We're Creating Ourselves Now: Crafting as Feminist Rhetoric in a Social Sorority

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Abstract: *Drawing from a nine-month ethnography of a sorority, this article shows how the discursive and material practices of crafting empower one group of sorority women to adopt a creative and critical approach to sorority life, explore alternative roles as sorority women, and theorize their sorority as an alternate formation of sorority culture. The sorority members pick up the three ideologies of crafting—having a vision, forming a community, and a feminist pedagogy for teaching group values—to navigate between the existing structures of a sorority and their present-day interests and needs.*

Keywords: *sororities, crafting, ethnography*

With over 300,000 members on over 600 campuses in the United States and Canada (National Panhellenic Conference), social sororities are one of the most powerful communities to which many female college students might belong in their college years, especially at large universities. The numbers of students joining sororities continues to climb an estimated 10% in each of the last two years (Heyboer). And yet, sororities tend to be overlooked by feminist scholars, in part because sororities seem like an unlikely site for any sort of feminist rhetoric or action. For example, studies of sorority life over the last thirty years demonstrate that sororities and fraternities tend to reinforce strict gender roles. Lisa Handler's study of sororities as "gender strategy" demonstrates that while sororities are a response to a male-dominated culture of romance, they remain "marked by the inequalities that characterize gender relations in the wider society" (252). Barbara J. Risman finds that sororities encourage behavior that contributes to socialization into traditional gender roles, such as marriage and staying at home with children. Risman writes that her findings are "not to suggest that none of these women will become surgeons, lawyers, or executives; only that the selves they have nurtured while in college will need considerable reorganization if and when they enter demanding occupational social worlds" (138). In *Inside Greek U: Fraternities, Sororities, and the Pursuit of Pleasure, Power, and Prestige* Alan D. DeSantis finds that

fraternities and sororities fiercely reproduce traditional gender roles because "the rigidity of the Greek institution produces a subculture where deviant performances—performances that are potentially liberating because of their ability to expand brothers' and sisters' gendered repertoire—are prohibited" (27). Although sororities seem like unlikely places to look for any kind of feminist practice because they propagate rigid, heterosexual gendered behaviors, they are possible sites for feminist inquiry because of their historical roots in creating opportunities for women in higher education.

This article examines the way that one group of sorority women adopt a creative and critical approach to sorority life, exploring alternative roles as sorority women, and theorizing their sorority as an alternate formation of sorority culture. Through a nine-month ethnography of a sorority that was new to my campus in 2012, I show how the reciprocal exchange of discursive and material practices of crafting empower the women to craft the sorority as their own meaningful community and craft identities for themselves as sorority members. Founding members of this sorority do not completely conform to sorority culture, but nor do they reject sororities as dated institutions. Instead, the founding members adopt three ideologies of crafting toward the construction of the sorority: having a vision, forming a community, and a feminist pedagogy for teaching group values. They use these ideologies to navigate tensions between the existing structures of a sorority and their present-day interests and needs as women in 2012. In context, this sorority-shaping crafting can be interpreted as feminist because these women's understanding of both their roles as crafters and of the sorority as crafting project empowers them to break open the overly rigid social structures of campus sororities.

This essay first articulates a justification for re-considering sorority life as a site for feminist rhetoric by noting that sororities have historical roots in creating spaces for women to grow and succeed as college students and explores crafting practices in the context of rhetoric and composition's interest in materialism, specifically, crafting as a discursive practice. Second, the methodology section of this essay explains my ethnographic approach and data analysis process. Finally, three subsequent sections explain the central ideologies of crafting in the sorority and how each ideology enabled the women to develop a vision for the sorority, form a community from the unique group of women who joined, and teach others about the sorority's values in non-dominating ways. The conclusion states the importance of these mechanisms for seeking feminism in unlikely places.

Critical Imagination: Sororities as Sites of Feminism, Crafting as Feminist Practice

In 2012, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch challenged feminist rhetorical scholars to broaden their investigations into women's rhetoric by engaging in a research paradigm called "critical imagination" (21). In the critical imagination model, scholars seek knowledge "in places at which we have not looked seriously or methodically before" to understand "what women's patterns of action seem to suggest about rhetoric, writing, leadership, activism, and rhetorical expertise" (72). Feminist scholars have taken up Royster and Kirsch's call by studying "topics that aren't explicitly feminist" (Rohan 8), in sites beyond just "the speaker's platform" (Conley 67), including literacies like women's clerical work (Solberg), knitting activism (Springgay), and quilting (Sohan) that do not fit pre-existing schema of political action and resistance.

