CURATING FEMINIST PERFORMANCE IN LOS ANGELES:
ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES

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Curating Feminist Performance in Los Angeles: Alternative Practices

Chapter One: Introduction

Feminism as a Capacious Practice in Performance

A celebration of queer, Black, female bodies becoming, unraveling, learning to love what is broken, witnessed through the poetic words of Kiyah Gentle and Jam. A cunning Afrofuturist book report on time travel to 2018, delivered in monotone by Ellington Wells’ angsty black teenage character, dressed for the time period in a nude body suit because “they had not yet merged with the aliens.” A survey of medical health reports on Black women’s internalization of systemic racism as low-grade inflammation and toxicity throughout the body, spoken somberly and with immense care by Melanie Magenta. A wrenching narrative of an unhappy childhood and the passage to Black womanhood, articulated through tears by Jasmine Nyende. Audiences leaning forward, squeezing tighter together, applauding, laughing, crying, and reciprocating, allowing these performances to envelop and permeate the collective bodies witnessing the Los Angeles feminist performance gathering, SORORITY: SPACE.

I believe feminism has the capacity to dismantle structures that are built to accommodate only select bodies. It is a means of developing the resistance and reclamation necessary to move within the complex structures that impose white heteronormativity and uphold hegemonic systems. Though generally understood as a panoptic theory, feminism is in fact something much more nuanced and heterogeneous, traversing intermingling scaffolds of meaning. This conception of feminism is best understood by drawing upon the theory of intersectionality. As Lucca Fraser, co-author of the Xenofeminist Manifesto, defines it:
“Intersectionality” is a tremendously important notion—it’s the insight that every demographic abstraction is leaky as hell, and that no identity category captures us without remainder, and that power never operates uniformly, but adapts itself to every facet of our complexly textured lives. (Hogeveen 22)

As the most critical strand of feminist theory, intersectionality centers bodies on the margins through the valuing of complexities, and is a crucial operating concept in my exploration and formulation of ways to practice feminism in performance. The recent focus on feminism in art and performance in Los Angeles has amplified the necessity of grappling with the complex relationship between intersectionality and feminism. That renewed focus demands that I deeply examine and engage with feminism in my curatorial practice. This concentration is crucial to the argument that intersectionality remains an effective tool within distinct epistemologies. Feminist practices in performance must make space for better questions and a commitment to provocation—and are vital to the curator’s process as co-conspirator, kin, and student of the artist and their work. My curatorial practice requires that I engage with intersectional feminism as a strategy to build capaciousness around the multiple identities and embodiments of artists. The application of “queer” to these premises, or the “queering” of space and feminist performance, speaks to the idea of a multiple self, a self with multiple truths, navigating away from binaries or singular identity. “Queer” unfastens from the monolithic and engages a weaving of possibilities, openings, divergences, and excesses of meaning within gender, feminism, and identity (Sedgwick 7). Its application in contemporary performance and in my research is to suggest that not everything has a single reality. Rather, I propose a range of possibilities, pursuing multiplicity within feminist contemporary performance. Additionally, I employ “queer” as a concept that asks
participants (artists or viewers) to feel empathy and be exposed to disorientation. Through queer phenomenology, disorientation is a means of experiencing the artist’s processes in new ways, expanding the framework of how performance is envisaged.

In this thesis, I will explore practices of intersectional feminism through the lens of contemporary performance and, conversely, performance through intersectional feminism. Between 2016 and 2018, Angelenos saw an abundance of feminist performance and programming: the opening of the Main Museum with programs organized by seminal feminists Suzanne Lacy and Andrea Bowers; Hammer Museum’s season-long initiative, “Bureau of Feminism”; the exhibition of “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965-‘85” at the California African American Museum; and the founding of SORORITY, a feminist new works salon—to name a few. I will consider two contemporary artists in Los Angeles who, through their artistic practices, engage with or center feminism as an anchoring approach to dismantling hegemonic systems of oppression. Using the lenses of phenomenologies and gender and queer theory, and by tracing alternative modalities, this thesis examines the work of Los Angeles-based artists taisha paggett and Gina Young. Their work provides both a process by which to consider feminism in performance and a set of practices to engender a perceptive and capacious culture of feminism. By distilling their methods and practices, I propose a framework—which I have labeled sentient ethos—for a curatorial practice that examines, cultivates, and supports the emergence of pluralistic feminisms.

From my subject position as a white, cis, straight woman, I define sentient ethos as a conscious, idiosyncratic, resilient, and responsive philosophy for feminist performance. This framework is dynamic and introduces the interweaving of four methods: (1) emphasis on the
artist’s lived experience and situatedness, (2) immersion with communal spaces (both physical and personal), (3) engagement with and articulation of specific lineages, and (4) a sinuosity within performance practices. Engaging paggett and Young’s implicit and explicit feminisms helps in the identification and development of these methods.

I will consider a variety of methods in paggett and Young’s processes to consider a culture of mindful feminism-aligned performance practices. I posit that in response to the propagation of conservative American politics and renewed culture wars, feminism in theater, dance, and time-based art has flourished in ways that specifically center contemporary women of color and queer women-identified artists working within communal and accessible performance platforms. These forms of contemporary performance practices are deeply related to artists’ processes of generating disruptions and reflections within the winding realms of performance and feminism. By analyzing paggett and Young’s work, I offer this new ethos with which to embrace and multiply feminist contemporary performance—one that reflects the fundamental necessity of addressing the complex values ascribed to binary social, gender, and racial constructs, and that centers realities discounted by white heteronormativity.

This thesis is an ongoing examination and extension of the knowledge seeking and method-building that underwrite my conviction that contemporary performance has both the responsibility and the capability to aid in dismantling systemic oppression. The methods identified in a sentient ethos support and deepen my unfolding and expanding practice of contemporary performance curation in Los Angeles. Additionally, the “Alternative Practices” defined and analyzed in this thesis do not represent the entirety of feminist performance contemporaneously or historically, but rather exemplify what I consider to be constructive
and valuable components in assembling a vision of a conscious feminist culture that effectively contemplates hegemonic systems. I begin this study in Chapter 2, “Defining Orientations and Feminisms,” by exploring the present implications of feminism and the notion of community, thereby connecting performance with phenomenologies and queer and gender theory, and offering the foundational components of a sentient ethos. The case studies of paggett’s multidisciplinary practice and Young’s development of SORORITY elucidate the application of these methods. Chapter 3, “Gina Young and SORORITY,” focuses on Young’s development of new conduits of exchange within feminist performance, identifies her disorientation of accepted understandings of “normal,” and recognizes the creation of space, both physical and emotional, as a site of restoration. Chapter 4, “Being-with taisha paggett,” follows the sinuosity of paggett’s multidisciplinary performance practices through an analysis of her commitment to the blackening of white spaces, offering of Black dance as resistance to the oppression and silencing of marginalized bodies, and multiple formations of building, healing, and sustaining through queer phenomenology. In relation to contemporary performance and a sentient ethos, it is pertinent to emphasize paggett’s recent thinking around contemporary social framing and political structures:

I don’t think we can today genuinely have a conversation about unmasking the racial and sexual and economic injustice specifically as it relates to people of color, and women, and poor folks, and folks without homes, and confront this administration of cruelty without simultaneously having a conversation about how we build and heal and sustain ourselves… I think dance brings those questions into the conversation. (qtd. in V. Phillips)
Returning to gender theory and the queering of phenomenology, Chapter 5 examines paggett and Young’s employment of feminism in their creative practices and recognizes the methods available to establish a capacious practice of feminism in performance that builds, heals, and sustains. According to Meiling Cheng, musing on multiple Los Angeleleses in this practice, “the ambiguity of an ‘invisible center’ exerts undeniable power over the ways we live, eat, think, work, exercise, play, and relate to others, but cannot be fully described” (3). I engage this notion of multiplicity, the centering of peripheries, and the re-visualization of frames in contemporary performance. This practice aims to upend the “invisible center” of “normal” (white, heteronormative patriarchy) by recognizing bodies on the margins as multidimensional. I conclude the thesis by contemplating how a sentient ethos inflects the taxonomy of contemporary performance, considering how its methods will gesture in multiple shapes, move beyond frameworks, and expand, capaciously, into the future.

