.” Both bodies and land serve as over-arching issues that affect all people, allowing alignment, even while each individual’s experience with those issues varies.

The issues of labor and economics were chosen because economic survival is a main conversation within SONG’s membership base. They believe there is huge amount of work to be done on this issue. “Whether it’s underground economies, whether we’re talking about sex work, whether we’re talking about growing your own food to be able to have some economic sustainability, whether it’s about labor issues in the Southeast and the massive political discourse and misinformation around immigrant labor in the Southeast,” the conversations are present and the issue needs to be discussed. The final issue, spirit was developed to “create a container to talk about sustainability and resiliency.” Issues of depression, isolation, and heart-break are issues SONG often hears from its Southern membership base. Spirit serves as a “huge container… to be able to talk about all of those things”. They discuss through their struggles,

Angel: what are things that sustained them; what are strategies that have helped people address really harsh conditions; what are some of the things that people have done to create more cohesive communities that are *not* just speaking to the pragmatic, but the other level of things that people are also experiencing. (emphasis original)

This emotional support adds a dimension to SONG’s intersectional framework that supports personal experience and coalition building among people on a very basic and individual level. This framework serves as “one of the ways that we have been able to engage a lot of people in intersectional conversations.” These conversations bring people together to form strategies that address the intersectional conditions in their own communities. In each community, SONG’s Organizing School asks people, “given

these four containers, what is the relationship of your own community to these four containers” and people respond well and “just break it down.” SONG leaders say that they particularly like this framework because it “creates a more cohesive conversation to talk about strategies.” This frame very practically allows people to say, “yes, I absolutely understand why my life as an LGBT or a queer person in Southern Appalachia is absolutely connected to the land struggles of people in the Deep South and I know my relationship to that.” This coherent strategy allows people to align their struggles so they may see how to work in coalition. SONG’s intersectional framework builds this coalitional base first on a personal level then locally, regionally and nationally.

This intersectional work, this coalition building is not easy according to SONG. One challenge SONG faces, for example, is balancing the need to do coalitional work with a desire for “safe space”. While safe space certainly has its place, Jamie argues that it not the place for coalition building.

Jamie: A lot of LGBTQ folks in organizing, we’ve gotten to this intense thing around our safe space; we just want to be with queer people. That’s why we have a safe space, that’s not our organizing space. It’s like Bernice Johnson Reagan, one of my favorite quotes of hers, she says, “coalition is not home.” You should not feel safe in coalition, it’s not where you feel safe, it’s where you are expanding for the good of multiple communities to do work and have wins.

In order to achieve this expansion, SONG creates both spaces where its members can feel at home and safe, as well as spaces for coalitional work. Much of the work on segregated and/or “safe spaces” implies the creation of boundaries and restrictive collective identities. Scholars “routinely note that social movements depend on the active, ongoing construction of collective identity, and that deciding who we are required deciding who we are not” (Gamson, 1997, p. 179) Safe space involves distinguishing

this boundary and as Anne Enke shows in her book *Finding the Movement* (2007), this space can both contest and reinforce hegemonic ideas around race, class, gender and sexuality (Enke, 2007). SONG's intentional creation of space and the balance they create between safe space and coalitional space prevents a strong exclusionary identity from forming by insisting on coalitional work through an alignment strategy. They are consistently “pushing that edge” because,

Jamie: our role has never been to be isolated and apart... we belong here, we are part of this movement, we need a place within that...it's always within an international and national context of fighting neoliberalism, that's part of how homophobia is played out...we're either silent within the movement or we're out over there.

SONG and its members are not willing to accept being outside of a larger “liberation movement”, which one leader defines in terms of the South.

Angel: The South has always been...one of the more massive testing grounds for right wing ideology or the deliberate crumbling of civil liberties and the intentional isolation of poor people, working class people, people of color and immigrant people. Movements have gone one way or the other; one [way] has been to shrink access and to shrink the lives of people. There has been the movement for liberation that has worked to broaden that stuff, so that more and more people have been a part of having access and having entry into sustainable lives.

SONG specifically places themselves, through coalition, at the center of that larger fight, one which broadens people’s access to liberty and connectedness. Jamie argues, “we are of you, we are from you, we need to be in the movement with other people to feel whole and we need to be respected and have dignity within that. So we’ve created a container to be able to do that.” As I understand Jamie, SONG meets the challenge of needing to provide safe space while doing coalition politics by creating what she calls a “container,” or an organizational home that allows SONG’s queer and/or LGBTQ members to have a political home where they can feel safe and respected while

constantly pushing members towards collaboration, coalition and building a larger movement for liberation. These coalitions are challenging but by having a home or container with SONG, members are encouraged to participate in more difficult situations, including those where personal respect and dignity may be lacking.

This strategy of building coalition and a larger liberation movement involves more than just willing involvement. It involves framing issues in such a way that creates possibilities for coalition that are clear and pertinent. For SONG, so much of this intersectional work “is about how we cut issues and what we allow to be cut as a quote unquote LGBT issue.” In an interview, SONG leader Jamie provided an example. Within the last few years, SONG members were working on a specific issue in Knoxville, Tennessee. The local community was voting on “a city ordinance that tried to allow only a certain number of… people who were blood related to each other [and] only a certain number of people who weren’t blood related, [to reside] in one house.” This issue was one that affected many groups of people including poor people, immigrant and migrant workers, and LGBTQ people whose family structures differ from traditional heteronormative structures. Looking at the issue by examining the ways it affects a variety of groups, allows SONG to work intersectionally. It allows them to build coalitions, and see themselves as undeniably connected to the fates of other groups and liberations struggles.

Jamie: When we’re actually looking with this lens, we are able to really articulate how these issues are intersectional and affect all of us. It doesn’t become as hard because we are not laundry listing it out, we’re not trying to take on 6 different projects because this one relates to racism, this one classism, and this one homophobia. We’re seeing that actually our fates are really deeply connected around this work, it’s how much we’re willing to see those connections and it’s how much we are willing to build in those communities.

According to SONG, this logic creates possibilities rather than limiting them. It builds on the core philosophies of both SONG and a more general coalitional logic by seeing oppression as interrelated and creating alliances to build a larger movement.

While groups use collaborating campaigns as a strategy, they do not often participate without still being attentive to their own core concerns. For SONG, as Jamie notes, “Queer visibility, LGBT visibility is a bottom line.” This means that if the group cannot be visible and open about their lives, SONG will not collaborate on a campaign. Jamie offers a nice example,

Jamie: So if we’re in Alabama and there is a really exciting living wage campaign and they say, absolutely we want your help, we’re so excited! There’s just this one little thing, which is that things are at a fragile place and queer issues are very wedge and as long as you’re not out, or you’re not very high profile about your queerness then we’d love your help. We’re going to have to say no to that because it’s a fundamental compromise of what our base is about and what our membership is.

According to SONG, a coalitional politic can only be successful for everyone involved if groups and organizations are not expected to compromise their core values. As SONG leaders and literature makes clear, in coalitional work it is important not only to see the connections and coalitions available, but also be sure those coalitions work from a shared set of values and assumptions about the world.

