

***Embodied Relational Practice as
Liberatory Memory Work:***

Theories of Communion, Protest, and Play



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Introduction

Zines?

Zines, underground press, small press, alternative press ... these are just a few of the names for publications that are not produced by a corporation with an eye to the bottom line, but by ordinary people who want to make their voices heard.

-*Queer Zine Archive Project* “Definition of a Zine”

Our work has been guided by zine writing and the sharing of our work with our communities. Guided by the embodied practice of handing someone a physical object crafted by your own hands. Zines are self-published, often free or low cost. Digital zines are printable and meant to be widely distributed for decentralized knowledge sharing, a form of queer epistemology (Lawson, 2022, p.51). We have used zines to explore our ideas and to invite students, colleagues, and friends to disseminate our works to broader audiences. The first zine we co-authored started as a conference paper, but by the conference day we had ditched the paper to instead share a zine. Cutting up our own words, putting them back together with new readers in mind, distilling our ideas, uniting them with images—showing instead of telling. We hoped to make something that any student, friend, or colleague could pick up and enjoy regardless of academic background. We’ve supported students in their zine projects to tell stories found in the archives, which shows us the possibilities of zine making to create forms of communication not possible otherwise.

As we explore expression through zines related to professional work, we recognize that as academics, we are compensated for our time and are rewarded through scholarship—which results in a different position from authorship of personal zines or artistic works. Within these complexities, our zines have functioned as a rhetorical form of relational practice and an invitation to engage in shared acts of queer memory work.

In “Retroactivism and the Institutional Archive,” Jean Bessette examines the rhetorics of queer archives using the concept of *retroactivism* as “the rhetorical practice of collecting, composing, and revising accounts of the past to foster queer community, shape identity, and combat shame, isolation, and harassment,” exploring the often complicated borders - sometimes rigid and sometimes more porous - between institutional archives and grassroots community archives, and the layered identities of people working among them

(2022). Our work continues this type of examination, we are interested in Bessette’s ideas of “rhetorical negotiation” and the ways collective memories are shared and constructed among community members, coworkers, queer elders, students, friends, archivists, and researchers.

This zine is written collaboratively, with two distinct voices (indicated by initials) along with shared writing. Throughout, vignettes and autoethnographic writing serve as anchors for collective work towards queer community organizing and our interests in what we refer to as *embodied relational practice*. We center the zine as a multimodal and cultural rhetoric to mobilize textual, visual, embodied, and relational ways of knowing.

Adela C. Licona’s book *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric* explores zines as forms of expression, resistance, and ways to make meaning but also zine making and zine sharing as acts of coalitional change-making. Licona writes, “zines and their rhetorical function and force instantiate fusions, perhaps even collisions of sorts, of diverse lived experiences and knowledge systems” (2012, p. 133). Licona underlines the essential step of embracing knowledges that came before (traditional, Indigenous, generational, local) and lead to new knowledge in her examination of zines in third-space borderlands rhetorics (p. 134). In this zine, we experiment with a fusion/collision of identity, form, and knowledge as we seek understanding, connection, and meaning in the work we build in our communities.

Our work is built on a foundational form of queer rurality that necessitates resourcefulness and collaboration (Cohen-Rodríguez and Norton-Wisla, 2024). Our experiences are tied to the land where we both live, on the Palouse Prairie, but are interconnected with the urban spaces and communities all around us. We hope that this work can serve as a marker of continued queer resilience and creativity in places where it may be least expected. We contend that queer multimodal rhetoric must be grounded in critiques of settler-colonialism and a critical eye to our relationships to land, offering embodiment and relational practice as modalities for survival.

Our approaches are informed through our experiences as community archivists, organizers, and scholars interested in realizing a direct-action mode of coalitional praxis in our work. This zine is about queer-centric spaces as they relate to community-based memory work. We seek to highlight the convergence of traditional archival approaches with embodied relational practices of communion, protest, and play. Centrally, we will discuss various forms of community gatherings which bridge multimodal approaches to embodied memory work and traditional archives.