I have built a deep relationship with both paggett and Young’s work and remain embedded in their cogitations. Not hearing words, but rather static scratching—a kind of salt and pepper on the television, the slapping of limbs against flesh, deep breath work of bodies in movement, bodies exerting together, collectively—I am listening to a recording of the final performance of School for the Movement of the Technicolor People, one of paggett’s recent expansive projects. As I listen, I am disoriented and temporally displaced, and reminded of one of her written reflections to her colleagues and collaborators—a piece that captivates me, one I often return to as a site of inspiration and orientation. She composes verses about the ways that continual, habitual speech and speaking stand in for the “holistic, comprehensive, multidimensionality of real-time experience” (“WXPT: Letter from taisha paggett”). As I read her words, I am transported into this Black dance, which moves me to
my own “overdue unlearning-learning” and closer to understanding “a deeply necessary resumption of holistic, comprehensive, multidimensional real-time power, agency and capacity” (“WXPT: Letter”).
Chapter Two: Defining Orientations and Feminisms

*Popular Feminism and Intersectionality*

Like many constructs of self-identification, feminism’s definitions are wide-ranging and multiple. Feminism’s terms and political foci have shifted through the years and its categorical purpose has been culturally redefined numerous times, contributing to the movement’s loss of momentum (hooks 5). Arguably, the present accepted definition has been distilled to fundamental simplicity: to achieve equality between the sexes. I characterize this generally-accepted formulation as “popular feminism.” Merriam-Webster declared “feminism” its 2017 Word of the Year, an accolade granted to relevant terms that attract the “collective curiosity of the public” (“Feminism’ is Our 2017 Word”). From 2016 to 2017, searches for “feminism” increased 70% on the dictionary’s online platform. Pinning the spike in interest chronologically to the news cycle, the publishers partially credit conservative policy advisor Kellyanne Conway as a catalyst for the public’s interest in feminism. Conway stated that she does not consider herself a feminist “in the classic sense because it seems very anti-male and pro-abortion” (K. Phillips). Merriam-Webster currently defines feminism as “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes” and “organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (“‘Feminism’ is Our 2017 Word”). For the purpose of terminology, I consider Conway’s definition of “classic” feminism to be synonymous with contemporary “popular feminism,” as the most recognized tenets (and common definitions) are equality between the sexes—Conway’s “anti-male”—and a woman’s authority over her own body—Conway’s “pro-abortion.” It is constructive to contemplate the public’s accepted definitions of feminism in an analysis of artists’ centering of intersectional feminisms within contemporary performance practices. Popular feminism
omits a crucial component, which challenges its ability to be inclusive: that marginalized women are still seeking equality within feminism, within their own sex and gender-identity categories. Thus, the most prevalent definition fails to recognize the lack of parity among women themselves. This corresponds with bell hooks’ argument for a definition of feminism as a movement that is not anti-male, but rather is against prejudiced, sexist thinking expressed and enacted by both men and women (iii). How can women as a whole theorize about or act on gaining equality with men if Brown and Black women are not provided political, economic, and social opportunities equal to white women? The normative definition of emphasizing equality between the sexes—“popular feminism”—has been repeatedly presented by white women and continues to define the term in the general lexicon. This rudimentary characterization excludes an acknowledgment of normativity: while equality between the sexes has altruistic value, it subscribes to a gender binary and assumes that all women seek to fit within current white-dominated patriarchal structures. It explicitly excludes gender nonconforming and queer persons, as well as dismisses the complexities of Black and Brown women’s experiences.

Classic and popular feminism’s connotation of “anti-male” is myopic and does not recognize that sexist and patriarchal structures can still exist within an entirely female space (hooks 1). The idea of feminism as a movement against sexism, rather than a movement against the other sex, is more comprehensive. It is supported by intersectionality, which, when distilled, recognizes and advocates race, gender, class, and sexuality differences and asserts that these categories cannot be disentangled within personal identity and social hierarchies. Scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited with advancing the concept when she
applied intersectionality to identity politics specifically to cogitate how women of color experience oppression and violence differently than white women:

Where systems of race, gender, and class domination converge, as they do in the experiences of battered women of color, intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles. (1246)

Intersectionality acknowledges that distinct demographics intertwine in ways that either benefit or hinder individual lives, and more specifically, that no identity is encapsulated by one definition. Therefore, it ascribes straight, white men as the primary beneficiaries of the patriarchy. Intersectionality argues that the patriarchy is a system of power that is complicit in upholding white, hetero, bourgeois, normative values, and accordingly, contributes to feminism’s efforts to end sexist oppression (hooks 5).

Identifying a sentient ethos by valuing intersectional feminist culture and infusing its principles into performance is critical in contemplating the function of white heteronormative frames. Imbuing feminist performance practices with recognition of autonomy, such as attention to an artist’s lived experience and awareness of their social location, helps to make visible that which popular feminism obscures. The building of a sentient ethos contemplates how to organize around feminist issues both individually and collectively—a project rooted in intersectionality, acknowledging interconnected layers of race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality. The history of work done by activists and scholars around intersectional organizing directly influences my argument for refined feminist practices in performance. Historically, Black and Brown feminist activists, by virtue of their personal truths and experiences, had no
other choice than to find a method by which to bring these issues to the fore (Davis 18). In discussing the history of black feminism, seminal activist Angela Davis writes: “We are still faced with the challenge of understanding the complex ways race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and ability are intertwined—but also how we move beyond these categories to understand the interrelationships of ideas and processes that seem to be separate and unrelated” (3). Intersectionality’s attention to the body and individual experience, emphasis on the immeasurable value of distinct truths, and theorization that personal experiences intersect at the heart of feminist resistance, inform my proposed methods of practicing feminism in performance. I must therefore include distinct epistemologies in my discussion. Illustrating the implicit power of white supremacy and the ways that white women benefit from hegemonic structures, popular feminism is complicit in masking individual subjugations and histories. It is not progressive, nor radical, to fight for unity and women’s rights without explicitly acknowledging marginalized women who have faced much greater oppression than their white counterparts. Popular feminism hollowly claims inclusion and unity, but in truth, considering all women as equals allows white heteronormative women to omit the complexities of intersectionality (which shape their experiences, as well), and Black and Brown women as participants in the movement.

However, current organizing around so-called unified feminist objectives—such as a woman’s right to choose or pay equality—mobilizes the resistance. This pinpoints a primary conflict within the movement: how can feminism continue to organize in solidarity while honoring and centering the experiences of Black, Brown, trans, queer, and otherwise marginalized or nonconforming women? And would a re-centering of feminism also, by necessity, include a revision of essentialized and dualistic notions of womanhood—of the
intertwining of sex, gender, and race that has historically only allowed for limited ways of being a woman?