Perhaps due to some of my own negative associations with sororities, I did not begin this project by looking for any sort of feminism; my original intention was to conduct research on the emotional engagement of extracurricular learning experiences. When I began a new job in the fall of 2012, I asked the student activities office if any organizations were seeking a faculty moderator. I was put in touch with "Beta Zeta,"[1] who had opened their chapter on the prior semester. While the specific chapter on our campus was new, Beta Zeta was affiliated with a strong national organization. This national organization included staff who oversee campus chapters, organize national events for undergraduate members and alumnae, travel to and assist chapters who are struggling (perhaps because of behavioral issues or declining participation), and help build and strengthen new chapters. Because I had never been in a sorority and did not know very much about sororities, I spent a lot of time observing and listening rather than participating, which enabled me to witness the dynamics unfold between the established, historically rooted national organization and the recently opened, slowly burgeoning local chapter. While some sororities would balk at having an adviser with no experience in fraternity/sorority life, the Beta Zetas were inexperienced themselves. Thus, my appearance as an outsider was less marked. I built relationships with them both based on my interest in sorority life (atypical for most professors) and because I was consistently present at meetings and events throughout the year, demonstrating my commitment to learning the practices of the sorority.

1 "Beta Zeta" and all names are pseudonyms. I have also removed other distinguishing features, like the names of events that would identify the sorority.

Reading about the history of sororities as a feminist scholar, I felt challenged to consider how sororities might echo their feminist past in ways that are overlooked due to stigmas about sorority life. Although contemporary sororities appear to enforce strict gender roles, sororities have a historical precedent of providing women with opportunities to embody the role of "college student" previously only available to men. Historian Diana Turk notes that the elitism of sororities means that they are often left out of narratives of women's history, despite the fact that from 1870-1920, "nearly 80,000 women pledged themselves to a Greek-letter organization" (8). In these years, sororities supported women intellectually and socially amidst hostility from male students who felt that women in higher education disrupted the "natural order" of society (Turk 3). In sorority chapter meetings, women practiced speeches for each other and pressured each other to do well in school to represent campus women in a positive light. To counteract common arguments that attending college was "unwomanly," the sororities worked to change the definition of proper "womanhood" to encompass intellectual capacities along with social skills (40). Turk observes, however, that in the 1920s it became more normal for women to attend college, and so sororities became more of the social clubs they are today, focusing on heteronormative dating activities and parties.

Rather than seeing contemporary sororities as merely social clubs, this historical precedent leads me to theorize that sororities are a mechanism for young women to work with a peer community to construct public selves and form social identifications by crafting together historical and contemporary practices. To understand how this process worked, I attended sorority events and functions for about six weeks before asking if I could research the group. Between September 2012 and May 2013, my graduate assistant, Anne M. Dimond, and I interviewed twenty-five founding members of the sorority: ten members of the chapter's leadership team and fifteen women in peripheral involvement positions. We also interviewed five new members who joined the chapter after the recruitment process in January 2013 and who were recruited by the founding members. We asked all the women about why they joined and their process of learning new things in the sorority. If they had a leadership position, we asked them about what they were learning in those positions and how they were leading others (see appendix). Via connections on the chapter's alumni advisory board, I was also able to interview twelve sorority alumnae and seven campus staff members involved in fraternity/sorority life to get a fuller picture of the campus fraternity/sorority life. I attended fifty-two total events, including weekly chapter meetings, leadership team meetings, and fundraising events. I collected written artifacts including newsletters, minutes, officer position applications, PowerPoints, forms, and handbooks.

I did not expect that the sorority would be a radical feminist space. I kept an open mind, however, because of Royster and Kirsch's call, because of the historical roots of the sorority in creating a space for women in the university, and because the Beta Zetas were (at the time) what DeSantis calls "strugglers" in his categorization of sororities and fraternities. DeSantis categorizes fraternity and sorority organizations into three "castes": "the elites, the aspirers, and the strugglers" (38). While the elites "dominate" fraternity/sorority life in terms of popularity, and the aspirers aim to be like them, the "strugglers" are the smallest and least attractive organizations. According to DeSantis, women in struggling and aspiring sororities tend to have "healthier relationship with food, expressed greater acceptance of deviation from gender norms, and adopted a more forceful and assertive interpersonal communication style" (39). Thus, I suspected that I might see some different attitudes about gender roles in Beta Zeta than what had been previously investigated in the literature.