I

In/Visibility in Queer Communion & Liberatory Memory Work

By shifting the focus from written to embodied culture, from the discursive to the performatic, we need to shift our methodologies. Instead of focusing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives, we might think about them as scenarios that do not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description. This shift necessarily alters what academic disciplines regard as appropriate canons, and might extend the traditional disciplinary boundaries to include practices previously outside their purview.

-Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003)



Yarrow and all following flower photographs by LNW.

//jcr//Taylor's quote pushes us to seriously grapple with the boundaries and limitations of academic disciplines. In our work as a community archivists and stewards for the WSU Queer Archives, we have had to grapple with the ethics of contemporary archiving at a time of increased surveillance and scrutiny of both race and gender nonconformity, of queer and nonwhite communities. In this work, we must frequently consider safety, privacy, and security in all the work we do as organizers and scholars. These reflections have led us to what may seem like an obvious conclusion, that queer spaces are important! It is in these spaces where we can talk, dance, laugh, cry, argue, and love. Spaces like drag shows. Spaces like queer-only dance parties, dinners with chosen family, poetry readings, celebrations, memorial services, art gallery receptions. Spaces like protests, letter writing campaigns, and grassroots mutual aid networks. These are the spaces where we gather with a religious intention in building community together. These are places where queer relationality functions as a form of knowledge production, where solidarity can be built, and knowledge passed on through acts of communion, protest, and play.



Anonymous student protest sign taken during the A Day without Immigrants protest at Washington State University, February 2025. Photograph by JCR.

When doing historical or archival work, we must ask ourselves, by what means are we trying to render our communities legible and for whom? I frequently think about what James C. Scott describes as “public” and “hidden transcripts,” (1990) which function as useful frameworks for conversations that are only *for us* compared to the ones that are spoken out loud for all to hear. Often, our work is expected to fit a nationalistic mold of what a queer person should be. There is a white-normative expectation that queer and trans communities must conform to whiteness and upper-class sensibilities to be taken seriously—a form of queer respectability politics that pushes us towards a form of visibility that is ultimately assimilation into the settler colonial project. While resistance is often thought to refer to highly visible and public acts such as protests, what Scott makes clear is that most resistance happens in private and domestic spaces. It is in these in/visible spaces where memory work is often most subversive and life sustaining. It is important to recognize the centrality of embodied relational practices such as zine culture and queer centric spaces as crucial modalities for what Michell Caswell describes as “liberatory memory work” (2021).

//lnw// Students from the WSU Queer Archives Advisory Board found images from a drag show at The Beach (a.k.a. Xenon's), organized by TabiKat Productions in 1994. The negatives were buried in the archives—only viewable with a light table and magnifying glass, until we digitized the whole run. This venue no longer exists, current drag shows are at another location in town, similarly packed, but at a fraction of the capacity. We can reflect on how it might have felt to be there. We can view the image, perhaps even talk to organizers, performers and attendees one day, but the full experience is collectively held only by the people who were there. The drag queen with over a thousand eyes fixed on her, the entranced college students covering the floor (except for a cleared aisle right down the center for the performers to walk), the group of friends peering from the second floor, the couple on the left holding hands so tight.



Washington State University Office of Student Media Evergreen and Chinook Photographs, 1921-2007 (PC 184) Box 7 Folder 3 WSU MASC

As we learn about the drag shows at The Beach, we seek to understand where they may have fallen on the spectrum of community and public spaces. We see other examples of public queer visibility through participation in individual and collective protests in local context at WSU historically and today.



"Vandalism sparks campus activism" Daily Evergreen 2002-04-11 WSU MASC

We learn about stories including an anonymous alumnx's handmade t-shirts printed with "F*GS RULE" and an unauthorized "Cougar Pride" with triangle background design, a personal protest by a student athlete handed out to friends to wear after being banned from wearing their shirt in the weight room (Anonymous Alumnx, 2023). We read about students and faculty engaging in a response to vandalism of a spray painted "WSU = F*G LOVERS" on the library mall in 2002, with protesters taping up handmade posters and speaking out. We view a poster from Chicanx/Latinx student center records in 1996 advertising "¡MARCHA! An alternative way to 'celebrate Columbus Day'" to protest nativism, homophobia, and intolerance—an example of an event promoting solidarity, interconnectedness, and shared humanity (Chicanx/Latinx Center Records, 1996).