Community and Consciousness-Raising

Feminism, like most civic, identity-based practices built upon activism, runs the risk of being an emblematic label for an all-serving, positive, and homogenous “community.” This risk is paramount in Crenshaw’s argument that women’s experiences are shaped by multiple dimensions of intersecting identities, not just one, flattened to singularity (1242). In feminist circles, as Miranda Joseph argues, “community has connoted cherished ideals of cooperation, equality, and communion” (vii). This benevolent intent, however, makes possible the continued obscuring of power and the exploitative dynamics of neoliberal models of identity—a central issue plaguing feminism that intersectionality indicts and makes visible. As an identity-based social movement, feminism is susceptible to the internal conflicts that sometimes arise by invoking community. “While identity is often named as the bond among community members,” Joseph warns, “it is a false name in that communal participants are not identical and many of those to whom an identity is attributed do not participate in communal activities” (v). With respect to the altruism ostensibly inherent in the concept of community, it is pertinent to question “inclusion” as an approach to create cultural equity, both in arts practices and in feminist organizing, as it still relies on the idea of a central “includer” to open the gate to an “includee” (Laing). The continued centering of whiteness (the includer) contributes to the othering of Black and Brown bodies (the includees). This is evident in the use of inclusion as a tool in diversity and equity initiatives, wherein the dominant culture—Eurocentric aesthetics within large arts institutions, for example—aims to become more diverse through including the “other” (Black dance, for
example) *within* their white framework. The result, however, is not a redistribution of power or shifting of boundaries, but rather the reification of structural disparity and the implicit bias of the white frame. This model of inclusion as sustained by exclusion is useful in contemplating theorist Judith Butler’s suggestion that community’s potential lies in “tracing the ways in which identification is implicated in what it excludes” (*Bodies That Matter* 119). She argues that selfhood is based not only on a subject’s identity, but also on its rejection by communal groups within society. Arguably, acceptance into a community is central to social structures—a prospect that is directly connected to power that is either assumed to exist within or used against members in order to belong. Arguing that “[t]o invoke community is immediately to raise questions of belonging and power,” Miranda Joseph calls attention to the inverse: community’s ability to offer belonging, without power (xxiii). One of the most challenging objectives for feminism and other movements for social equity that employ the guidelines of community is resisting the use of repressive power dynamics that the movement seeks to conquer. If there is an intrinsic human need to belong, that need will be central to social movements in perpetuity. The only feasible way to generate belonging without employing power, then, is building a movement with enough capaciousness to provide belonging free from currency. A *sentient ethos* imagines such a movement, expelling eligibility rubrics, asking participants to honor personal truths, and shedding expectations of the “other.”

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler encourages alliances between non-normative and rejected minority groups to resist assimilation. Crucial to this formation is joining together, but with a commitment to *not* produce a new group identity. The construction of an identity, or structured “sameness,” within a community or “coalition” requires adhering to singular
defining principles or measures of identity at the expense of another. In other words, in order to form a community or group based on identity politics, the exclusion of another community or identity must take place. This elucidates a central question in feminist and gender theory: can such repudiation be rectified by valuing individuals, specifically non-normative and non-conforming individuals (by Eurocentric hegemonic standards)? This is an ongoing question in relation to the idea that “cultural viability has been secured through the exclusion of others” (Elliot 72). Transgender theorist Jack Halbertsam counters Butler and resists normative terms altogether, arguing that it is unrealistic to transform hegemonic normativity and that any justification of exclusion is damaging (Elliot 62). Applied to feminist and gender theory, the question of valuing the devalued becomes a tool for problematizing normative canons and theorizing vulnerability as an agent for change.

Furthermore, Butler presents the concept of the “coherent” self, the normative person who exists in opposition to the “incoherent” self, the non-normative person. How do these individuals connect to one another? Butler argues that it is the incoherent self who must expose their individuality and conform in order to make a connection: “It may be only by risking the incoherence of identity that connection [between non-normative subjects and their others] is possible” (Butler qtd. in Elliot 70). Butler’s objective is to encourage “a broader cultural struggle toward the rearticulation and empowerment of groups that seeks to overcome the dynamic of repudiation and exclusion by which ‘coherent subjects’ are constituted” (Bodies That Matter 117). Butler’s ideas of rearticulation, connected with popular feminism and feminist practices in performance, inform the configuration of a sentient ethos as an active practice which centers multiple identities and complexities. Recognizing and highlighting Butler’s notion of incoherent subjects within paggett and
Young’s practices is valuable in identifying a *sentient ethos* and its approaches to pluralism.

Relatedly, it can be argued that for many, seeking the definitive in life can provide comfort and a promise of autonomy, or the knowing of oneself. To be in consort with societal pressures, such as nuclear family development, is intensified by hegemonic structures and the imposition of Western culture’s ostensible forward trajectory and linear movement towards the future. For many, it is considered radical in an anarchical sense to disengage from seeking resolution to the future’s unknown. The antithesis of this effort to conform, then, is uncertainty. Unknowing. This path can be considered a stasis, and perhaps intrinsically threatens an individual’s ability to feel secure, creating disquiet within the self. Applying this concept of unknowing-as-disquiet to sex, gender, race, and feminist identity provides a tool for better understanding Butler’s coherent subject’s rejection of trespassers (incoherent subjects) upon normative margins. For example, uncertainty and complexities threaten established binary gender boundaries. Sociological theories about the conventional acceptance of gender acknowledge that normative gender ideologies do not recognize intricacies, revisions, or complexities, as gender is considered to be “natural” (Elliot 74). Although transsexual, transgender, and intersex individuals disprove such theories, the hegemonic structure of normative gender maintains their prevalence in the public imagination. Changing this canon and blurring the margins will only happen through conscious consideration of existing exclusions and a commitment to challenging the systems that form normativity (Elliot 71). With respect to a *sentient ethos*, multiplicity (or pluralism) is the effort to dismantle hegemonic patriarchal structures through the complete acceptance of the other. This ethos has no prerequisites for alliance other than a commitment to dismantling white heteronormativity.
The practice of consciousness-raising, a principal tool of the Western women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s, is helpful to contemplate how to foster pluralism within a sentient ethos. Employed as a method for bearing truths as well as organizing, consciousness-raising revealed the roots of women’s oppression through the sharing of individual experiences. Women who first engaged with the process defined it as “radical” (rather than its often-misused characterization as “extremist” or “fanatical”) because consciousness-raising sought to identify the foundational cause of women’s oppression. Consciousness-raising presents individual experience and the bearing of its truth as a feminist strategy to advance the liberation movement. The framework does not define specific methods for success, but rather offers radical principles of “going to the original sources, both historic and personal, going to the people—women themselves, and going to experience for theory and strategy” (Sarachild 147). It is power through a collective call to knowledge and personal truths. The integration of the collective and the individual is a formidable but fundamental element to processing feminist practices. The risk in collectivity is homogenization, and this is the inherent issue with practices that call for shared action. What consciousness-raising specifically did not do is call for action before thought. Gathering knowledge before action was the action. Putting a stop to male domination was always the purpose with consciousness-raising, but the action, this change, could not come before the thought. As feminist Kathie Sarachild explains, “It seemed clear that knowing how our own lives related to the general condition of women would make us better fighters on behalf of women as a whole” (145). A sentient ethos upholds the gathering of knowledge as an action unto itself and as a tenet central to its enactment. Specifically, as performing arts and
performance canons largely value the product—the eventuality of a set show time or presentation—it is radical to remain in the practice and development of the artwork.

Feminism is different to each feminist, the same way that the culture of consciousness-raising has allowed individual realities to build shared knowledge that, in turn, spawned a singular willingness for action. That generation of individual resistance communally pushed back against the hegemonic patriarchy. Feminisms do not need to be identical in practice to survive, but rather accepting of all motivations propelling the movement. If each feminist bares personal truths, truths that both benefit and indict women, there is the possibility of a united understanding of distinct lived experience.

_Phenomenologies_

Phenomenology, championed by theorists Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and George Herbert Mead, pursues the meaning of the ordinary ways humans establish social reality through movement, language, and a myriad of corporeal signals (Butler, “Performatives Acts” 519). Phenomenological theory argues that the mind and body are oriented by the location of the self. Merleau-Ponty centered his theory of phenomenology on a “corporeal schema,” which describes the body’s instrumentality and process of understanding and unveiling the historical world (Weate 3):

> We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A “corporeal or postural schema” gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or “motor projects,” radiates from us to our environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to
move about we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments as if by magic, since it is ours and because through it we have direct access to space. For us the body…is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. (Merleau-Ponty, “Primacy of Perception” 5)

Philosophers such as Judith Butler have exposed the ways in which bodies dwelling in communal space influence and generate social differences (Ahmed, “Orientations” 544). A body in space is not only relative to the location of an object, but informed by another body’s root or orientation, as in Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of inhabiting or haunting space. It is helpful to consider Meiling Cheng’s meditation on Los Angeles as space, which illustrates the orientation and comingling of individual centers and acknowledging of other bodies: “I see myself as a center; therefore, I realize that you also have your own center, and he his, she hers, we ours, and they theirs. When gauged from different time-space coordinates, the multiple others who frame my center are themselves their own centers” (5).