In addition to coalition building, community organizing is also a key strategy in the coalitional work of *Southerners On New Ground*. SONG defines community organizing in terms of their larger goal of shifting power structures: “Organizing is people together building a base that has the shared vision to act together to build power, challenge power, and change power relationships and communities. This is important because the power to make change lies in the hands of the people that those changes affect most directly” (S.O.N.G. Key Terms, 2008). This power not only lies in the hands of the

people but SONG argues it is “the best way we know to Build Power for oppressed people. SONG supports organizing that builds collective power and leadership among all involved and that begins with people who are most targeted by injustice” (Beliefs Our Work is Based On). To begin with, people who suffer injustice create a very different leadership strategy than can be seen in other political logics. When people who suffer injustice take on leadership roles, power comes from within rather than from outside. This way, according to one SONG leader, “you are actually doing some representation as opposed to just advocacy.” This notion of representation and centering oppressed people in the work of community organizing is key to resistance as a strategy. Jamie continues, “as long as there has been oppression, there has been resistance. Resistance doesn’t look like lobbying and mainstream, that could be a tactic or part of a strategy, but traditions of resistance don’t look like that.” Organizing provides an opportunity to create the necessary systems that Southern queers need to survive while holding larger systems of government accountable along the way. As another leader Angel explains,

Angel: We absolutely need our own alternative infrastructure. But I think that the safety net that people need to be able to stay here in the South has some relationship to the state. But that’s not about reform, that’s just about, we pay taxes just like everybody else, we are a part of the South, and we need to figure out how to have sustainable lives here and we need to hold the State to that as well.

Angel explains the complicated relationship between community organizing struggles and larger systems of the State and nations government. Building power within communities through community organizing allows SONG to create new systems while also working to change the ones that exist and effect the lives of people.

Not only does SONG strive to do resistance in the form of community organizing led by those facing oppression, but SONG also strives to employ strategies of coalitional work that include both local and national components. SONG's political logic works towards social transformation but does not discredit positive social reform along the way. According to SONG, social transformation often begins at a local level. At this level, groups can begin "building actual localized work, localized economies, participatory democracy, as well as figuring out what real representation and self-governance looks like." As this SONG leader explains, this building and testing of practical innovations allows communities to envision a different world. By working locally within a community rather than focusing on an identity, multiplicity can continue to be respected. Speaking in the language of SONG, Jamie explains, "I'm a big believer in regions being able to define themselves." Like notions of self-sovereignty, local work begins with the central belief and tactic of letting communities lead the work. Strategies are diverse because only a community knows what is needed and what will work locally. Linking together local issues allows for regional coalitional work. SONG's distinctly Southern identity allows them to focus on a region where they believe people share common struggles. At a Southern level, SONG works as "a part of a Southern [coalition], lead by Project South, called Building A Movement (BAM). It is a Southern regional leadership cadre of folks that have already been playing key roles within movement leadership in the South. It's not LGBT specific but it's pretty LGBT heavy." This regional coalition serves an example of how local groups and different social movement organizations come together regionally to affect change.

SONG also believes that beginning locally does not discount the ability to take on national issues and work in national coalitions. SONG is quite aware of a history of community organizing that has created national reform and improved the lives of oppressed people. As SONG states, “organizing has won concrete gains for oppressed people in the US and around the world...like the two-day weekend for workers, an end to segregation of certain public spaces, and the legal rights of people with disabilities to demand equal access to public spaces” (S.O.N.G. Key Terms, 2008). This history of success motivates SONG to work in national coalitions to create change on a larger scale. Currently, SONG is working as part of the Roots Coalition, a national network of 14 collaborating organizations located in a variety of cities throughout the United States. Together, these groups are working as Jamie explains, “to sort of zero in, quote unquote, and pick an issue.” One issue they are considering is based around the idea of identity policing. This concept involves state and national institutions regulating or “policing” the ways in which people can acceptably identify and be recognized by the State. This concept is, however, difficult to define because it is a work in progress and was not specifically defined by the activists in my research. The Roots Coalition has narrowed in on “the idea of identity policing because it’s naturally intersectional. There are certain issues that have a lot of heat that are naturally intersectional.” In relation to this issue, the Roots Coalition is working on the Real ID Act, which was passed by Congress on May 11, 2005. This Act creates new standards for creating and issuing state drivers’ licenses and identification cards, increased documentation requirements for people to obtain or change information on a license or ID card, and stricter screening of people seeking asylum in the United States (The Roots Coalition, 2010). This is an

example of an issue that SONG sees as naturally intersectional, or strategic for coalitional work. Jamie notes, “It affects undocumented people, it affects gender non-conforming and trans people, it affects African Americans in rural communities who have been disenfranchised who have never gotten birth certificates, [and] it affects poor people who can’t afford licensing.” Rather than working individually in identity specific groups to address this issue, coalitions work together to frame issues in a way that illustrates the collaborative potential for a coalitional strategy. Whether it is a local or a national effort, as one SONG leader notes,

Jamie: the truth is that we’ll always have to take on … concrete work, sometimes campaigns, sometimes projects. There are going to be timelines, there are going to be goals, there are going to be concrete wins in some form. That always means selecting an issue. So I think that the framing [of that issue] is where the intersectionality comes though.

These realistic constraints to movement work mean, as Angel articulates, “people have to be able to move with strategies that they are not 100% sure are going to work, they are not 100% sure that they are going to be able to fly. You still have to do it. You just can’t wait for the perfect platform to come along for you to be engaged. It’s not there.” In creating a platform to do concrete work, SONG strives to carefully select issues and frame them strategically. They work to frame issues in a way that promotes coalition, which is key to understanding SONG’s political logic.

Coalitional History

By examining the history of feminist of color’s activist work, the history of a coalitional political logic becomes clear. While members of SONG did not explicitly explain the connections to this history in my interviews or in their organization’s documents, coalitional work and intersectionality are historically grounded in the work and ideology developed by Black Feminists. In her interview, Jamie suggested, “a lot of

the early [work of SONG] was really spent trying to get and successfully getting regional organizations and leaders to start thinking more intersectionally and doing more intersectional work.” This work, explained by Angel a SONG leader, “began from “a feminist, a womanist, a racial justice and an LGBT lead view of what [early leaders] saw was really needed in the South.” An examination of the development of Black Feminist and Black Lesbian Feminist activism and political thought illuminates a history of coalitional politics and intersectional practice. This history clearly relates to the current political logic of SONG and offers a distinction between other historical accounts of queer politics rooted in the development of queer theory and those of SONG.

As Armstrong states, new political logics can only “emerge under specific conditions of heightened cultural creativity” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 14). These conditions were present and flourishing during the development of the black feminist/lesbian movement. “The sociopolitical conditions and social movements of the late 1960’s gave rise to an unprecedented growth in black feminist consciousness” (Springer, 2005, p. 1). Black Feminist politics and organizations developed in conjunction with both the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement. From the late 1960’s through late 70’s, a black feminist movement developed. “The dates of emergence also marked a period of tremendous political upheaval and ideological struggles in the United States and abroad” (Springer, 2005, p. 9). This period allowed for the creation of a coalitional political logic grounded in intersectionality, a logic that SONG draws upon and expands today.