II

Rhetorics of Multimodal Memory Work

//jcr// Multimodal memory work refers to a variety of forms in which memories are created, preserved, and passed on. Traditionally, historians have valued a positivist approach which sought to establish pure objectivity with rigid criteria for what is considered a historical artifact or document. Consider legal documents, government documents, police reports, and newspapers. On the other hand, autobiographies, journals, speeches, and oral history interviews have often been considered too subjective and unhistorical according to dominant methodologies valued by historians. We seek not to discount this broad array of modalities, but instead to challenge the longstanding hierarchy which history has imposed.

Multimodal memory work integrates cultural rhetorics towards an expansive approach to historical evidence that broadly considers the many amorphous forms of communal memory such as creative writing in poetry, fiction, or genreless writing; visual media such as art, videos, graffiti, zines, posters, photographs, film; or auditory modes such as oral stories, podcasts, music; and digital modalities such as websites, digital exhibits, video games, servers; and blended approaches of embodied communal practices, events like art receptions, poetry or prose readings, drag shows, parties, and protests. As my dear friend Laurence Haener, an amazing community educator, artist, and farmer, reminds me, even our landscapes and gardens hold cultural memories—in spite of the impacts of agribusiness and monoculture, the landscape holds on to the memories of plants, fungi, and soil life which continue to persist in relation to other life in the most unlikely of places. Diana Taylor emphasizes that documentation is not the same as preservation or conservation. You can't take performance out of its context. Similarly, you can't take a communal event or practice out of its context. You can't preserve what it is like to stand in a field of native flowers in bloom with your chosen family. You can't preserve in an archive what it was like to be in at a drag show in rural Idaho in the early 2000s with over 1000 people. You can't preserve what it felt like to be at a rural after-hours dance party in a gyro shop with over 100 queers dressed as nuns and priests. You can document it, but it's not the same. Just like you can't preserve a kiss, or a hug.



L by a field of wildflowers he helped plant on the Palouse Prairie. Photograph by JCR.

Our repertoire consists of the routines, habits, and knowledge that we perform on a regular basis. Like a dance, or a musical performance, the ways we move through spaces together are learned, rehearsed, and performed. In queer spaces, this is where we learn what it truly means to be queer. We learn from each other and from the spaces we occupy together. We teach each other how to love, how to plant and care for our gardens, and how to build a world together beyond the constraints of the present. This embodied repertoire is a multimodal practice of memory work. It is a modality of cultural rhetorics. While this embodied repertoire cannot be archived in a traditional sense, it functions as a radical form of liberatory memory work that breaks beyond the confines of dominant Western archival and rhetorical theory and practice. This is embodied relational practice.

III

Embodied Relational Practice—We Gather, Mend, and Make Together



Excerpt from a zine by LNW.

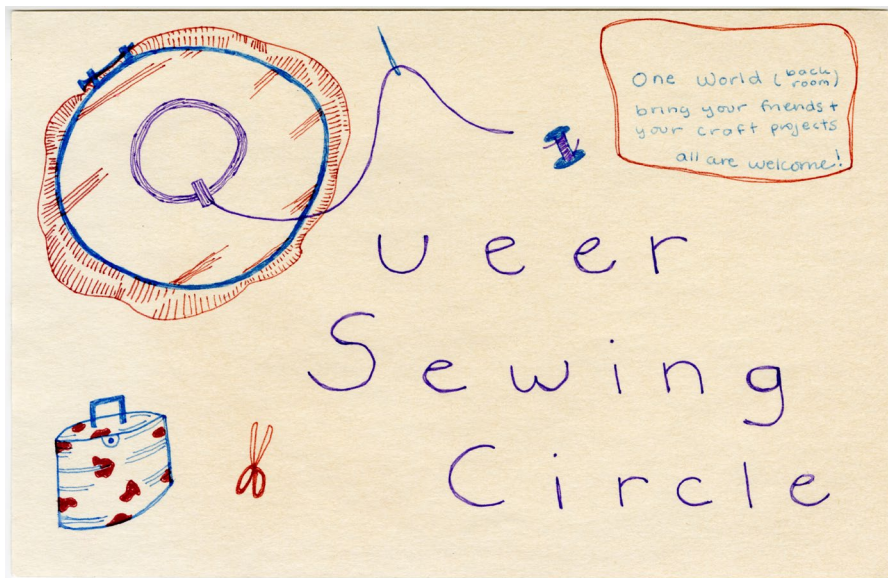
//lnw// At a community event about queer archives, history, and art, attendees asked about what was going on when we gather together and find this feeling of reverence or communion of being together in person. An exhibition curator addressed the question and spoke of the *intention* inherent in coming together in queer-centric spaces. I think about this feeling, and where I've felt it. Wrapped in a wool blanket at a candlelit poetry reading; looking over at my friends skipping rocks upriver after pulling off the highway through the Tillamook forest; sitting on the bench with a team of new queer friends lining