In the initial round of open coding my data—particularly my interviews with the new members and my field notes from sorority events—I observed the constant pull of the sorority's institutionalization and history. The international oversight board of Beta Zeta provides new chapters with two trained full-time staff members who live near campus for a year to get the chapter going. These staff members also assist in upholding the practices, standards, guidelines, traditions, rituals, symbols, and philanthropic interests of the sorority "brand." The sorority is even further fastened to historical practices via alumnae members who serve as advisers. In addition to their historical rooting, sororities are also influenced by cultural stereotypes of sororities present in television and movies.[2] The new chapter of Beta Zeta also faced pressure to compete with the six existing sororities on campus. Members of Beta Zeta would often compare themselves to these existing sororities; for example, they would feel pressure to put on a fundraising event after another sorority had just held a successful fundraising event. At the same time they were feeling these pressures to be like other sororities, they also identified themselves as the "new" sorority on campus, which gave them license to think about how the sorority might be unique.

In the process of "axial coding" (Birks and Mills 12), looking for relationships between my codes, I noted that these tensions between the old and the new often co-occurred with crafting activities. Sometimes, the tension played out in concrete, hands-on crafting projects. For example, when making T-shirts for new sorority members, the existing membership had to decide if they were

2 Examples relevant to the women I interviewed include the films *Legally Blonde* and *The House Bunny* as well as the television show *Scream Queens.*

going to make T-shirts with small letters that looked like those of other sororities or if they wanted the shirts with big letters to set them apart. Sometimes, these tensions between the old and the new were reflected in the women's rhetoric about the sorority, which I noted also reflected the spirit of crafting. The women continually interrogated their own roles in the creation of the sorority, considering what they had to offer the sorority, and thinking about how they might serve as role models for new members entering the sorority. One of the founding members, Jill, told me that when she recruits new members to the sorority, she uses her own story as a way to respond to the discomfort some recruits may have about taking on a sorority identity:

> [They say] "Oh, I never thought I would join a sorority, didn't think it was my thing." I always respond with Beta Zeta is filled with a lot of people who never thought they would be in a sorority so it's like all these people who didn't think they belonged in one are forming one, so that's made it really cool and really easy. Yeah, there are parts of it that are very *sorority* like the recruitment and the clapping and screaming but there are a lot of parts of it that are really cool with the philanthropy and the [major philanthropic event]. Those are really awesome things.

Jill dichotomizes "sorority" things and "really awesome things"—a mixture of the old and new coming together. Jill's position toward sorority participation reflects a crafting orientation: the sorority is a mix of people coming together to knit together existing sorority practices and new practices to make it their own. While Beta Zeta fulfills some of the standard cultural norms of a sorority—the "clapping and screaming" during recruitment events—Jill sees it as a place for change, creativity, and agency as well.

Since the time of Plato, crafting has been stigmatized as less prestigious than art, a mechanical skill requiring little to no intellect, and consigned to the role of "women's work." Recent scholarship on crafting, however, has sought to challenge some of these negative associations by demonstrating that crafting requires considerable intellectual and artistic skills, provides a mechanism for community formation and group affinity, and offers crafters a means to explore new discursive territory. Robert R. Johnson suggests a renewed attention to and value of craft because "In the ancient mind and culture . . . techne was seen as the source of creative tendencies, the formation of new ideas, the place of invention" (677). Because the maker knows the logic behind the process of creation, he or she can teach others this process and in so doing, can "create culture" (679). Johnson therefore re-defines crafting beyond just the making of products to also include "the making of selves and the making of cultures" (684). Like Johnson, Kristin Prins also sees the profound creation

of culture in the material practice of crafting because "craft also implies . . . relationships between a maker's identity, her interactions with others, and the things she makes" (145). Cultures form through and with crafting projects: crafters collaborate on craft projects, share crafting supplies, and offer help and advice to each other while crafting. For the purposes of this essay, I define "crafting" as the process of using existing materials to create something aesthetically pleasing, personally and communally meaningful, and practically useful. I use this admittedly broad definition so I can recognize crafting that is literal and material (as I observed at sorority events) as well as crafting that is discursive and ideological (as I heard in my interviews with the sorority women).