During the 1960’s and 70’s, black women worked to develop both a collective identity and to establish social movement organizations. “In the process of this

organizational and identity formation, black feminists found, sometimes in difficult ways, that black women held a plurality of visions for social change because of their differences from one another in sexual orientation, class, color, and educational achievement" (*Ibid*, p. 4). These differences pushed women of color to examine the intersections of this plurality. Kimberly Springer in her book *Living for the Revolution*, argues, "[B]lack feminists are, historically, the first activists in the United States to theorize and act upon the intersections of race, gender, and class" (*Ibid*, p. 2). This theorization developed as black women leaders in the Civil Rights Movement "contested sexism and normative models of womanhood" (*Ibid*, p. 21). These women "incorporated civil rights movement organizing skills and the movements equal rights frames into new theorizing on the connections between oppressions" (*Ibid*, p. 26).

This new theory of oppression, particularly the work of lesbians of color "intervened into the question of identity by refusing to posit identity as a goal" (Ferguson, 2004, p. 126). As Gladys Jiménez-Munoz explains, black lesbian feminists believed identity is a "place of departure, of creating and inventing spaces, that is crucial because as lesbians of color oftentimes this meant being located in positions in which one could not take for granted the social solidarity characteristic of racially oppressed/cultural-national families and communities in Europe and North America" (cited in Ferguson, 2004, p. 126). This lack of social solidarity provided the impetus for the creation of a black feminist consciousness. The development of these organizations and this new theory of intersecting oppression "coincided with the transition of the locus of black activism from key integrationist civil rights organizations to black nationalist groups" (Springer, 2005, p. 9). Black feminists challenged ideas of nationalism that

were becoming ever present at the time, particularly their investment in social construction. “Lesbian of color feminism contributed to the theorization of identity by arguing that if identity is posed, it must be constantly contravened to address the variety of social contradictions that nationalism strives to conceal” (Ferguson, 2004, p. 127). A new black lesbian identity was created that was not imbued with socially constructed notions of identity. Using Barbara Smith’s classic essay *Towards a Black Feminist Criticism* (1979), Roderick Ferguson, in his book *Aberrations in Black* (2004), explains the use of the term “lesbian” by black lesbian feminists, not as an identity, but as a set of social relations. This use of lesbian “designates the ways in which heteropatriarchal relations are rife with unrest and contradictions and that these disruptions rebuke heteropatriarchal ideals and claims” (*Ibid*). Viewing identity as a set of social relations “creates a space where … social contradictions can be addressed and worked through, insofar as it is the space where these contradictions become visible” (Jimenez-Munoz cited in Ferguson, 2004, p. 126). This new usage paved the way for a larger analysis of oppression and the possibility for coalition building.

In her introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (2000), Barbara Smith states, “approaching politics with a comprehension of the simultaneity of oppressions has helped to create a political atmosphere particularly conducive to coalition building” (Smith, 2000). This notion of simultaneity is the significant difference of a coalitional political logic. This move to “coalition building among women of color and third-world feminists was the ‘single most enlivening and hopeful development in the 1980’s’” (Ferguson, 2004, p. 133). The Combahee River Collective serves as an excellent example of black lesbian feminist theorizing of the intersections of oppression

and the use of coalition building. “The Combahee River Collective and other black lesbian feminists were actually rearticulating coalition to address gender, racial, and sexual dominance as part of capitalist expansion globally” (*Ibid*, p. 134). This “rearticulation” was developed out of the coalition strategies of black nationalists. In its new form, “coalition was based on women of color’s subjection to simultaneous oppressions, oppressions constituted through normative undercurrents, modes of exploitation that would characterize globalization in the late twentieth century” (*Ibid*, p. 137). This idea of simultaneous oppression would lead the way for SONG’s coalitional political logic based in defining identities as a set of social relations, or ‘whole selves.’

Analysis

SONG’s coalitional political logic views oppression as systemic and intersected. It combines the societal problems seen by all three of Armstrong’s political logics, discrimination, structural inequality and alienation. The goal of SONG’s coalitional political logic is individual self-determination as well as creating shared power. Goals can include, if we use Armstrong’s terms, social transformation, authenticity, and broadening the range of expression. In the case examined here, they include changing power dynamics as well. SONG uses diverse strategies based on the idea of coalition building and working within the intersections of oppressed groups. They do not participate in mass movement, specifically not the mainstream LGBT movement. Strategies focus on starting at a local level, but working regionally and nationally when the opportunity arises. In SONG’s political logic, identity is seen as neither a means nor an end but as a set of social relations that are influential for every individual given the societal implications of those categories.

This analysis shows how SONG does a coalitional and intersectional politics that centers on self-determination, coalition, and working within intersections. Given that SONG and its members see the organization as queer and as doing a queer politic of self-sovereignty as I describe in Chapter 3, it is fair to conclude that this looks like a new queer politics. It is a queer intersectional political practice. The extent to which a large number of social movement organizations practice this logic requires further research. However, in the era of global capitalism, post-modernism, and queer theory, I believe it is an increasingly popular political logic for non-bureaucratic LGBT groups and leftist social movement groups. Chapter 5 examines more specifically one practice of SONG's coalitional political logic, the intentional creation of space.

CHAPTER 5

PERFORMING UTOPIA: QUEER COUNTERPUBLICS AND SOUTHERNERS ON NEW GROUND

As Chapters 3 and 4 have illustrated, *Southerners On New Ground* use coalitional queer politics to blur identity rhetoric and resist neo-liberal assimilation. In this process, they create spaces and places to envision a future where queer lives are whole and self-determined. This Chapter will examine *Southerners On New Ground*'s use of *CampOuts* as a tool for rejuvenation and social connection among Southern organizers. In this chapter I argue that through the development of “queer counterpublics” (Warner, 2002), SONG creates intentional spaces through which a queer utopia can be envisioned. These spaces for alternative expressions of gender, sexuality and racial embodiment create opportunities for affective and expressive politics that combat the isolation of queer personhood in the larger public sphere. They allow for queer connection and illuminate the potentiality of a future not limited to the present.

Counterpublics

In his book, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner (2002) provides an analysis of public and private life and a conceptualization of “queer counterpublics” in the United States. Through the critical discussion of gender and sexuality in public and private culture, Warner examines the possibility of a world where “publicness and privacy are equally accessible to all” (Warner, 2002, p. 21). This examination leads him to formulate of the notion of “queer counterpublics.” Counterpublics maintain a particular relationship to space and place within queer culture. Scholars have offered a variety of different ways to examine the use of space in a cultural and political context, notably the work of Anne Enke in her book *Finding The Movement* (2007). Enke’s examination illustrates how movements can be shaped by space, how space can shape

movement participants, and how conflicts are mediated through space (Enke, 2007). Movement organizations, including SONG, create space both within a movement context and in the larger society. As Chapter 4 illustrates, ideas and strategies around space are at the forefront of SONG's political logic. I believe the examples in this study more closely resemble the ephemeral and transformational nature of a counterpublic. Enke's notion of space relies heavily on the negotiation and creation of longer lasting and even institutional spaces within social movements. While the examples I use are part of SONG's larger goal to create sustainable spaces on a regional and national level, I contend that the idea of a "queer counterpublic" offers a basis for understanding some of SONG's work and their current queer political practices.