up to bat in the height of summer at a gay baseball game; sitting in nature and noticing, noticing the sunlight, rocks, and lichen. My attention crystalized in the joy of connection, the self-awareness of existing as a node in a mycelial network, receiving and giving love, understanding, and acceptance. Fleeting moments are hard to capture; I try to see and think like I do in nature, breathe and zoom in, focus on the moment to carry forward in my memory. An act of preservation through collectively keeping the moments we share together, passing them on, and creating opportunities for others to join.



Image of Red Paintbrush—a flower native to the Palouse Prairie - taken on a hike at with an outdoors group organized for queer folks by queer folks in 2024. Photograph by LNW.

I first heard about the Queer Sewing Circle from a friend around 2018. I never joined back then, but I was holding that place in my mind for years after the organizers moved away, hearing that it had ended or paused but hoping that perhaps it could reemerge. As part of *Higher Ground: An Exhibition of Art, Ephemera, and Form* curated by June T. Sanders and Josie Cohen-Rodríguez in 2024, O.M. Comstock and Fran O’Farrell submitted two Queer Sewing Circle posters that they’d posted around town six years before – simple lettering calling out messages of “bring your friends and your crafts” and “all are welcome,” bright and colorful on off-white paper, surrounded by ink drawings of an embroidery hoop and sewing notions.



Comstock, O. M. and O’Farrell, Fran - Queer Sewing Circle poster. (2018)
Higher Ground collection, 1983-2024 (Cage 970) WSU MASC



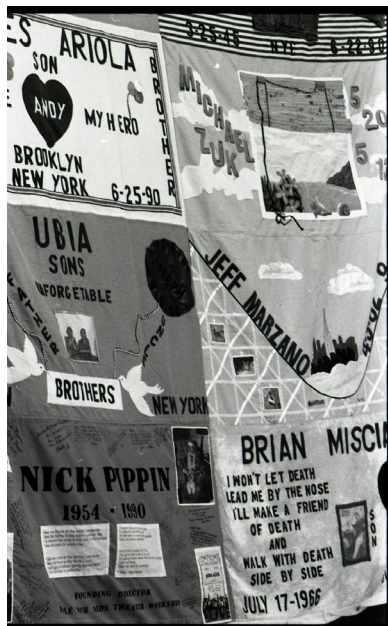
Cantrell, M. (2024). *Sundown Triptych*. *Higher Ground collection, 1983-2024 (Cage 970) WSU MASC*

Mars Cantrell is another artist in the exhibition who submitted figure drawings and a sunset triptych – a series of gorgeous, quilted wall hangings. I delighted in adding these artifacts of queer life and artistic expression to the collections in the WSU archives. In corresponding with Cantrell over email, I learned a brief history of the Queer Sewing Circle (where he had done some of his quilting) and how the first iteration had met virtually during early days of the COVID-19 pandemic (extending to people beyond the Palouse with video meetings), and that it had come to a close when O’Farrell and Comstock moved away to Berlin in 2021. I later learned more about the origins of the group from O’Farrell’s website, where she identifies her and Comstock’s aims of meeting people, building community, setting aside time to build skills and freely exchange skills with others, and to “carve out a more capacious queer space” in town (O’Farrell, 2025). They intentionally created a queer space to sew, knit, and learn – a type of embodied repertoire practiced weekly together in community.