To transport the body through space—to become situated—requires localizing the self. Phenomenology makes location and direction—orientation—essential in its hypothesis that “consciousness is always directed toward objects and hence is always worldly, situated, and embodied” (Ahmed, “Orientations” 544). This “grasping” of space—in other words, embodiment—is informed by the self’s habitation in society or social situations. In this regard, the phenomenology of orientation deems that the “situatedness,” or the positioning of the body in society, creates the means by which individuals process the surrounding world. In sociology, situatedness describes the way multiple perspectives and frameworks, such as sociohistorical or cultural contexts or power relations, create identity (Chandler and Munday location 20614, par. 1). When applied to a sentient ethos, situatedness emphasizes lived
experience as determinant in understanding the artist’s autonomy and multiplicity within feminist practices in performance.

In the queering of phenomenology, Sara Ahmed questions the significance of orientation relative to sexuality. She takes as a starting point Husserl’s summation of orientation as fundamental to how the body resides in space, proposing that sexual orientation considers how the queer body dwells in or inhabits space (“Orientations” 543):

If we consider the characteristic way in which the Body presents itself and do the same for things, then we find the following situation: each Ego has its own domain of perceptual things and necessarily perceives the things in a certain orientation. The things appear and do so from this or that side, and in this mode of appearing is included irrevocably a relation to a here and its basic directions. (Husserl qtd. in Ahmed, “Orientations” 165)

Applying this mode of appearing and perception to sexual orientation, Ahmed argues that neither object nor body have the same actuality in the world without the other. In other words, bodies and experiences are understood and produced through orientation, and further, orientations are multiple and experienced as the sharing of space (“Orientations” 552). The engagement of a physical being with another body or object inevitably alters or influences the original being’s orientation or comprehension of space. Ahmed points to this fundamental structure of living—sharing space and orienting the body—as a derivation of lived experience. Moreover, the repetition of the body’s orientation and lived experience creates a sedimentation of patterns throughout time. Arguably, the “corporeal schema” is created through the replication of orientations and inhabitation of certain spaces, creating tendencies. And this ongoing pattern-making through experience contributes to the building of histories.
Merleau-Ponty also referenced the transfer of culture—how the body’s habits and orientations participate in the making of history—particularly the way each body’s schema creates difference and inflection through its lineages. He would argue that the body is free to participate in its genealogy, as it has a relationship to the continuation of patterns being built: “the body is ‘free’ to the extent it can participate in its expressive horizons” (Weate 4).

Black philosopher Frantz Fanon problematizes Merleau-Ponty’s idea that there is coherence and equality across all able-bodied beings, a common ability to be “free,” arguing that not all bodies’ tendencies are created freely (Weate 11). If society refuses the body’s capacity for expression, the body is not free. Fanon writes, “The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty” (110-11).

Though he references the “corporeal schema” in his writings, and he agrees with Merleau-Ponty that the body can change the world through inhabitation, he shows that the Black body is negated within white space (Weate 9). Fanon illustrates uncertainty as “unknowing-as-disquiet,” and instantiates the concept of sameness found within phenomenology and ontology, the philosophy of existence.

Ontology theorizes the nature of being in conventional understandings, and, similar to the coherent subject’s denial of complexity, does not provide space for the complexity of Black experiences. If whiteness and gender normativity—coherence—comprise the epicenter of bodies’ assumed orientation in the world, how does the non-normative, non-white body navigate? When Fanon examines his own consciousness of the body and its subsequent negation, nullification, and exclusion, he challenges the normative, reconstituting and
disrupting orthodox orientation so that the “conditions of possibility for experience are pluralized” (Weate 11). The body’s capacity to be a mediator of its own expression and historical transformation is a method of generating the very disruption necessary to build these multiplicities. Freeing the body and centralizing its capacity as an agent in erecting feminist practices in performance engenders this precise disruption.

Arguably, feminism in performance is always disruptive to conventional orientation. Gina Young’s SORORITY, temporarily performed in the Hammer Museum’s outdoor, freely navigated, coherent public space, offers an example of feminism-as-disruption. Although an open and free space operating between public passersby, audience members, and performers, the courtyard can be limiting and bound by affluence, in comparison to SORORITY’s usual embosomed black box, which in its shelter, summons liberation and infinite identities. Returning to Ahmed’s queering of phenomenology, she argues that ability is reliant upon what is available: “‘Doing things’ depends not so much on intrinsic capacity, or even upon dispositions or habits, but on the ways in which the world is available as a space for action, a space where things ‘have a certain place’ or are ‘in place’” (“Queer Phenomenology” 153). Her argument illustrates that the capacity to “do things” does not depend on habits or cultural-historical tendencies, but rather on location, whether imposed or chosen. Power is contingent upon engagement with what is accessible within vacant and occupied spaces.

Considering Fanon’s characterization of physical space as occupied by whiteness, how does the incoherent body move easily? It is helpful to consider Katherine McKittrick’s thinking around geography and intention, as she tells us: “Geography is not, however, secure and unwavering: we produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is” (xi). Space is created with intention and thus cannot be engaged
passively, but rather with an understanding of the frames and purpose within methods of resistance. Furthermore, spaces naturally orient around certain bodies more than others. For example, an institutional space (such as a modern art museum) may be described as “being white” as it is shaped by the collective (often white) bodies that gather within it (Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness” 157). Employing practices of feminism—specifically by recognizing individual situatedness and generating disruption, such as Young’s intervention of installing SORORITY in a coherent space—multiplies opportunities for re-visioning frames. This process of inhabiting space, perceiving orientation, and engaging histories is central to contemplating both taisha paggett and Gina Young’s performance practices as well as centering incoherent bodies.

*Building a Sentient Ethos in Los Angeles*

In taisha paggett’s provocation of “holistic, comprehensive, multidimensionality of real-time experience,” there is an accountability and pressing need to develop practices that engender thoughtful cultivation and exploration of feminism in performance (paggett, “WXPT: Letter”). This feminism, and its threads in a *sentient ethos*, is defined as a pluralistic, malleable philosophy that mandates a conscious culture: the recognition of individual situatedness within the active pursuit of dismantling the white, heteronormative patriarchy. Feminism is concurrently autonomous and multi-centered. This feminism is active and dynamic.

Feminist practices in performance are necessary in conceptualizing and centering multiple experiences. A city layered with expansive and crosscutting margins, Los Angeles, too, is comprised of multiple centers and subjectivities that exist in both congruent and divergent forms in relation to one another (Klein 106). Los Angeles is a space of polarities,
intersecting and diverging, and segregated largely by class, race, and the dominant cultural industry of Hollywood. But in truth, Los Angeles is punctuated by an expansive cultural ecology, and paggett and Young’s practices reflect the “multicentric” metropolis that performance art critic Meiling Cheng offers as “other Los Angelese”—the notion that there are multiple centers and unraveled margins tethered within the city of Los Angeles and its urban-sprawled surroundings (12). Cheng speaks about the multiple bodies of Los Angelese as parts of a whole, utilizing an allegory in Sam Francis’s 1996 Untitled (Edge Painting): “A collage of fragments, with independent, parallel, or intersecting centers, bubbling in varying sizes and colors, filling the canvas all the way to the edges” (12). Through the privileging of distinctive groups, the notion of multicentricity is a complement to a sentient ethos. Multicentricity is discursive, allowing a group (or, in this case, a body) to simultaneously affirm autonomy and acknowledge both its margins and centers and other bodies’ margins and centers (Cheng 13). In Cheng’s formulation, mainstream culture can be considered the center of Los Angeles, while the edges within the city represent other heterogeneous cultures, including feminist, queer, and diasporic groups (7). This propels autonomous bodies together in cohabitation, illustrating the saturation of multiplicity within both Los Angeles and the notion of a sentient ethos.