Counterpublics are in many ways defined by their relation to a larger public. Participants in counterpublics are "marked off from persons or citizens in general" (Warner, 2002, p. 56). This demarcation of difference suggests that counterpublics are not just different but are sometimes seen as inferior to publics; "the cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one" (Ibid, p. 119). A counterpublic always "maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (Ibid, p. 56). The discourse within this type of counterpublic often conflicts with the rules of the dominant public discourse. It is "structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying" (Ibid). In queer counterpublics for example, the cultural assumptions and discourses of heteronormativity are not present. These alternative conceptions within counterpublics are "by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment" (Ibid, p. 63). This

conflict comes in the form of discourse because publics, and counterpublics, are by definition organized by the circulation of discourse. “The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternate idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” (*Ibid*, p. 119). Meaning, because this discourse conflicts with accepted standards of good conduct, not just anyone would willingly associate themselves with such a counterpublic. While “like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers...counterpublic discourse also addresses those strangers as being not just anybody” (*Ibid*, p. 120). This is precisely because of the conflicting discourse presented in counterpublics. Participants are marked by their participation because there is an assumption that “ordinary people would not want to be mistaken ... for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene” (*Ibid*). While this may carry a negative connotation in the dominant sphere, counterpublic participants see the critical power present in such an environment.

One example of a counterpublic, specifically one that relies on alternative notions of gender and sexuality, is the performances of an artist from New Orleans known as Big Freedia. Freedia’s music falls into a genre known to locals of New Orleans as “bounce,” a variation of hip-hop music that has a deep history in New Orleans. Freedia however performs in a subgenre’s that is known as “sissy bounce.” While artists like Freedia have “no desire to be typed within, or set apart from, bounce culture,” their shows are “founded increasingly on the novelty of their sexual identities” (Dee, 2010). This discursive distinction between “sissy bounce” and “bounce” creates an awareness of its subordinate status and marks it off from the larger genre. Freedia’s shows are

“structured by alternative dispositions or protocols” (Warner, 2002, p. 56) of gender roles and presentation. Freediea herself presents a very “masculine style, is genetically a man; but neither she nor anyone who knows her uses masculine pronouns to refer to her” (Dee, 2010). Her shows are dominated by a female audience who “did not dance with, or for, one another — they danced for Freediea, and they did so in the most sexualized way imaginable” (Ibid). While New Orleans has historically accepted more freedoms of gender and sexual expression than other US locations, the gender relations present in Freediea’s shows continue to conflict with the norms of their environment. As one participant noted, “when you identify with Freediea, you’re the agent of all this aggressive sexuality instead of its object” (Ibid). This discourse of aggressive female sexuality separates it from the larger sexual discourses of the public ‘bounce’ culture. Freediea’s shows are short, an average 20 minutes in length until the “sexual balance at the [venue is] restored” (Ibid). Not just anyone would be interested in Freediea’s shows and they represent a queer counterpublic with alternative discourses of gender and sexuality that “make possible new forms of gendered and sexual citizenship” (Warner, 2002, p. 57) for a short period of time.

Events like Freediea’s shows offer an example of counterpublics and hint to the possible transformative nature of counterpublic space. As Warner comments, “what remains, then, is a need for both concrete and theoretical understandings of the conditions that currently mediate the transformative and creative work of counterpublics” (Ibid, p. 62). Examining the current work of *Southerners On New Ground*, and the queer counterpublic that they create, can offer one example of this transformative work.

The Need for Queer Counterpublics

Counterpublics, particularly queer counterpublics, are necessary and even essential for many reasons. Historically, marginalized groups have been systematically excluded from participation in publics. Historical examples range from the enslavement of African Americans to gendered cultural assumptions of men and women's roles in the public and private sphere. People who do not practice heteronormative sexual relationships are also marginalized from participation in the public. As Warner notes, "not all sexualities are public or private in the same way" (Warner, 2002, p. 24). Public displays of sexuality are seen as appropriate only when they follow heteronormative scripts while alternative forms of sexuality are excluded or deemed inappropriate for the public sphere. This exclusion of marginalized groups can create "a kind of political depressiveness, a blockage in activity and optimism, a disintegration of politics towards isolation, frustration, anomie, [and] forgetfulness" (Ibid, p. 70). The desire and even need for counterpublics becomes clear through this historical understanding of public exclusion.

To this end, *Southerners On New Ground* work to combat this isolation and cynicism through the creation of intentional space. Being queer in the South poses particular challenges that go hand-in-hand with exclusion from a public. SONG members regularly speak of these challenges and the need for alternatives.

Kim: I think it's necessary in the South because generally speaking, the South is really under-resourced in terms of queer folk so there is a scarcity and a lot of isolation. This happens to queer people all around the country but it's particularly true in the South where the religious right has such a strong hold and where real violence is being perpetuated on our bodies and our spirits on a very regular basis. We need each other and it's hard to find each other.

Angel: One of the conditions that people talk about all the time is the heart break of what it means to break away from your family or just isolation, issues of depression in our community, the really high rate of suicide in our community and this constant thread of both heart break and heartache but also resiliency on the other side of that.

Jesse: We just really talk about ... working together almost out of need and I think that that type of organizing doesn't come from a place so much of want, but it comes from a place of need.

SONG brings Southern queers together by creating what I identify as a queer counterpublic that is open to a certain type of stranger and that offers a space, and sometimes a place, for developing an alternate form of citizenry, one that the SONG members above explain as something they "need." While it might be argued that the larger work of SONG creates this counterpublic, I focus particularly on a gathering that is part of this counterpublic: the *CampOut*.

The *CampOut* as Queer Counterpublic

According to Warner, while some counterpublics happen by chance, others are intentionally created for their ability to alter power and transform individuals. The work of SONG and the space created at a *CampOut* is an example of an intentional creation of space. *CampOuts* are seasonal gatherings of queer people from across the South. While members of SONG typically coordinate *CampOuts*, they are open to anyone interested in registering and attending. Typically a call for registration is posted and passed through networks of Southern queers calling for interested people to "join us for a weekend of SONG Kin rest, renewal, fun, and political conversation" (SONG Spring CampOut 2008). They work from a philosophy of counterpublics that Warner calls stranger sociability. For the Fall 2010 *CampOut* on the Gulf Coast, only 5 of the 15 attendees were members of SONG. While a few were friends or acquaintances, most had heard about the gathering and traveled to meet other Southern queers who were

strangers. Strangers in this space are not however strangers for long. As Warner explains, “counterpublics are ‘counter’ to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity; as publics they remain oriented to stranger circulation in a way that is not just strategic but constitutive of membership and its affects” (Warner, 2002, p. 122). Strangers who gather for a *CampOut* become part of the space where their queer sensibility creates an immediate sense of belonging. Riley explains, “when I go back to the South to say a *CampOut* … it is an illuminating experience. You’re felt and appreciated and respected and regarded [in] ways that I don’t have to explain myself.” There is an assumption present in this space, as in all counterpublics, that participants share a discourse and that an individual’s presence signifies a specific type of belonging.