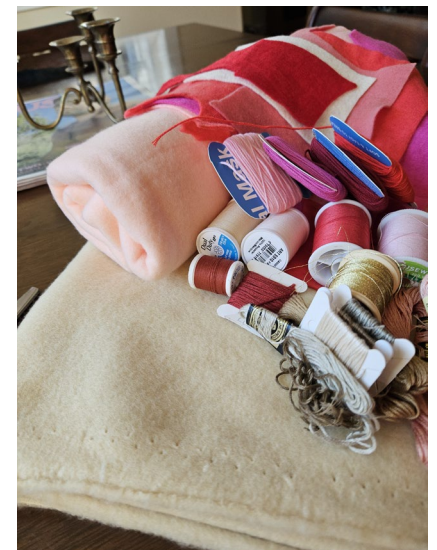


I saw Cantrell again when he joined us to speak on a panel at the closing of the *Higher Ground* exhibition. He mentioned again that he had been thinking of starting the Queer Sewing Circle up, that he had access to the email list from O’Farrell, as well as a backlog of mending projects that were slowly taking over a corner of his house with his partner. Later I showed him the photo negatives of students at WSU in the 1990s—tabling about HIV and AIDS and fundraising to bring part of the AIDS quilt to Pullman. As we seek stories from these decades, we’re learning more from people who were there at the time about what it meant to be a witness and part of the queer community in Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho during the AIDS epidemic. We see this process of seeking stories from the past and sharing with our students, neighbors, and friends as retroactivism applied to our local community – manifesting as forms of celebration, grief, and protection. That night, we looked through small negatives on the lightbox, each containing a portal to 30+ years ago, stitched into the fabric of our time

Cantrell jump-started the new iteration of the Queer Sewing Circle in October 2024, and I became a new member, eagerly receiving his weekly emails letting us know the time in the afternoon reserved in the chalkboard room at the local coffee shop. Bringing my mending, my knitting, my embroidery, my *Alien* face hugger project stitched out of fleece and felt, getting a mug of tea, finding a seat among friends and settling in for a couple hours of quiet conversation.



Washington State University Student Media Photographs and Negatives, circa 1977-2002 (UPC0034) WSU MASC



Mending and sewing projects, 2024. Photographs by LNW.

Every week we gathered around a table and connected with friends, exchanged sewing advice and techniques, learned about organizing and events going on, talked about the ethics/possibilities/limitations of archives, and heard joyful memories along with hard and sad stories. This regular, communal space provides a setting for embodied relational practice—producing visual and tactile art, seeing progress on projects from week to week. The repetitive, routine movements of our hands produce work that we learn from and admire. What makes it a queer sewing circle? Queer people around a table, blending ideas/materials/textures/conversations, looking out for each other, a feeling that invites you to bring any kind of project and to come as you are, all that you are, and all that you are becoming.

Cantrell and his partner moved away in spring of 2025. Shortly before they left, he brought their quilts made in protest and love to the first annual Palouse Queer Student Summit—one patterned after a design in *Teeth become weapons : a zine inspired by the words and art of David Wojnarowicz* (Reay, 2022) inspired by artist David Wojnarowicz's jacket from 1988 with the words: "If I die of AIDS—forget burial. Just drop my body on the steps of the F.D.A." It was incredibly powerful to see speakers and students sharing the microphone in front of the hand-stitched work that tied back to legacies of AIDS activism, healthcare advocacy, visual expression, and communal practice.