Building upon feminism, I define the concept of a sentient ethos as a conscious, idiosyncratic, resilient, and responsive culture for performance practices. This ethos is built upon an emphasis on the artist’s lived experience and situatedness, immersion with communal spaces (both physical and personal), engagement with and articulation of specific lineages, and a sinuosity within performance practices. Exploring the tenets of a sentient ethos reveals the formation of methods that support the curation and creation of a conscious,
feminist performance process. Performance is a sinuous practice, first and foremost—one that is linked with artistic processes of disruption and re-visioning multiplicity within the shifting fields of art-making and feminism.
Chapter Three: Gina Young and SORORITY

Nurturing Exchange in Feminist Space

As a queer new works performance salon “evoking the New York City performance scene of the 80s and 90s,” Gina Young’s Los Angeles-based SORORITY creates space for women, trans, and queer artists to share experimental performance (“SORORITY: SPACE”). Young’s series invokes a breadth of varied voices and generates a sphere for processing and questioning, fostering the exchange of distinct experiences and expressions within the Los Angeles feminist creative community. SORORITY is Young’s response to the absence of a specifically feminist queer/trans/women’s theater communal gathering space and platform in Los Angeles. Since 2016, the series has supported a distinct group of queer women artists working within performance. In reminiscing about her path to theater in New York and Seattle, Young references “toxic call-out culture”—a combative approach to calling out discriminatory behavior that often establishes the individual called out as an outsider to the community—as an instigator fueling her hunger for a supportive communal space like SORORITY (Ahmad). The acrimonious generational conflict and infighting around trans inclusion she tolerated during her tenure at WOW Café Theater in New York, followed by a backbiting culture of femme competition in Seattle's queer scene, generated a sense of distress that ultimately lead Young to Los Angeles.

Intersectionality shapes Young’s experiences and she embraces it as a central tenet in her creative practice. Her devotion to distinct narratives, expressions of personal truth, and belief that, at the heart of feminism, these experiences intersect, grounds SORORITY in a quest for and obligation to intersectionality and the inclusion of distinct epistemologies. As she ruminates on finding artists who are the “perfect fit” for SORORITY, Young
simultaneously asserts that the series is potentially open to anyone. This generous sense of multiplicity underlines the feminist practices in Young’s curation. She is specific and unwavering with certain decisions; for example, the ushers and box office team are regularly a contingent of exclusively trans persons whom she compensates with free admission (Young 2018). For the February 2018 Black History month installment, SORORITY: SPACE—co-curated with artist Jynarra Brinson and centering only black women—Young stipulated that volunteers must be women of color, with no exceptions. She respects privilege and situatedness by offering discounted tickets and volunteer opportunities to those who cannot afford to attend performances, and requires affluent patrons to purchase tickets on a sliding scale. She continually evaluates how to infuse her art with feminist practices. Though it may seem strident to some, Young’s practice is capacious and all-encompassing in its building of a feminist community.

This practice of capaciousness is deeply connected to the pathways of intimidation and criticism that Young experienced throughout her career as a theater director. She engages her “corporeal schema” as a tool in curation, likely without realizing it. She did not even consider her work in building SORORITY to be that of a curator; to Young, it felt more like producing, organizing, and directing. Though the curator often moves supplely between each of these roles, her principal responsibility is as “caretaker”—of the intended culture, artists, bodies, and experiences developed through creating and residing within a performance. It was not until a friend labeled Young as a “curator” that the loyal care and personal development with which she supports her fellow artists registered as curation in her mind (Young 2018). Though many of the performances in SORORITY are exceptional, Young does not select work based on excellence or quality of content, but rather on the individual
artist and the sensibility that their practice embodies. She will follow an artist on Instagram or come to know them through the Venn diagram of Los Angeles queer culture, aptly selecting which performer to commit to which series. She somehow straddles the vital, urgent nature of the work—creating awareness around trans, queer, race, gender, class, and intersectional issues—and composing an organic evolution of narratives and performances. She is not aggressive in identifying a theme before its potency is fully formed; she is patient in finding a work’s essence. Curation for Young is “less about ‘good’ work and more about what is niche, relevant, and timely” (2018). She often references feeling the “vibe” of the artists or the next focal point for the series. The content of what is ultimately presented can be less developed but is incredibly aligned with exigent social and political matters.

Young is attuned to the natural development of the series, but also chooses when to be decisive in order to cultivate compelling and principled presentations. An example of this is her co-curation of SORORITY: SPACE with Brinson that showcased only Black, women-identified queer and trans artists. In reflecting on the development of the evening, though she certainly contributed to the production, Young was adamant that she could not be the woman to spearhead the realization of an all-Black SORORITY. She is white, and as a practicing intersectional feminist recognizes that it is not her role to direct the building of a series by and for women of color. When Brinson agreed to lead SORORITY, Young admittedly felt apprehensive about relinquishing control of a project to which she has dedicated countless hours. However, she is quick to recognize Brinson’s brilliant elucidation of SORORITY: SPACE, acknowledging that her own interpretation as a white woman would never be valid (2018). Brinson eloquently writes:
Artists will explore SPACE in all its capacities: physical, emotional, gender, creative, familial, societal, and the ways in which Black women penetrate unwelcoming spaces and the methods we employ for survival. Consider the creative energies and roles we must assume to navigate openly hostile places while we simultaneously work to repair and celebrate ourselves.

(“SORORITY: SPACE”)

How can Young deploy her own histories and autonomy alongside shared experiences of other women and raise communal space that engages parallel but distinct artists and practices? How can she ultimately develop new conduits of exchange within the framework of feminist and queer performance? I argue that SORORITY is a response to and exploration of this very question.

Young can be considered an ambassador of queer and feminist performance within the Los Angeles theater community: she curated the thirteenth edition of SORORITY at the 2017 Los Angeles Exchange (LAX) Festival. She acknowledges that SORORITY inspires a feeling of “sisterhood,” but also sees its somewhat limited engagement with other queer performance platforms on the east side of Los Angeles: “Ian MacKinnon, has been doing Planet Queer for 5 years, which is another late-night performance series—it’s very similar to SORORITY, except I wanted one that was explicitly feminist and mostly women, which I think is the main difference” (Walser). Although participating artists perform in other queer and feminist assemblages or spaces, Young grants that SORORITY generates a specific gathering that does not cross-pollinate with a wider theater-going audience. But as an inward-facing safe space for artists, SORORITY’s ethos does not require blanket inclusion, but
rather offers the positive, generous uplifting of disregarded histories within the queer, feminist community.

*Queer Phenomenologies and Restorative Disorientation*

In 2018, the notion of recognizing spaces that are friendly to trans, queer, or intersectional feminist peers or allies might seem fundamental, but within the current American political climate, the cosmoses of incoherent identities are more precious and potent than ever. Having a presidential administration that is friendly towards white supremacy has fueled the deepest toxicity experienced in younger generations’ lifetimes, and these experiences, intuitively, are fodder for new work for the stage. Underpinning SORORITY is the provision of a safe, supportive, “womb-like” space for generating new performance—a continued antidote to pervasive oppression. Young started the series as feminism began its present lap in popular culture, which has produced an explosion of glib feminists alongside long-engaged and finally empowered womxn and allies. In the visual art world, recent large museum exhibitions such as “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (2007) and the Brooklyn Museum’s (and, later, the California African American Museum’s) “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965-1985” (2017) have helped to center feminist art histories in contemporary culture.