Participation and belonging in SONG’s space is not simply based on an identity or discourse but contains the potential for transformation from within. SONG creates spaces in which people, who are often isolated or discriminated against on a regular basis, can feel like their “whole selves” during participation. “One of the most common things that groups and members say about why SONG is crucial in their lives is the way that SONG can create a space for conversation and community that makes people feel whole, connected, and courageous” (Alchemy: The Elements of Creating a Collective Space, 2008). This space allows people to develop a sense of themselves that is not possible within the larger public, but which can be carried into it. Where a traditional public sphere contains private person’s whose identity is formed in privacy and brought into the public, “counterpublics of sexuality and gender, on the other hand, are scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate” (Warner, 2002,

p. 57). SONG specifically develops “spaces—of mind, body, and spirit—and practices that welcome each person’s whole self and identities, create a culture of hope, encourage the development of one’s best self” (Beliefs Our Work is Based On). This development of “one’s best self” speaks to the ways in which “participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members’ identities are formed and transformed” (Warner, 2002, p. 57). SONG members speak of the *CampOuts* as welcoming to that transformation. “You’re kind of secluded out in the woods so there is not outside influences and distractions. It’s just looking at people and being real. It just blew me away.” One key feature of this ability for identity formation that was regularly discussed by *CampOut* attendees was the initial introductions that take place at the beginning of each weekend. Each person has a chance to say, among other things, which gender pro-nouns they prefer to be addressed by. This simple self-naming allows participants to develop, explore, and expand their gender identities in any way they choose. During my experience at the Fall 2010 *CampOut*, these introductions pushed some participants to think about gender in a new way. Participants commented about these introductions as offering them a different way to view gender. Some shared a larger description of their personal experiences with notions of gender identity. It is, as one member notes, a “little bit of intentionality for how you want to be addressed and for what feels most comfortable for you.” This intentionality allow for a wide variety of expressions all of which are valued. “You have the right to express your gender however you want to and to be respected for whatever you want to call that.” Using Warner’s ideas, I believe that it is in this way that *CampOuts* can be understood as counterpublics. They “can work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can

be lived...[and] can therefore make possible new forms of gendered and sexual citizenship—meaning active participation in collective world making through publics of sex and gender" (Warner, 2002, p. 57).

Envisioning Queer Utopia Through Counterpublics

Queer counterpublics not only provide a space for transformation, both personal and collective, but they also allow participants a space to envision a future not restricted to the present. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz pushes readers to invest in the notion of utopia. He argues that queerness is not something that has arrived yet, but something that allows us to hope for a future. "Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). That missing thing is not just absent, but something queers can and should strive for. "Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Ibid). Different spaces and times allow us glimpses of this future world that sustains our investment in it. This future, this utopia, is not a prescriptive one, but it does "render potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema" (Ibid, p. 97). Based on my observations and interviews, I feel that this potentiality exists within the world of queer counterpublics and particularly within the work of SONG. *CampOuts* allow queerness to flourish and provide a necessary glimpse of the future that sustains queer activists today.

Particularly useful in examining the futurity present in the work of SONG is Muñoz's discussion of queer stages and utopian performances. In this chapter, Muñoz suggests that "on some level utopia is about a politics of emotion" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 97).

Emotion, particularly hope, is the mode through which queers are permitted to access futurity. He also states, “it is my belief that minoritarian subjects are cast hopeless in a world without utopia” (*Ibid*). SONG embraces a similar notion of hope and utopia. In their Core Leadership Agreement, SONG acknowledges that they “put hope, desire, and longing at the center of our thinking and work, instead of and before working out of fear” (SONG Leaders Core Agreements and Code of Conduct For Our Work Together, 2008). They use this hope to imagine futures not yet here. “Our work is about transformation to a just, fair and liberated society that meets the needs of its people (Beliefs Our Work is Based On). The transformation to a society not yet here is impossible without the notion of hope. By working from a place of desire and hope, SONG can envision a world in tune to Muñoz’s queer utopia.

The centrality of hope and a utopian vision in SONG’s work can be seen in a particular exercise SONG uses in their traveling organizing school. This exercise, which they call a Studio, involves a concept called Third Space. According to SONG organizing literature, Third Space is an idea developed and evolved by Black revolutionary thinkers. The concept involves three types of space that can be inhabited in our world. The First Space is the “the space of capitalism, the space of McDonalds, the space of trade and stealing within this country” (SONG Organizing School-Facilitator’s Agenda, 2008). The First Space is the world often struggled against by activists and members of SONG. These members “as activists, ...often also live in the second space: the space of resisting and pushing back on oppression—the space where we do anti-racist work, anti-sexist work—the space where we oppose something”

(Ibid). Both the First and the Second space are regularly inhabited in our world. The Third space pushes individuals to think into the future.

The third space is the space of creation, invention, innovation, and birth. It is the space where we dream a new world, with new words that are shaky on our tongues. It is an exhilarating and scary space. Some would liken it to standing on the edge of a great cliff. (Ibid)

This Third space allows people to envision a utopia. A place not yet here but that is often hoped or longed for. Given the work many queer activists do fighting the oppression of the First Space, the Third Space asks, as one SONG leader did, “in lieu of not having that, what is it that we would want?” This idea allows people to fantasize about a different world. “Queer fantasy is linked to utopian longing, and together the two can become contributing conditions of possibility for political transformation” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 127). While SONG recognized that “it is easier to not go to this space,” they believe, like Muñoz, that “it is the space that we need to survive” (SONG Organizing School-Facilitator’s Agenda, 2008). It is central to SONG’s queer counterpublic.

Returning to Muñoz’s idea of queer performativity, we can examine how this utopian longing and a vision of the future not yet here can lead to spaces of utopian potentiality through performativity. Like José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of stages, *CampOuts* are spaces that remind participants “that there is something missing, that the present and the presence...is not enough” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 100). Queer performativity creates literal moments or times of utopian potentiality. Applied to *CampOuts*, I argue that they serve as “actual utopian rehearsal rooms, where we work on a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics such as late capitalism, heteronormativity, and, in some cases, white supremacy” (Ibid, p. 111). That space

provides comfort for people working through and working against the hegemonic order of society. SONG member, Courtney, speaks to this comfort, taking solace in the fact that,

Courtney: there was an organization that is out there working for me to be comfortable and working to create a community. Whenever I'm out there trying to navigate in this world and trying to figure out who I am, there is this organization that has done it and if I ever needed a place that was a haven . . . there is this organization that is out here doing this work and I don't have to go out there and try to find other things.

This work allows people to connect with each other in a different way and feel connections that are not present outside of these queer spaces.

Riley: I think going to the *CampOut* was just amazing for me. It was a breath of fresh air because [before that], I had not had a chance to connect with my people in that way. It was just really a chance to not be 'the only lonely' but to be really connected through other people.