In addition to creating culture, crafting can be a discursive practice that challenges dominant cultures. In studying historical practices of needlework specifically, Heather Pritash, Inez Schaechterle, and Sue Carter Wood find that needlework is "a vehicle through which women have constructed discourses of their own, ones offering a broader range of positions from which to engage dominant culture" (27). Much more than a mechanical skill, crafting can be understood as discursive, rhetorical, and even resistant. In this light, the purpose of studying crafting is not to create standards of excellence, but to appreciate the diversity of meanings enabled in craftwork. In studying the quilting of rural women in Alabama, Vanessa Kraemer Sohan sees the importance of keeping an open mind about the meaning that the crafters intend:

> we should listen to the semiodiversity of texts, rather than codifying or judging the formal elements of texts with enumerative categories based on a static understanding of particular traditions or standards. We should look at instances that "don't look right" as challenges for writers and readers to take agency over their work, negotiate meanings, explore the particular contexts they want to highlight, and understand the multiple options for making it "look right." The Gee's Bend quilts represent just one example of how women have (re)written the particular contexts of their lives through strategic, creative deployment of repetition and difference. (312)

I am interested in exploring the "semiodiversity" of material, discursive, and linguistic crafting practices in the sorority for how they explain the way that the women are re-writing the experiences of being a contemporary sorority woman. In the next section, I detail how and where crafting rhetoric emerged and how it enabled the women to think creatively and critically about some of the seemingly inelastic aspects of sorority culture. Each section names an ideology of craft and discusses one of the sorority's specific crafting projects along with segments of interviews with the women about the formation of the

sorority. Although I describe the process of the crafting projects, my analysis here will focus more on the crafters and their language rather than the crafted objects. Maureen Daly Goggin notes that in studying crafting, feminist scholars should "focus on material strategies related to needlework and textiles rather than solely on the material objects themselves, thus showing how women produce and reproduce cultural objects as well as communicate and transform cultural values" (3). Thus, a large focus of this article will be on the women's ideas about crafting rather than a direct analysis of the crafted objects.

Crafting Creates a Vision for the Community

Beginning a new sorority requires a kind of artistic vision for what the sorority might look like and how it might be perceived on campus; crafting helped to concretize this vision. Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush write that the recent resurgence in crafting "complicates conventional notions of activism," because the uptake and popularization of craft "spatially and analogically links experiments in making futures differently" (234). For Beta Zeta, abstract ideas about what parts of sorority life should be "re-purposed" into a new sorority and what should be scrapped often played out in materially in crafting projects that helped the women imagined different kinds of futures for themselves and discursively, in the language they used to discuss their sorority involvement.

For example, the international chapter of Beta Zeta sent two advisers to our campus to recruit the initial group of women who would become the founding members of the chapter. When I interviewed one of these advisers, Melanie, she told me that because sorority life is deeply tied to its history, new members must be given a sense of possibility. The advisers gave potential new members a chance to reflect on the group's practices and explore possibilities for their own involvement through a calendar crafting activity during recruitment. The advisers set out giant paper calendars, markers, and stickers. The potential new members were put in small groups and asked, "If you could create an ideal month as a chapter member, what would you do?" The stickers matched up to events that regularly occurred on campus, like an annual carnival. Each small group created their own calendar and then presented it to the rest of the group. Melanie said that the crafting activity enabled members to imagine what the chapter would look like on their specific campus:

> The main idea is to get them to understand that they will have the ability to do this as a new chapter on campus, that they're not jumping into an existing chapter saying "Okay, your philanthropy activity that we always do is a taco feed, so that's what we're doing." But

> instead they get to kind of create. Like "Okay, we want to do like a 5K run." And so I think it's really allowing them to think outside of what's already on their campus and realize that that's what a new chapter has to offer.

This activity creates an imaginative infrastructure (stickers, paper, markers as well as the existing campus events) but also allows potential new members to craft possibilities of what their lives might be like as Beta Zetas. The calendar activity has a literal element of play, as it involves art-making, but also allows members to feel as though they are concretely setting the agenda of what the group will do. The women learn that they belong to a historical and institutional trajectory but have personal license to shape the future of that trajectory. Because the calendar activity happened before the women were invited to join Beta Zeta, the craft made an implicit promise that, should the women choose to join, the sorority was going to be a place whose agenda they could shape.

This material act of crafting worked in reciprocity with a discourse of crafting that shaped the sorority's formation. Mary, for example, uses language that reflects the material practices of crafting to describe how she was energized by the possibilities of involvement in a "new" sorority:

> The other sororities, it felt like they all had like very set personalities and I was like, well I could mold myself to that but I didn't necessarily feel like I wanted to be that way. And Beta Zeta was more of a blank canvas so it was more something I could create for myself and with a bunch of people who also wanted to create something.