Within the current American pulse of highly partisan and divisive politics and renewed focus on feminist art, Young has developed a space that requires the intermingling and integration of queer theory and feminism. Her curation has roots in the joint manifestation of the untethered and indefinable within the queer (a quest for continued liberation) and feminism. This union of queer and feminist performance creates an exciting
friction and energy. It nurtures inherent multiplicities, producing bountiful opportunities for performers and patrons alike to meet within the radiance of the salon and challenge each other in unpredictable ways. Their union in a performance space highlights a shared critique of an orthodox and perhaps mundane search for equivalency (Brewer Ball 548). “Sorority” is a strong term that conjures “mean-girl” imagery, but in discussing the series’ namesake, Young explains, “like sports culture, as a theater geek, and sorority/fraternity culture, as a generally antisocial queer feminist, those worlds seemed so alien to me—so weird, even though they were the mainstream” (Bendix). Young goes on to clarify that SORORITY and the communal mental, emotional, and physical space that the event creates is about celebration—a celebration that casts a wide net, too loosely woven to be exclusionary in practice (Bendix).

With the intersection of newly developed feminist and queer performance and artists newly acquainted through Young’s eager and enthusiastic curation, the series could potentially obscure the importance of personal narratives. However, SORORITY finds the right groove. Young honed this sensibility at the WOW Café Theatre—her first muse, where she cut her teeth as a producer. Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw, co-founders of WOW Café and founding members of feminist theater collective Split Britches, have likely influenced Young’s work. WOW, originating as an international women’s theater festival, “remains a vital community space that brings visibility to under-represented identities and experiences, and fosters alternative forms of public conversation” (McCabe). Weaver discussed the process of creating a community for the work while making the work itself—a tenet that resonates with the nascent stage of works in SORORITY; the artists and works are in-progress and in-process, allowing for both evolution and rawness. In addition, the structure of
SORORITY allows for independent processes and the formation of new work, although presented through a collaborative and genial milieu. Weaver’s performance pedagogy (though generated for ensemble work) can be applied to a salon experience, as it encourages each artist to maintain independence while coming together in coalition and exploring intersecting identities (Armstrong 202).

SORORITY artists emphasize lived experience in their performances, and Young selects participants who generate content oriented towards these individual, personal accounts as the curation thread of each installment in the performance series (see fig. 1). The artists’ experiences are seen as both personal and purposeful. For SORORITY: OUT, Ashley Obinwanne wrote a one-act play titled “Let it be Known.” Typically a writer and director for film, this was her first work written for and performed live on stage. The story follows Obinwanne’s immigration to the United States as a young, gay, Nigerian woman, coming out to her friends and ultimately her Nigerian mother. Although a five-minute, first-run performance risks creating an impression as inexperienced or superficial, implementing the personal establishes empathy with the audience, albeit one comprised primarily of allies and peers. Alternatively, Amanda-Faye Jimenez, self-described as a “queer, fat, Blaxican writer and literary performer,” has performed at every SORORITY since the series’ inception and is heralded and loved by the audience (Jimenez). She is whip-smart with impeccable delivery, fiercely unapologetic, and unsurprisingly, deeply personal. Always centering herself, Jimenez’s lived experience orients both what she takes in and puts out into the world around her, and forces her audience to face her experiences.

SORORITY: OUT featured many other queer artists of color—including now co-curator of SORORITY: SPACE, Jynarra Bryson—and succeeded in creating an
amalgamation of performers across multiple identity categories, such as trans, elder, bisexual, non-binary, lesbian, gay, adolescent, novice, and veteran performers. SORORITY is a cohesive location for these multiple identities. The assemblage continues to emphasize

un-interrogated assumptions of what is normal and highlight the richness of the performance practices in Young’s curation. These practices will further the always-necessary examination and performance of sedimented histories within each related canon. Honoring Butler’s argument that “[t]here can be no viable feminism that fails to account for its complicity in forms of oppression, whether they be colonial, class-based, racist, or homophobic,” the necessity of autonomy and self-awareness in performance practices is as relevant now—twenty years after her statement on feminist and queer oppressive culture and the acceptance of normal—as it was then (“Against Proper Objects” 2). It is clear that Young is aware of her own influences and histories, as well as those of the artists she curates in SORORITY. For example, through Jimenez’s telling of personal histories, her “historic-racial schema” contributes to how her body and sharing of lived experience inhabit the shared communal space. The emphasis on autonomy and multiplicity in SORORITY generates a connective
tissue that draws participants together within the performance space. With performances at the Hammer Museum and Los Angeles Exchange (LAX) Festival, there are new opportunities for an expanded audience. Included in LAX as a guest curator, Young introduced new narratives to the festival and through such interventions, invigorated the conversation around feminist practices.

In order to perceive a purpose, objective, or in some cases, a way of being—feminist, queer—a dialogue must be created. As a phenomenological example, if feminism or queer theory in performance is a blanket on a chair, one must touch the blanket—be warmed by it, made cozy by it, become uncomfortable if it bristles the skin. The blanket would be no more than a decorative object, merely inviting or visually appeasing, if it is not tactically engaged. Similar to Husserl’s table, a foundational example within phenomenology, the blanket nor the body in this experience have integrity without the other (Ahmed, “Orientations” 558), just as feminism in performance (object) and the viewer or artist (body) do not have integrity if they do not come in contact with each other. In order to connect, feminism or queerness and the body must cohabit in space.

Within this cohabitation, feminist and queer performance must also be oriented around in addition to towards each other. For Ahmed, the meaning of being oriented around something is “returning to the question of how bodies ‘cohere’” (“Queer Phenomenology” 116). In Young’s practice, the cohesion of individual artists within one space generates the location around each other and enables bodies to not challenge each other, but rather allows each to be at the center of presence and actuality. If queer theory, trans experience, feminism, or lesbian performance is the reagent that propels an artist to participate in SORORITY, then
that artist must undertake the act of performance not by itself, but with the unavoidable experience of the communal.

New publics are given entry into the artists’ lives, and therefore SORORITY gives feminism or queerness or trans experience a platform. It provides artists with space to analyze the significance and performance of “feminism” and “queer.” Young wants this community to feel like a utopia, as she tells us, “There are definitely performances that are challenging, or unexpected, or upsetting sometimes, but…it’s a space where there’s a collective intention to keep racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia as far outside as possible” (Walser). This ability to create space provides the makers, the consumers, the allies, and the supporters a place from which to orient themselves, to expand horizons of understanding. Ahmed writes about Merleau-Ponty’s claim that orientation demonstrates that “the body is not ‘merely an object in the world,’ rather ‘it is our point of view in the world’ (Ahmed, “Orientations” 551). The exploration, growth, and pursuit of the individuality of the self generates a frame of reference, paradoxically discovering autonomy through collectivity.

One of the first installments of SORORITY took place the same weekend as the 2016 mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. The series had recently launched with a springtime weekly residency at the Lyric Hyperion and was transitioning into a monthly gathering. Writer Sam Cohen reluctantly attended the performance, wearied from the emotions wrought by the massacre. Ruminating on the experience that summer evening, she writes:

[T]he cabaret is a collective; at the cabaret, performances can only speak their queer language to an audience that’s fluent; it relies on an audience that knows how to feel melodrama. The cabaret is only a cabaret if the audience
speaks back. So I tried to connect with the void—to appreciate the sacredness of this space, as all spaces are sacred in which new languages, the languages of Others, bubble up or are recognized—I tried to dedicate my spectatorship.

(Cohen)

Cohen reveals the locating of her body within an alliance—an alliance that is receptive to newness and otherness. This congregation, a term I use intentionally to conjure feelings of sanctity, generates the “togetherness” that a sentient ethos embraces as a principal tenet. Fundamental to Cohen’s perception of SORORITY is identifying the idiosyncrasies of “others” in making sacred space. She is calling forward the sharing of sedimented histories, commitment to authenticity and rawness as a potent site of commonality. She actively chooses to both witness and reciprocate the artists’ effort.