Utopian feelings of hope and belonging are also associated with these spaces. Riley further explains, "when I come into space with SONG people, my spirit is just lifted by the fact that there are other queer people, there are other Southern people, there are people of color, and there is just real love." These connections last beyond the experience of camping and provide a potentiality for future community. In these spaces, this potentiality is "always on the horizon and, like performance, never completely disappears but instead, lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling other people" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 113). With *CampOuts*, the connections do not end with the weekend but as one member noted,

Riley: I feel like those connections have really stayed strong. So even if it was just meeting [someone] at a camp out, we've crossed paths at other places and it's been just like real love and support . . . that came just through that experience of going to the *CampOut*.

This continuation, this building, and this potentiality help members physically understand, even in small ways, a vision of queer utopia.

The feelings that these spaces create, like the stages in Muñoz's text, remain with the participants even after the event is over. The resonance of these feelings "at performance's end, if it is situated historically and materially, it is never just the duration of the event" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 99). Rather, they "linger in our memory, haunt our present, and illuminate our future" (*Ibid*, p. 104). *CampOuts* serve not only as rejuvenating and welcoming spaces, but as fuel for futures and visions of utopia that stay with the participants:

Riley: It just seeds ideas for me; it's given a boost in terms of the work that I am doing to know that I'm struggling with other people. It's not just me in this community or the handful of us that exist in this community doing it, there are people struggling in other ways. It gives you that boost to want to stick with it.

In this way, *CampOuts* inspire queers to keep working towards their vision of a queer utopia. In Muñoz 's words, their "utopian performativity suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 99). This new mode of being in the world allows queers to maintain a utopian vision while the world around them challenges that ideal.

Analysis

Through the creation of counterpublics and the performativity of queer utopian spaces, *Southerners On New Ground* sustain their vision of a world that is not yet here. Their work contributes to our understanding of how, through this creation of counterpublics, queer political actors can continue the investment in a futurity that is challenged in their everyday lives. As Muñoz states, "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" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 96). *Southerners On New Ground* refuse to accept the ways in which queers exist in our world. Instead, they actively work to create spaces and communities that fulfill their vision of a queer utopia while sustaining the potentiality of that future while they work towards it.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

Although this thesis has analytically separated the political work of *Southerners On New Ground*, each aspect of SONG's work relates to and relies heavily upon the others. The following discussion elaborates on the connectivity of Chapters 3-5 and argues that SONG's coalitional political logic is new and queer not simply because they rely on models from former social movements, but because their coalitional political logic is defined and practiced through queer notions of 'whole selves', self-sovereignty, counterpublics, and utopian longing. These practices work together to define SONG's coalitional work and allow for the practice of intersectionality.

Queering Intersectionality

Southerners On New Ground, or SONG, is a sixteen year old organization working to build, connect, and nurture Southern individuals who believe in liberation across all lines of race, class, culture, gender and sexuality. SONG is a distinctly queer organization and is known and referred to by its members as a queer organization. SONG practices community organizing across the South with a focus on coalition building amongst organizations with similar goals. Although notably challenging at times, SONG's queer take on the practice of intersectionality allows the group to successfully implement intersectional work where others have faced difficulty (Luft & Ward, 2009). They are striving to put into practice a new queer intersectional politic.

Rather than using a traditional queer politics of deconstructing the identity-based and social categories of society, SONG understands the complexity of identity politics and does 'queer' differently. SONG practices a new way of complicating identity-based and social dichotomies like man/women and gay/straight. This concept is based on

their notion of ‘whole selves’ and gender and sexual self-sovereignty discussed in Chapter 3. They believe each individual has a right to self-determination of their gender and sexual identities and that no choice should be privileged. People should be respected and allowed to present and live as their “whole-selves” in all parts of their lives. This is a unique take on queer politics. Its uniqueness is clear when compared to the historical deconstructive strategies within queer social movements. Recall Joshua Gamson’s discussion of queer ideological challenges to the usefulness of sexual identity categories in political work (Gamson, 1995), where queer actors contested the use of categories like ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ as socially constructed regulatory devices. Instead, as I detail in Chapter 3, SONG has developed a new queer strategy of ‘whole selves’ which allows for the sustained importance of identity on an individual level while deconstructing the privilege and meaning that identities have in society. The nature of SONG’s ‘whole self’ concept is queer in that it allows the group to avoid *reification*, Luft and Ward’s observation that “despite the antiessentialist and poststructuralist momentum of early intersectional theory, many projects that have since laid claim to intersectionality have struggled to recognize racial, gender, and sexual differences while also keeping in view their social construction” (Luft & Ward, 2009, p. 25). SONG strives to reinforce the fluidity of identity and the importance of self-determination and individual experience. This political practice is arguably queer, but in a new way in part because SONG’s new conception of queer identity, ‘whole selves,’ is grounded in their overall intersectional coalitional political logic and, as I will also argue, practiced through utopian performativity in queer counterpublics.

As I discussed in Chapter 4, SONG's political logic is based on the belief that oppression is systematic and intersecting. This logic is also found in the academic understandings of feminist intersectionality. In this thesis I have outlined SONG's belief that alignment and solidarity among oppressed people provides the best possibility for social change today. They work to value multiplicity in people and ideas and strive to see and build upon on intersections and connections of identity. As this thesis has argued, these core beliefs are imperative to understanding SONG's political logic. I also argue that this political logic is centered in an understanding that SONG's approach to identity formation is a new queer politic.

Recall that Chapter 4 has explained how the goals of SONG's political logic are inherently non-competitive and work to create shared power in society. SONG resists neoliberal concepts of 'diversity' and fights institutionalization (Luft & Ward, 2009, p. 19) through structures and strategies that create shared power. SONG's ideas around power relations are explicitly stated within their organizational documents and are clear in the overall structuring of their organization. This notion of shared power can be understood as queer by recognizing how SONG's notion of shared power is tied to, and in fact dependent upon, their unequivocal valuing of self-determination and their refusal to privilege any specific identity, as discussed in Chapter 3. Rather than simply talking about the importance of intersectionality or "appropriating" it (Luft & Ward, 2009, p. 16), SONG actively centers their work on marginalized groups and builds at the intersections of its constituency's 'whole selves.' SONG seeks space for the creation of shared power *and* self-determination, sometimes creating specific avenues, or as I discuss in Chapter 5, counterpublics, for that purpose. By working to bridge and connect "whole

selves,” SONG aims to hold Southern communities accountable to sharing power in a queer intersectional way such that they can foster a fundamental understanding of the value and benefits of this type of work.

As I illustrated in Chapter 4, SONG’s political strategies focus on the notion of coalition, or alliance for combined action. Coalition is essential to the work that they do but is described by SONG leaders as continually challenging on both a personal and political level. Movement organizations examined by Luft and Ward (2009) struggled with the practical “operationalization” of intersectionality, or how to “do intersectionality in a way that does not compromise facets of identity, reproduce oppressive patterns, nor sabotage long-term movement goals” (Luft & Ward, 2009, p. 27). To address this challenge, SONG uses an intersectional framework to foster coalitional thinking and action. Recall from Chapter 4, this framework contains four core issues that facilitate discussion and strategizing in an intersectional way. These core issues include land, bodies, work/economics, and spirit. SONG uses these issues, which they believe everyone has some relationship with, to help members see their relationships to each other even if that relationship is not a direct one. As Chapter 4 shows, SONG also strives to frame political issues in accordance with their beliefs around intersectional thought and coalitional possibility. To that end, they choose issues that they see as naturally intersectional, or that clearly affect a variety of people, different parts of individual ‘whole selves’ and not just the queer or LGBT part of a person’s identity. Looking at issues in this way allows for local, regional, and national coalition building with groups of people who are also affected by systematic oppression. Within their strategy of coalition, SONG specifically uses community organizing as a political

strategy to shift unequal power relations or as discussed, to create the queer intersectional practice of shared power. As illustrated in Chapter 4, these core beliefs, goals of political action, and strategies make up, what I call, SONG's overall *coalitional political logic*, an intersectional politic, but a new, queer kind.