More than just being excited about the content of learning (as a student might typically be excited about taking a course she interested in), Mary is excited about both what she could learn and how she could shape a new and different kind of organization. Beta Zeta offers her the chance to shape, individually and collectively, an alternate model of a social group often characterized by inertia and exclusivity. Mary seeks meaning in a space that activates her imagination for a different kind of social formation that can arise from the unique configuration of the women themselves. Mary's quote also shows the hints of artistic discourses: she doesn't want to fit into the "mold" of another sorority, preferring a "blank canvas" that allows for the act of creation with others.

The discourse of another woman, Helen, also reflects excitement about how she viewed this challenge of developing an image for Beta Zeta:

> The opportunity you get from joining Beta Zeta, you get to create the image that you want and we don't have any. If you join the other

> ones you automatically have that stereotype placed on you, that they already have, whereas we're creating ourselves now, we're going through the process so we don't really have a stereotype yet and we can form what we want. . . . But I think what really drew me in were the opportunities to have leadership but also to like be a part of something new and actually get to create it and like make it what you want it to be, rather than being immersed into something that's already there. I guess that was the biggest difference for me.

Helen says that sorority reputations get "placed on you," like a heavy weight, and so members become "immersed" in these sororities, feeling as though they might drown. Her contrasting experience with Beta Zeta is a feeling of freedom, and her emotional stake in crafting stems from the freedom she feels from these stereotypes. Helen sees existing sororities as external to her, whereas she draws energy from the exciting challenge of crafting a sorority into what she wants it to be, using crafting discourses like "form" and "create."

Mary's notion of a "blank canvas" and Helen's idea of "something new" do not entirely fit my earlier definition of crafting as manufacturing something new *from existing materials* because Mary and Helen do not express any particular enthusiasm for the existing practices of the sorority. I would argue that their vision of the sorority still represents crafting, however, because for them, the women who joined the sorority were the existing materials: Mary views the sorority as "something I could create for myself and with a bunch of people who also wanted to create something" and Helen says that she and her sorority sisters are "creating ourselves now" using the collective noun to stress the collaborative process of the co-crafters. In this sense, the sorority is not just formed from existing sorority practices but also from the personalities of the women who are engaged in making it their own.

While it would be a stretch to say that the ideologies of crafting allow for radical or disruptive gender roles, the creation and implementation of a vision for an artistic project—a practice of crafting—frees the women from some of the stigmas and expectations attached to sororities. This crafting practice also challenges them to collectively generate and implement an alternative vision for what a sorority might be like and who sorority members might be. Through the material and discursive practice of crafting, the women are able to imagine other modes of existence for themselves and the sorority.

Crafting Produces and Solidifies the New Community

Beta Zeta was made up of women who consciously chose not to join any other sorority. Although they did not fit the mold of any other sorority, this did not mean they were all the same. Crafting then became an important tool for the new group of Beta Zetas to create a sense of unity and mark themselves as a community. As Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood note, "The product of craft can also visually combine a multiplicity of voices to create a statement of solidarity and friendship" (19). As family quilts knit together past generations, crafting projects create continuity between the crafters.

As a case in point, many crafting projects occurred when new members joined the sorority. Bratich and Brush write that one of the longstanding functions of craft has been to "produce a community through production and distribution of the object (within the family, as gift, as public sign)" (234). Each new member was assigned a "big sister," a junior or senior who was responsible for mentoring the new member. Over the course of a week, called "Big/Little Week," the big sister would craft decorations for the new member's dorm room door and send her gift baskets with handmade items like T-shirts, coffee mugs, pillowcases, tote bags, and notebooks with the sorority letters emblazoned on them. While items with the sorority's letters were readily available for purchase, the women took great pride in crafting these items themselves. Because crafting materials could be expensive, the women would often meet together in residence halls and in their apartments to share their crafting supplies. One member, Yolanda, said that "community" was what was most important to her about Greek life, which she closely associated with the work of crafting:

> Interviewer: So, generally, what is it that you like about being in this sorority?
>
> Yolanda: It's just fun to have a community where I can go and be goofy and "Oh, let's get together and craft" and have, I don't know, have like something to do, have like ideas for crafting or whatever, to have a reason to be doing those things.

For Yolanda, crafting animates the community, giving the women a reason to get together, share ideas, and generally "be goofy." Yolanda says that the sorority gives her "a reason to be doing those things," in the sense that her sorority participation validates or authorizes her crafting work. Yolanda's example demonstrates how crafting becomes a bond between the women, giving them something to talk about and do together. Crafting for the Beta Zetas

brings the "big sisters" and "little sisters" together in the act of creating something and giving it to someone else, at the same time that it brings together the sisters that share craft supplies. These items, crafted with the sorority's letters, also mark the new member as a member of the sorority community to the campus. These crafting projects are particularly important because the founding members of Beta Zeta were a more diverse group than that which might typically join an existing sorority.

