



## Frustrated by society's erasure, the Lesbian Avengers fought back

By Allyson McCabe

June 24, 2022



In 1993, the Lesbian Avengers organized the first Dyke March. Within a few years, its membership grew to more than 50 chapters nationwide. *Carolina Kroon.*

When Yusef Hawkins, a 16-year-old Black teenager, was ambushed and murdered by a white mob in 1989, it drew attention to New York City's deep and longstanding racial divide. A group of teachers and administrators responded by creating "Children of the Rainbow," a curriculum for first graders intended to promote understanding and respect. Students would learn about Mexican hat dances and Greek New Year's Day bread, and within more than 400 pages of recommended learning activities, there was also a 6-page section on families, which included three references to gay men and lesbians.

Some parents, members of the school board, and clergy regarded books such as *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Daddy's Roommate*, and *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* as tantamount, in the words of board member Mary A. Cummins, to "dangerously misleading lesbian/homosexual propoganda." Cummins accused the Chancellor, Joseph A. Fernandez, of promoting "as big a lie as any concocted by Hitler or Stalin."

Playwright and theater director Ana Simo closely followed the escalating rhetoric, which mirrored the hatred and suppression gay men and lesbians faced on a daily basis. She invited Maxine Wolfe, Sarah Schulman, Anne-christine d'Adesky, Marie Honan, and Anne Maguire to strategize a response. They were already involved in women's and gay rights, as well as HIV/AIDS activism, but Simo says as lesbians their priorities were often sidelined. "No more talking, not community building," Simo explained, "The point was to do something on the street."

Inspired by Emma Peel, the smart, capable spy played by Diana Rigg on the 1960s TV show *The Avengers*, they called themselves the *Lesbian Avengers*. Their first action, in September 1992, was showing up at a school in Queens where opposition to the new curriculum was especially strong. They arrived with a marching band led by women wearing T-shirts that read "I was a lesbian child" and handed out lavender balloons, inviting kids and parents to "ask about lesbian lives." "This was not a protest," Simo explains, "This was more like a performance with a political end result."

Zaps like this had significant precedents, says historian Lillian Faderman. In 1968 New York Radical Women protested the Miss America pageant by trashing their bras, hairspray, and girdles on the Atlantic City Boardwalk. In 1970 the Radicalesbians hijacked a meeting of the National Organization for Women, in T-shirts that identified them as the "Lavender Menace" (a mocking reference to Betty Friedan's disparagement of lesbians).

Faderman says that for the Lesbian Avengers, humor was often as effective as rage. "They handed out chocolate kisses in Grand Central Station on Valentine's Day with the message 'You've just been kissed by a lesbian,'" Faderman explains, "And they also installed a playful sculpture of Alice B. Toklas embracing Gertrude Stein in Bryant Park."

Flipping an accusation that had long been lobbed against LGBTQ people, the Lesbian Avengers' motto was "We Recruit" and they did- with flyers and palm cards, which were stuffed into phone booths, newspaper boxes, and ATMs. One featured blaxploitation star Pam Grier with a rifle, another an aproned housewife with a bomb on her cake platter. Artist Carrie Moyer, who designed this playful agitprop, explains "Part of it was countering this stereotype that I and many other people had grown up with, of lesbians being these sort of dour, humorless people."



A flyer designed by Carrie Moyer, collection of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. *Carrie Moyer.*

The Lesbian Avengers also wheat-pasted posters around New York that closely mimicked commercial ads, creating visibility, says Moyer, while making a broader public point, "We can show up in all these places. It doesn't have to be just the cover of a gay magazine." One of those places was the nation's capital. When the Lesbian Avengers organized the first Dyke March in 1993, on the eve of the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, 20,000 lesbians showed up.

Within the space of a few years, the Lesbian Avengers' membership grew to more than 50 chapters nationwide. A spinoff television network, Dyke TV, aired on 78 public access channels, covering everything from headline news to movie reviews.

By the close of the 90s, lesbians had crossed from the margins to the mainstream, landing on the covers of *Vanity Fair* and *Time*, and soon to be in ads for major companies such as Subaru. It was a sea change, recalls historian Lillian Faderman. "I came out into what we called the 'gay girls' community in the 1950s and I think we saw ourselves, young lesbians- though we seldom used the word 'lesbian,' we were all 'gay'- I think we saw ourselves as outlaws, and if we were lucky, beneath the radar. If we weren't beneath the radar we were in trouble. We were being fired from jobs, or kicked out of schools, or kicked out of parents' homes."

The Lesbian Avengers disbanded in 1997, although its name and logo controversially resurfaced in a Pride T-shirt collection sold by the Gap last year. Whether one sees this as progress or commodification, it appears that visibility alone isn't enough to thwart backlash. Although some studies suggest that nearly 40% of kids today identify as LGBTQ, hundreds of anti-LGBTQ measures have been introduced in state legislatures this year, including dozens of so-called "Don't Say Gay" bills, which aim to limit discussions of gender and sexuality in the classroom.

That's why activism still matters, says Carrie Moyer, "You need to be in a room with other people where you're actually talking about things. The kind of passion around creating change is fueled by being together."

They will when Dyke Marches are held in cities around the country this month, including the 30th New York City Dyke March, which takes place on June 25. Two of the organizers, Jade Watts and Christina Nadler, say a younger generation of activists has added a few more colors to the rainbow and maintains closer ties with other movements for social justice. But Watts says one thing hasn't changed: "40,000 dykes walking down 5th Avenue says something."