Outlined in Chapter 5, unique to SONG's political logic are ideas around space for shared power and self-determination. SONG sees these spaces as particularly necessary for Southern queers. Recall from Chapter 5, this necessity comes from the experiences of isolation, depravation and exclusion from the larger public discourse that Southern queers and SONG's membership base express. SONG works to develop these spaces in communities throughout the South while also creating temporary spaces particularly for the purpose of feeling respect and self-sovereignty, a concept detailed in Chapter 3. An example of this type of space, examined in Chapter 5, is SONG's event the *CampOut*. These spaces work on a set of relationships between people that differ from society as a whole and contain the potential for personal and political transformation. SONG is creating what this thesis argues are queer counterpublics, as outlined by Michael Warner (2002), that are based in the emotions of both longing and hope. Longing creates the need for these spaces, or counterpublics. SONG understands this need and works to meet it while focusing on hope and utopia throughout their work. Creating utopian counterpublics, as discussed in Chapter 5, allows SONG's members to image different concepts of self, their whole but transformed selves, detailed in Chapter 3. As this thesis portrayed, this constant capability for transformation is queer in nature and allows participants a space to envision a future not restricted to the present. Counterpublics, like SONG's *CampOut*,

allow individual queerness to flourish and provide a necessary glimpse of the future. This potentiality, created in the queer counterpublics examined in Chapter 5, helps to sustain queer activists. As previously illustrated, SONG's creation of space inspires members because it functions as a performative for a queer utopia. A utopia that SONG and its members work towards, using a coalitional political logic described in Chapter 4 and dependent upon in the queer notion of 'whole selves' examined in Chapter 3, but that is not yet here.

Southerners On New Ground's success comes from a unique history of social movement work. As this thesis has shown, SONG builds upon the work of Black Lesbian Feminist and Queer Movement actors with a new queer approach that is distinctly different from these previous movements. Their politics, outlined in Chapters 3-5, are practiced through queer notions of 'whole selves,' self-sovereignty, counterpublics and utopian longing that allow for a fluidity of identity and feeling of hope necessary for intersectional work. This discussion of SONG informs our understanding of why and how these contemporary queer movement actors work to challenge neo-liberal politics and envision a different future. Their work offers a queer intersectional politic that "is still visionary, still just out of reach and so interactive and inclusive it has not yet been achieved" (Luft & Ward, 2009, p. 16). This thesis has outlined that queer utopian longing, practiced through SONG's coalitional political logic, pushes towards an intersectional vision of personal and community transformation that has not yet arrived.

Further Research

During my research, SONG unveiled a new seven-year strategic plan (S.O.N.G.-New Strategic Plan!, 2010). While certain successes of the group are clear from this study, the outcome of their organizing work was not examined. It would be interesting

to observe the group as they expand their work and implement this plan over the next seven years. Examining how the group gauges success and whether or not the group will deem the plan successful, could further this study. This type of inquiry would also allow for a more expansive look at SONG's work and the inclusion of many more member voices. In addition, this research has also only skimmed the surface of interesting questions about space and its role in queer social movements. A further examination of the spaces and places used or created by queer movements may provide a different or better understanding of how the movement functions and characterizes social movement action.

APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION (REVISED)

<h2 style="margin: 0;">UFIRB 02 – Social & Behavioral Research</h2> <h3 style="margin: 0;">Protocol Submission Form</h3>			
<p><i>This form must be typed. Send this form and the supporting documents to IRB02, PO Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611. Should you have questions about completing this form, call 352-392-0433.</i></p>			
Title of Protocol:	EXAMINING THE PRACTICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF INTERSECTIONAL QUEER COMMUNITY ORGANIZING		
Principal Investigator:	Sarah Steele		UFID #:9982-0441
Degree / Title:	BA/Graduate Student	Mailing Address: (If on campus include PO Box address): PO Box 117352, UF Gainesville, FL 32611	Email: s.steele@ufl.edu
Department:	Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research		Telephone #: 517-980-1442
Co-Investigator(s):	None	UFID#:	Email:
Supervisor (If PI is student):	Kendal Broad-Wright	UFID#:	
Degree / Title:	PhD/ Associate Professor	Mailing Address: (If on campus include PO Box address): PO Box 117352, UF Gainesville, FL 32611	Email : klbroad@ufl.edu
Department:	Women's Studies/Sociology		Telephone #: 352-273-0389
Date of Proposed Research:	June 22, 2010- April 30, 2011		

Source of Funding (<i>A copy of the grant proposal must be submitted with this protocol if funding is involved:</i>)	NONE
Scientific Purpose of the Study:	
<p>Intersectionality is a key framework through which feminist academics and activists attempt to frame their work. Available data has explored the ways in which different groups and organizations implement an intersectional approach and the challenges this process brings. This data has a limited amount of information on groups whose work is based in community organizing. Furthermore, this information fails to explore the practical implications of “queer” (deconstructive) politics in creating grassroots collective change. Therefore this study will fill that gap and contribute to our understanding of how community organizing work that addresses the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality is done by people who think of themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ).</p>	
Describe the Research Methodology in Non-Technical Language: (<i>Explain what will be done with or to the research participant.</i>) <p>Research will begin at a political network and organizing conference called the <i>US Social Forum</i> in Detroit, MI. This conference is designed as a national gathering space for social movement convergence and strategic discussion among activists to advance social movements, build relationships and strengthen capacity for change. Groups attending the conference who participate in self-described “intersectional queer” community organizing will be observed throughout the public sessions of the conference. In addition, participants in these groups will be asked to participate in non-structured interviews about the work of their group. The interviews will take place at the conference in a private space (a private meeting room or a quiet sitting area in the conference hotel) and over the telephone and/or email if time during the conference cannot be arranged. I will ask people to describe their participation in the organization and recount their past experiences with intersectional community organizing. They will also be asked to speak about the successes and challenges of this type of work.</p>	
Describe Potential Benefits: <p>Empirical research has not fully examined the concept of intersectional organizing by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) organizers. The results from this study will illuminate the challenges and possibilities for intersectional community organizing within distinctively LGBTQ organizations.</p>	

Describe Potential Risks: (*If risk of physical, psychological or economic harm may be involved, describe the steps taken to protect participant.*)

Participants may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about answering certain questions or when recalling past experiences. However, these feelings are no greater than those they would normally experience in daily life. To protect the participants the principal investigator will remind those who seem uncomfortable for any reason that they can stop the interview. Participants will also be informed that at any time they have the right to discontinue the study and may refuse to answer any questions without penalty. The investigator will occasionally pause and ask participants if they still wish to continue the interview. In addition, the researcher will keep the records of this study confidential. The principal investigator's final thesis project and any report that the researcher might publish will not include any information that could identify individual participants. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. After the research project is completed, all the audiotapes will be erased.