In thinking about the collective action of bodies gathering, specifically in public protest, Judith Butler argues that the true maker of a society in motion is the space created by bodies in alliance. Organizing and transformation do not happen merely by locality, but rather through participating bodies in action. In this phenomenological consideration, the physical space of location and the immaterial space between bodies, together, cultivates orientation: “The ‘true’ space then lies ‘between the people’ which means that as much as any action takes place somewhere located, it also establishes a space which belongs properly to alliance itself” (“Bodies in Alliance” 1). For Hannah Arendt, whose philosophy Butler often draws upon, this alliance is not specific to location, but rather is generates its own transportable location. She writes, “action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost anywhere and anytime” (198).
SORORITY’s “proper location” happens to be in a dark, black box performance space in hipster Silver Lake. Grounding SORORITY in Los Angeles feels suitable, where queerness seems to permeate the city’s edges and creative practices on the margins, woven throughout the ostensible creative capital of the world. SORORITY’s artists span all types of genres and artistic and creative practices, from written word to film to choreography. Cohen describes a vivid moment during SORORITY: MUSCLE when feminist performance artist Erin Pike could no longer muster her body to complete the burpees she set out to cycle through for the duration of the song “Survivor” by Destiny’s Child. With her arms hardly moving and legs visibly weak, an audience member jumped onto the stage next to Pike and picked up the succession of pushup-jumps. For Cohen, “This gesture made me swell with feeling—I am always trying to figure out what queerness is, to recognize moments that feel queer, and this was one…this audience member reminded me that sometimes solidarity is built, projects are finished, by jumping out of one’s role and into another, by recognizing when work someone is doing could be your work.” Truthfully acknowledging that the work another human is suffering through or committing oneself to, though it manifests differently from how an “other” (or you) might process that same work, is the core of feminist practice. Pike’s grieving and attempt to understand the Orlando massacre was unique, but in utilizing feminist practices as the observer, Cohen was able to see the multiplicity of Pike’s mourning and, ultimately, recognize and connect to her own grief.

As evidenced in intersectionality and phenomenology, there is a connection between the way sociohistorical or cultural contexts contribute to an individual’s identity—situatedness—and the ability to both engage with and perceive one’s environment. Ahmed argues that through disorientation we can become oriented; that in order to perceive wholly,
we must bring forward what is behind us (Ahmed, “Orientations” 549). The roots of deposited histories create pathways in which we comprehend and interact with the world. In this way, the relationship between audience and performer at SORORITY requires a bit of disorientation. With Young’s encouragement, the artists are often first-time performers or presenting in a discipline different from their established genre. This is disorienting to the performer and generates a rawness that cannot be predicted or rehearsed. In addition, by witnessing new work, lived experiences, individual complexities, and truthfulness, spectators become disoriented, as well.

Engaging with a sentient ethos in feminism expands the opportunity for sharing complex experiences. The framework of centering non-white and non-conforming bodies with cohabitation of space, complex orientations, and distinct genealogies is central to considering the potency of the queer, feminist reservoir found in SORORITY. Labeling SORORITY as a utopian safe haven is perhaps too homogenous, but its multifaceted rawness certainly feels sublime. Participating in this harmonious space helps to resist the often-sustained feelings of failure and negation that marginalized groups must navigate throughout efforts of collective, positive, or political action. Ahmed speaks to the grueling experience of opposing the normative (e.g., queer feminism):

There can be risks to becoming oppositional; to having a sense of oneself as always struggling against something. If you are used to having to struggle to exist, if you become used to having others oppose your existence, if you are used even to being thought of as oppositional, those experiences are directive.” (“A Killjoy In Crisis”).
The feminist practices I propose reconsider how to explore stories of opposition to the normative, which bodies participate in the telling of these stories, and how these bodies are positioned in relation to power. The ability to perform individual narratives breaks through the monotony and meaninglessness of content created for and about incoherent complexities. It creates an active engagement with often-underrepresented genealogies, thereby illuminating glossed-over histories and realities otherwise not readily available to mainstream society. The exploration of feminist practices helps to destabilize accepted notions and normative societal standards. Coming “in contact with” or absorbing the experience of the “other” is a powerful tool in the quest to reposition and redefine what is considered normative.

In discussing representations of queerness in SORORITY, Young says, “Art isn’t accessible, or we assume the art has nothing to do with us. So often we see queer representations in mainstream film and television that feel so removed from our experience; it’s so not on the nose, so inaccurate, and we think, that’s not about me or how our community is” (Walser). Here, Young is speaking to the idea of agency and the authenticity of authoring identities. Not only is she appropriately pointing to narratives being represented incorrectly, but she also questions who has agency in authoring the story and who holds the power in telling the story. SORORITY is a negation, a reversal of the prescribed narratives and accepted universalities of “queer” identity.

Moving forward, Young intends to document and create an accessible online platform for SORORITY performances. Perhaps this will only succeed in producing a storage archive of these live experiences within the overloaded containers of digital media, but I think Young would argue that it will help perpetuate authentic narratives—demonstrations of queer live
performance by and for queer artists. In writing about race and gender’s historical representation in media, scholar Janell Hobson notes:

Indeed…media determined whose stories got told (the narratives of those in power), which bodies produced media (often male bodies, which still dominate fields of science and technology today), and how bodies get positioned (often women, colonized, and people of color get reduced to objects and commodities). (10)

The visual archives of SORORITY, whether imprinted in ephemeral memory or recorded for media consumption, signify the ways in which bodies on the margins are evidence of the need to honor and author stories of autonomy and multiplicity.

In relation to Butler’s assertion that “when bodies assemble, especially if they are precarious or indebted or displaced, they demonstrate themselves; they give their own bodies as evidence of the claim” (Cazier), the foci of SORORITY, such as SPACE or OUT, are essential in that the tangible bodies on stage are the embodiment of these truths. SORORITY is tangible because it is a presentation of authentic egos. The participants are not generating content or stories based on fiction, but rather on their own identities and first-hand experiences. This so often seems lost in the spectator’s judgment or comprehension of art.

During SORORITY: PROTEST for example, artists are not just commenting from an outside perspective on how “protest” is happening or being utilized in contemporary society, but rather, embodying their own experiences of how they utilize “protest,” and how it affects them personally. This again exemplifies the importance of intersectionality that Young considers crucial to feminism. In discussing what term for “feminism” might have the dynamism that “queer” elicits for “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “trans,” or “intersex” lives,
she identified “intersectional” (2018). Though SORORITY is a social experience and communal offering, it specifically upholds the notion of the individual self as the foundation of intersectional identity. Arguably, Young’s continued elaboration and sinuosity in practice while curating and producing the event—for example, toying with the structure of ticketing, staffing, and involving co-curators—indicates that she is aware of the flexibility required to create an intersectional yet autonomous experience. The autonomy found within SORORITY is generated perhaps through a metaphysical awareness. The very structure of the series must itself be intersectional in order to foster and support intersecting identities.