In describing her reasons for joining the sorority, Kristine notes the necessity of finding not just a community, but specifically a community of crafters who are willing to form the sorority alongside her. Like several other members I interviewed, Kristine told me that she chose to join Beta Zeta because she "just clicked with" the group. For Kristine, this meant finding someone with the right emotional energy to craft alongside her:

> Interviewer: Why did you think that Beta Zeta might be a good fit for you?
>
> Kristine: Because it was new and everyone that was getting it started or involved in it had to take kind of like that risk and like take a shot in the dark, and in order for someone to like do that, I feel like they have to have some interest, or some passion, to like that put that money forth and not really know where this organization is going to go . . . I definitely think that with taking that risk, like people saw that, and for me that appealed to me, like I could make it my own, like, you know, like if I was super passionate about something there's a really good chance that my idea's going to be put forth and at least it's going to be tried.

In the typical sorority recruitment process, new members find an existing community into which they could fit. But when the option is presented for a new sorority, new members like Kristine seek co-crafters with whom they can stitch together a new community. Kristine seeks crafting companions who can mirror and build on her own "passion" and "enthusiasm" for crafting the new sorority. She keeps making contact with sorority members until she finds what she's looking for: brave and passionate co-crafters willing to take "a shot in the dark," which Kristine believes will enable her to "make it my own."

Crafting offers the possibility of creating a new community from the unique configuration of crafters who choose to join. As Bratich and Brush write, "Crafting, as media and as resurgent technology, stitches across common distinctions between old/new, material/immaterial, economic/semiotic, bio/info, and digital/tactile and opens to a new fabric of relations" (246). This "new fabric of relations" was particularly important to Frieda, the director of recruitment, who told me that she objected when the Beta Zetas' alumni

advisors encouraged the women to have members from other chapters participate in recruitment. Frieda told me that even though these women would ease the recruitment process, she was concerned that they would not represent the unique texture of her chapter:

> I'm very scared of becoming the fake sorority. I don't want that. [The alumnae advisers have discussed having Beta Zetas from other schools] in the room for formal recruitment, walking around, but like no, because they're not us. They're Beta Zetas but they're not [this university's] Beta Zetas. And we're very different [from them]. They're nice girls [and] I enjoyed getting to know them, but I want to come off as real, who we are . . . I really want us to feel, I want us to have that close bond so I think that's the other thing with not being fake. Having that genuine closeness—that we want to be together. If we're not the best sorority, so what? At least we get along and we're there to make friends. I don't want it to be "rent-a-friend"! I paid my dues so you have to be my friend now! I want [it to be] my way of meeting people, having something in common, let's build up friendships.

We can see the crafting process happening in Frieda's quote above: to create the new sorority, Frieda considers the available configurations of women in the context of the emotional experience she wants to offer in the recruitment experience. Paralleling crafting to the process of composition, Prins writes, "By engaging in social and digital production of texts . . . writers are transformed by the experience of looking closely at available designs, considering them in the contexts in which they are writing, engaging with fellow writers and potential readers, and finding themselves reflected in what they make" (153). Like any crafter, Frieda wants herself (and her sorority sisters) "reflected" in the finished product, so naturally, she is concerned that adding in outside sorority members will come across as "fake." From her experience with the Beta Zetas from other chapters, Frieda realizes that if outside sorority members are present during the recruitment process, the bond between the women will be "fake," as the women won't actually know each other very well. Because she is going for a "genuine closeness," Frieda chooses crafting. Frieda perceives her Beta Zeta chapter in the process of formation—it is her way of "meeting people" and "build[ing] up friendships," imagining that her chapter is in a simultaneous invention and revision process.

The women I interviewed were resistant to passively accepting existing sorority cultures, and joined Beta Zeta with the mentality that they could craft together a new sorority identity. Crafting offers the women a mechanism for thinking about forming a sorority community that does not look like existing sorority communities. I cannot argue that their new sorority is characterized

by a radical departure from gender roles or that they seek to create some kind of radical feminist space; however, I believe their imagination, optimism, and excitement about their ability to craft a new sorority culture can be characterized as a feminist orientation to an existing institution. As anthropologist of youth culture Anita Harris writes, so much of feminism has been appropriated by mainstream culture that young women have developed "complex relationships with popular culture that require them to negotiate, infiltrate, play with, and undermine feminine cultural forms rather than simply reject them" (7). In this case, the women choose to play with the cultural form of a sorority rather than reject it entirely with the belief that they can create a sorority community out of the constellation of their individual personalities.