Describe How Participant(s) Will Be Recruited:

Participants will be recruited by contacting group leaders, participants and/or representatives at the *2010 US Social Forum*. Participants will be asked to offer suggestions for other group members who may be willing to participate. Interviews will begin during the conference (between June 22 and June 27, 2010) and continue over the telephone and the Internet. I will attend the *2010 US Social Forum* conference, observe the groups participating, introduce myself, explain my research and ask if anyone would like to volunteer to participate (sharing with them a copy of the attached informed consent form). I will follow up with those who expressed interest in participation but did not have sufficient time available to participate in an interview during the *2010 US Social Forum* (sharing with them a copy of the attached informed consent form). I will also contact those suggested group members who may be interested in participating but who did not participate in the conference to seek their informed participation.

Maximum Number of Participants (to be approached with consent)	100	Age Range of Participants:	18+	Amount of Compensation/ course credit:	No compensation
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Describe the Informed Consent Process. (Attach a Copy of the Informed Consent Document. See <http://irb.ufl.edu/irb02/samples.html> for examples of consent.)

Participants will be informed of the purpose of the study, the length of the interview, tape recording of said interviews and their rights to refuse to participate at any time before or during the interview process. They will also be informed that the study does not provide compensation for their time. This will all be explained on an informed consent form (see attached). Those who participate over the telephone or email will be

provided a consent form prior to participation and their confirmation of willing participation will be taken as consent.

Principal Investigator(s) Signature:		Date:
Supervisor's Signature (if PI is a student):		Date:
Department Chair Signature:		Date:

APPENDIX B INFORMED CONSENT FORM (REVISED)

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

EXAMINING THE PRACTICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF INTERSECTIONAL QUEER COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

What is the purpose of this research?

I am asking you to be in a research study because I am trying to learn more about queer community organizing and the possibilities and challenges of intersectional work within this process. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a member of an organization that participates in queer community organizing. The researcher will be interviewing approximately 20-40 other people who also participate in queer community organizing. This study is being conducted by SARAH STEELE at the University of Florida, Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research.

How much time will this take?

This study will require one meeting/conversation taking about one to three hours or less of your time, depending on your pace in the interview.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed. In the Interview you will be asked questions about your participation in queer community organizing, the organization you do this type of work with, your past experiences with intersectional community organizing and the successes and challenges of this type of work. Your interview will be audio taped.

What are the risks involved in participating in this study?

Being in this study does not involve any risks other than what you would encounter in daily life. For example, if you discuss experiences or relationships that are of a sensitive nature, you may have feelings that might be uncomfortable or distressing.

What are the benefits of my participation in this study?

You likely will not personally benefit from being in this study; furthermore, there is no compensation to you for participating in the study. Though, by discussing your experiences you have the opportunity to reflect on relationships, experiences, and feelings with a person who is non-judgmental and a good listener. Moreover, I hope that what I learn will be adding to the body of knowledge about queer social movements and the successes and challenges of doing intersectional work.

Can I decide not to participate? If so, are there other options?

Yes, you can choose not to participate. Even if you agree to be in the study now, you can change your mind later and leave the study. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or change your mind later. Furthermore, you may interrupt to ask questions concerning the research or research procedures at any time and you may refuse to answer any questions at any time without penalty.

How will my privacy be protected?

The records of this study will be kept confidential. My final thesis project and any report that I might publish will not include any information that could identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the records. After the research project is completed, all the audiotapes will be erased.

Whom can I contact for more information?

If you have questions about this study, please contact Sarah Steele at 517-980-1442 or by email at s.steele@ufl.edu. If you wish to contact my supervisor, you may contact Kendal Broad-Wright at 352-273-0389, klbroad@ufl.edu, PO Box 117352, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-7352. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject please contact: IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 352-392-0433.

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Institutional Review Board 02
Protocol # 2010-U-539
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You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

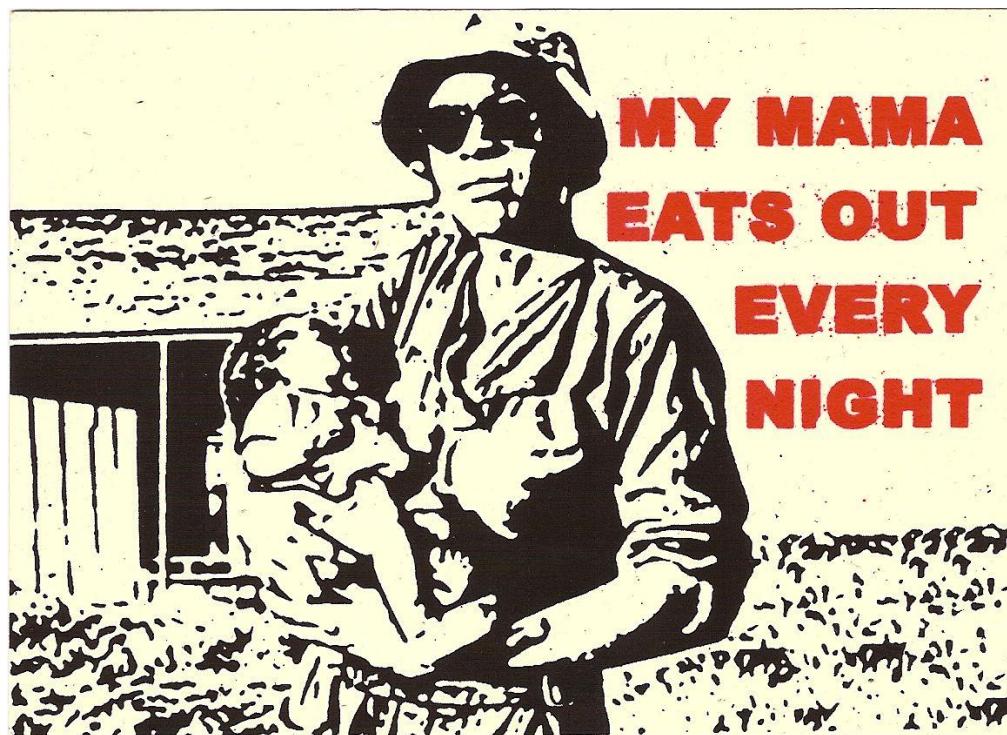
Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have all my questions answered.

Approved by
University of Florida
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APPENDIX C
PARTICIPANT CREATED POSTCARDS FROM SONG'S 2010 FALL CAMPOUT





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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sarah Steele hails from the great state of Michigan where she received a Bachelor's Degree from Michigan State University in 2005. Before entering graduate school, she developed a passion for community organizing through work as an organizer in Lansing, Michigan. Sarah is particularly passionate about feminist, queer, and working-class concerns. Now living in Florida, she received a Master of Arts from the University of Florida in the spring of 2011 and is continually excited about possibilities for new relationships and new ideas about social change.