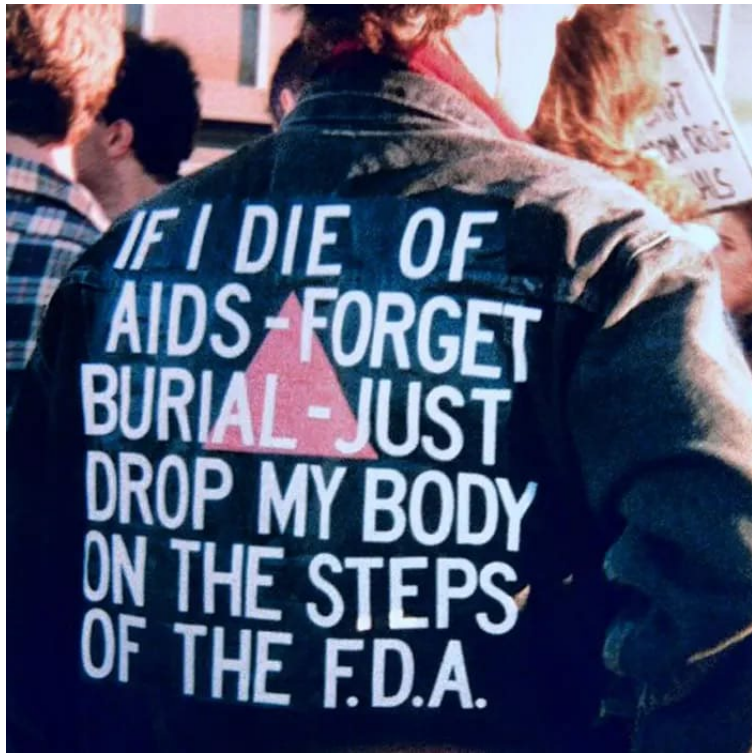


Image of David Wojnarowicz's jacket: "If I die of AIDS, forget burial – drop my body on the steps of the FDA", 1988. Photo: Bill Dobbs. Copyright the artist. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz; P·P·O·W, New York; and The David Wojnarowicz Papers, The Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University.



Cantrell with his quilt in front of his home, presented at the Palouse Queer Student Summit in February 2025. Photograph by MC.

I volunteered to co-lead the Queer Sewing Circle starting in 2025. As we find our way in continuing, I think about the legacy of the group, and what it has given me over the past year, both 1) the fact of the inevitable revolving door of precious creators in our twin university towns paired with 2) a luminously sustained local presence of dear queer artists, and the piece of the patchwork we can provide in queer social life in our interconnected rural and university communities.

IV

Relationships, Memory, and Archives

//jcr// Taylor's work utilizes a theory of acts of transfer in performance studies, which can be used to expand how we conceptualize cultural production to include that which is relational, embodied, and affective through both quotidian or more organized communal practices of queer life.

While Diana Taylor makes clear distinctions between the archive, one that traditionally holds and values writing above all, and that of the repertoire, which is more about embodied action and social agency as a form of cultural production, we move to challenge these distinctions to see how they can inform each other to redefine and push archival and rhetorical practices to be more expansive. We are interested in what archival and rhetorical practices can learn from the repertoire, or these embodied acts of transfer, to hold more nuanced narratives of queer life and memory. Zines and queer centric spaces function as embodied relational practices and as modalities of cultural rhetorics.

Relational affective practice connotes the importance of being in community and sharing hard feelings together. In times like these, this is one of the most radical acts we can do. Lean into each other and work through messy conflict instead of turning away and isolating yourself or others. Relational affective practice looks like building mutual aid networks, cooking food for your chosen family, building a chosen family, having difficult conversations with each other, not calling the cops or relying on authority figures to solve problems for you. Relational affective practice means building relationships with our elders and building opportunities for our youth. It means passing on the traditions that you are actively learning, sometimes before you even think you are ready. There is no time for perfection. Relational affective practice means coalitional solidarity. It means addressing and reckoning with racism, ableism, and settler colonialism in our communities. It means having hope in the future that we can build together and trust in your neighbors to want that future too.

When I consider how queerness can be distilled from the past, I think of the repertoire that we all have, and the ways in which we continually learn from and teach each other in the collective spaces we occupy. We are never separated from the past so long as we continue queer cultural traditions of community, care, performance, protest, play, and pleasure.



Artists Against AIDS Poster, 1987
National Organization for Women, Pullman, Washington Chapter Records,
1973-1995 (Cage 632) Box 6 Folder 37 WSU MASC



Photograph from Andrew Whitver, 1984
Higher Ground collection, 1983-2024 (Cage 970) WSU MASC

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