Crafting Offers a Feminist Pedagogy for Teaching Group Values

Sororities have a reputation for indoctrinating new members, telling members what to think, and valuing conformity. Feminist pedagogy, however, defines itself in resistance to "hegemonic educational practices that tacitly accept or more forcefully reproduce an oppressively gendered, classed, radicalized, and androcentric social order" (Crabtree, Sapp, and Licona 1). For Beta Zeta, crafting offered a means of teaching new members about the group in a way that resisted "hegemonic educational practices," allowing new members to take up the group in a way that made sense for them. Because crafting "serves the culturally important purpose of inculcating commonly held values, helping intensify adherence to those values" (Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood 15), teaching the group's values through crafting projects—rather than through speeches or lectures—amounted to a kind of feminist pedagogy.

For example, each sorority has a designated philanthropic organization (or a "philanthropy"). Members volunteer for this organization and often hold fundraisers to support it. On one day of the five-day recruitment process, designated "Philanthropy Day," potential new members watch a short video about the sorority's chosen philanthropic organization, which for Beta Zeta, was a foundation that supported research on heart disease. The video contains testimonials of sorority members from around the country about how they have been personally affected by heart disease. To complement the video, the new members engage in dialogue with existing members about heart disease. Following the video, the women do a simple crafting project alongside current members. The goal of this crafting project is to teach the new members about the philanthropy in a way that they can take up and make their own. For example, one sorority decorated barrettes for grade-school girls they worked with in a mentoring organization; another sorority attached flowers to

pens to give as gifts to children in a local hospital. For Beta Zeta, the crafting project involved decorating paper hearts that would be hung around campus for heart disease awareness week. One new member, Veronica, said that the craft worked alongside the testimonial video and dialogue with the member she met on that day to teach her about the philanthropy:

> I liked it just because handwriting is personal and everyone did it and everyone had their own style. I really liked that part. I knew someone who had heart disease so it really spoke to me and I got to talk to the person with me for a while about it.

The artistic component of the craft allows new members to inflect what Veronica calls "their own style" into the group's existing values. Rather than passing down the group's beliefs as a set in stone, the dialogic and artistic components of learning about these beliefs make them feel open to new members' personal meanings and interpretations. As Robin Crabtree, David Alan Sapp, and Adela C. Licona write, "feminist pedagogy acknowledges personal, communal, and subjective ways of knowing as valid forms of inquiry and knowledge production" (4). The video of testimonials combined with conversation and crafting with current members teach new members about the sorority using "personal, communal, and subjective" ways of learning and knowing.

Certainly, decorating paper hearts to hang up around campus may seem like a trivial activity to combat heart disease; however, I would argue that the central function of the crafting activity is more to make the sorority feel like a place where creativity and imagination are welcome, and where the new members have something unique to offer. These characteristics of a feminist classroom are enabled by the crafting activity. In confronting the problem of students' pre-conceived ideas classrooms, Ira Shor writes, "To help move student students away from passivity and cynicism, a powerful signal has to be sent from the very start, a signal that learning is participatory, involving hope, humor, and curiosity" (26). The crafting activity, while teaching about the group's values, gives new members a sense of the sorority as participatory, energizing them for the future construction of the group.

In addition to raising money for research on heart disease, the national chapter sets forth values like scholarship, service, and character development. In the discourse surrounding the sorority, the women recognize that while the national organization of the sorority upholds certain values, they can shape the sorority in such a way that reflects their own interpretation of those values. Renee, one of the founding members who participated in the crafting activity mentioned above, connected to the values of the national chapter of the sorority:

> I was hesitant at first [to join] because it was a whole new sorority and I didn't know anybody else who was going through it and I'm jumping in blindly to be with these people who are going to be my sisters, which to me is a big bond. When I saw the official values and goals and that sort of thing, I really connected with them and said, well, that's something that I feel passionately about and I feel like I would really like to help form a sorority that really stands for that.

I suspect that Renee would likely be hesitant to "jump in blindly" to either a sorority with no scaffolding or to a sorority that is already constructed. Instead, Renee appreciates the values as a kind of backbone for the formation of the group. While Renee feels as though she is starting something "new," she works with an awareness that what she is building comes from existing materials. Renee's quote here represents a central value of feminist pedagogy: "the acknowledgement of personal experience as a primary means of constructing knowledge" (Ropers-Huilman and Palmer 17). Renee matches up her own experience to the existing group values ("I really connected with them") and in turn, gets excited about the possibilities for engagement in Beta Zeta. In generating this excitement, Beta Zeta created an emotional energy that contradicted the women's previous experiences with sororities. As bell hooks writes, in traditional classrooms, excitement is viewed "as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process" (7). In a feminist classroom, however, this excitement, or eros, can "co-exist with and even stimulate serious intellectual and/or academic engagement" (hooks 7). For the women of Beta Zeta, this excitement was a catalyst to help them imagine the ways sorority life could be different.

While the women's desire and agency for changing an intractable social structure is a hallmark of feminist pedagogy, feminist work typically takes a more radical approach. Crabtree, Sapp, and Licona note that the explicit goals of feminist pedagogy are "consciousness raising, social action, and social transformation" as well as "empowering individuals within a larger context of social change" (4). Although the pedagogy of the sorority does not radically alter social structures, the dialogic, narrative, affective, and crafting elements of learning about the sorority do question dominant educational models as well as the ways that one might assume knowledge would be passed along in a sorority. Crabtree, Sapp, and Licona write, "feminist teaching is a reexamination of what happens in any classroom, indeed of the relationships between teachers, students, education and society" (4). Beta Zeta's modes of learning give new members the sense that they bring valuable attributes to the formation of the group.

Conclusion: Finding Feminism in Unlikely Places

Because sororities are and have long been and continue to be an important site of identity formation for many college women, I believe it is time to re-consider the kinds of experiences college women have as a part of sororities. Writing in 2002, Carol Mattingly notes that the initial efforts at the recovery of women's rhetoric favored "those historical figures who most resemble academic feminists—those who seemed to share our investment in confrontational and assertive approaches—at the expense of others worthy of our attention" (100-01). I have shown here how the rhetoric of crafting—albeit not a "confrontational" or especially "assertive" rhetoric—allows the women of Beta Zeta to approach an existing and seemingly monolithic extracurricular organization with the idea that it can be changed. Sorority life offered one group of ambitious and creative women the challenge of developing a historical rooted organization on campus with vision and creativity.

Royster and Kirsch stress the importance of listening deeply to women's rhetoric to disrupt assumptions or snap judgments about its value. To challenge expectations of rhetorical excellence, which are predominantly created by "Western patriarchal values" anyway (30), Royster and Kirsch challenge feminist rhetorical scholars to create "schemata for engaging critical attention" (21) that allow scholars to "make qualities of excellence . . . more visible" (43). As an ethnographer, my first step was to *give up* some of my existing schemata for rhetorical excellence. In observing crafting activities, I had to give up some of my negative associations with crafting as frivolous or silly activity to see how it was a mechanism of community formation (and as a person with limited artistic skills, I had to give up my own distaste for crafting). I also had to reconsider many of my ideas about feminist rhetoric—I wanted the Beta Zetas to be more radical and more edgy—so I could clearly see the kind of feminism that made sense for them.

In addition to letting go of preconceived notions about excellence in feminist rhetoric, this research has shown two schemata that might prove especially useful in identifying potential feminist rhetoric in youth cultures. As Stephanie Springgay writes, it's important not to be too rigid in our definitions of what constitutes social change for contemporary youth cultures because "youth have new ways of taking on politics and culture that may not be recognizable under more traditional frameworks" (112). First, sites of youth-driven, face-to-face communities—a increasing rarity in our individualistic and online culture—present potential sites of feminist rhetoric because they require people have to talk about the importance of community and use rhetoric in ways that form human connections. For the Beta Zetas, crafting served these

rhetorical functions by knitting together the disparate personalities of the community around common projects that shared their values. Second, sites where the old bumps up against the new present interesting opportunities for feminist rhetoric because community members are constantly challenged to articulate their vision for the community; this vision may not be presented in a speech but instead may manifest in the social practices of the community. In a sorority, the past is constantly bumping up against present: older members recruit new members, contemporary members carry on historic traditions, alumnae and current undergraduates collaborate. For the Beta Zetas, crafting was one mechanism to articulate how the past and the present would work together to form the future of the sorority.

Appendix

Interview Questions:

Tell me your year and your major.
What do you want to do with that major?
Tell me about how you first got involved with Beta Zeta.
Why did you decide to join Beta Zeta?
How do you like being in a sorority so far?
Do you have a position in the sorority? Why did you choose that position?
How do you feel about your position so far?
How did you feel about the starting of the chapter last year?
How do you feel about the upcoming formal recruitment process?
What do you see for your future in Beta Zeta?
What are some things you'd like to see Beta Zeta do in the future?

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