Young may be in consort with author Diana Tietjen Meyers’ argument that “intersectional identity should be considered a feature of the authentic self” (159). However, the challenge of espousing intersectionality outside of an aware community like SORORITY is inadvertently pinning intersectionality to privilege. If acknowledging intersectionality in subjugated identities illuminates the understanding of systemic oppression, then recognizing intersectionality within normative, putative identities elucidates how privileged identity is upheld through its oppression of the “other”: As Rodier argues, “…a privileged person may feel quite ‘right in their skin’ and ‘sure of themselves’; thus knowledge that pierces through privilege will upset these feelings of autonomy” (68). The “knowledge” referenced here is accepting that intersectionality can contribute to stratified social imbalances and the autonomy of privilege. A sentient ethos strategizes about how to best engage with intersectional feminism as a practice that upholds pluralism, requiring its participants to autonomously connect with their personal experience while also recognizing and valuing the lived experience of others. SORORITY demonstrates that the centering of intersectionality is a powerful action within contemporary performance.
Chapter Four: Being-with taisha paggett

*Phenomenologies and Blackening White Space*

Submitting to the museum’s hours and hard flooring, immersed in quotidian comings and goings, bearing passersby’s unspoken judgment and simultaneous disengagement, having pledged repetition and duration, taisha paggett inhabits the gallery lobby of the Whitney Museum, the paradigmatic American art institution. Her Blackness permeates the familiarity of the white space, inflecting established patterns with a body that has not always been present, a body that still fights to be present. paggett’s performance establishes and inserts her body into this monolithic museum, displacing and critically questioning the white roots of the institutional context. paggett’s artistic methods investigate the positioning of Black bodies; conscious of the power that contemporary Blackness has, she intentionally works in and with contemporary movement vocabularies. Instead of overtly drawing upon dance and visual practices from Black histories, she penetrates and inhabits white physical and conjectural spaces not built expressly for her or other Black bodies. Discussing her current performance practices in a recent interview with *Feminist Magazine*, paggett tells us that she is not necessarily interested in bringing African dance practices into current curricula (though she acknowledges their significance and relevance); her commitment is to continue to transform contemporary white spaces: “I don’t feel my project is to go back and inhabit those [African dance] spaces, mine is about staying in white spaces and talking about how they can be blackened” (V. Phillips).

Significantly, paggett’s practice challenges the orientation of whiteness and racialization of space, revealing her conceptualization of phenomenology, and more explicitly, her queering of the phenomenology of race and orientation. It is useful to ground
paggett’s approach in Fanon’s problematizing of phenomenology. Fanon posits that beyond the “corporeal schema” is the “historic-racial schema,” one comprised of elements not created by one’s own tactile and kinesthetic perceptions—as conventional phenomenology offers—but rather provided to one “by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (111). He identifies a feeling of Blackness, an “epidermalization” of phenomenological perception. In other words, the racial and historical dimensions of his body are not only on the surface, waiting to be called out, but also below, implanted by the white gaze and harbored by the Black body (Ahmed, “Queer Phenomenology” 110). Relatedly, returning to the centering of lived experience in my formulation of a sentient ethos, it must be recognized that part of the lived experience of a Black body is enduring being the object of the adverse white gaze (Fanon 112). This argument follows Fanon’s amended concept of phenomenology by demonstrating the ways that racism obstructs the Black body, preventing the ability to phenomenologically inhabit space by familiar extension through objects and others. This idea of extending the body to find its place through objects and others is a central point in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology: the body moves towards and extends through an object to “do things,” but as Fanon counters, the body can only do so if the surrounding world is an accessible space for action (Ahmed “A Phenomenology of Whiteness” 161; Fanon 112). If the body “doing things” is contingent upon living or being located in a familiar or accessible space, then racism “disorients” the Black body, as the space available is not familiar, but rather a white and colonized world (Ahmed, “Queer Phenomenology” 111). The Whitney Museum—and the institutional arts complex at large—is a white and colonized world, as are the vast majority of art spaces available for contemporary performance.
It would be negligent to omit an explanation of my framing and central use of the language “Black body” in my research, when the slaying, silencing, and persecution of Black bodies is the driving force in present-day culture wars and political movements, including feminism. In writing about paggett’s collective project WXPT (We Are The Paper, We Are The Trees), queer scholar Treva C. Ellison introduces Black feminist critic Hortense Spillers’ suggestion that the concealed accumulation of racism (in other words, the immeasurable depth of enduring racial subjugation) materializes the body as “flesh,” making “a distinction in this case between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ and impos[ing] that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions” (Spillers qtd. in Ellison 67). Effectively, Spillers argues that categories like race, class, gender, and sexuality depend on the use of the body as a definitive factor, and are produced through the existence and violation of captive flesh (Ellison 29). In contemplating paggett’s work, together with phenomenology and feminism, it is important to recognize the corporeal body as a site and location of significance within a *sentient ethos*, and “flesh” as foundational in contemplating the Black body.

paggett’s practice concurrently engages movement, video, visual art, performance art, and installation-based styles. Though interdisciplinary in effect, her principal intention is to reset frames, specifically those of the Black dancer and visual artist (and arguably, the Black body) (Coan, “Black Space in Total Whiteness” 81). Her creative practices and research are “built from a recognition of the body and space as multifaceted sites in which meaning is created, displayed, felt, enforced, and transformed” (paggett, “Artist Statement”). Engaging phenomenologies, she seeks to create meaning for bodies on the margins, activating spectators’ engagement to find coalescence between object and subject (paggett “Artist
This practice, originating from her dance studies in the Western canon, is immersive and performative. Moving beyond the limits of formal dance structures, she both questions and resides within visual and multidisciplinary configurations. Her work observes how bodies interact and intersect with and around each other. This phenomenological positioning of herself—as object, as subject, between objects, between subjects—creates an embodied relationality, representing emotional and physical potential, and soliciting relationships that require contemplation of what “feeling” might mean (Jones, “Thinking Feeling” 14).

Paggett’s space-claiming work—gathering Black energies within white spaces alongside an obligation to new and reoriented relationships—is a necessary feature of her negotiation of space and agency. Akin to SORORITY: SPACE, paggett’s practices orient bodies in specific ways, altering how they take up space. Just as SORORITY: SPACE utilized multidimensional performances as a generative device to not only occupy space, but to occupy a racialized space, paggett magnetizes bodies, spaces, and experiences to one another with her multidisciplinary practice. The durational, individual, visual, and performative structure of her performances offers a significant intervention at the 2014 Whitney Biennial, illuminating the omission of Blackness in the white, colonized, and heteronormative space. Paggett’s construction of Black space reorients both the physical space of the museum’s lobby and the paradigmatic museum patron. Positioned in the lobby gallery for five days with her solo work underwaters (we is ready, we is ready), paggett provides individuals with the opportunity to have singular or numerous encounters with the Black experience in an otherwise domineering white space. She inhabits four distinctive characters throughout the durational performance, individually described as “a Black female
domestic, a femme Black woman strong with sexual and shamanistic powers, an aggressive afro’d masculine person, and a version of paggett herself, sometimes appearing in blackface” (Coan, “Black Space in Total Whiteness” 78). Each persona is a conduit to other Black bodies and spaces, and together with paggett’s vow of silence throughout the durational work, generates an abstract space for healing, both personal and of “the body of ‘the black’” (Coan, “Black Space in Total Whiteness” 78).

Expanding the conceptual space created by her four characters, paggett introduces additional Black queer voices (and experiences) through off-site interviews about Black performance, which she personally conducted with artists of her choosing. These conversations took place outside of the museum’s gallery lobby, over a meal or tea, and were recorded on paggett’s cell phone (though not archived) and fed into lobby gallery speakers when she was not present. Patrons only experience the voices of her interviewees—not her own—further infusing the Black queer experience into the institution and expanding the
disorientation of whiteness (V. Phillips). Discussing her choice to perform mostly in silence, paggett tells us of a desire to illuminate Black queer voices:

I think on a basic level…I took up the opportunity—and, I think this is what dance is and why it’s really radical—is that it really is just a container of time and space, and so I decided to make my own rules. For this duration of time I only want to be in dialogue with other Black, queer, trans-identified folks. And that’s a rule that I can’t make on the street in my daily life; that’s a rule that I could not make growing up as a kid for some period of my time in an all-white community…this was a space for me to create the world that I wanted to live in on a basic level and call it a dance. (qtd. in V. Phillips)

This space paggett has created is an unrestricted home to process her own feelings, set her own guidelines, choose her conversations, and decide how she wants to process and navigate the world—a practice she articulates later in the curriculum and development of her large-scale collaborative project, School for the Movement of the Technicolor People (“School for the Movement” 14).

Through her four characters and dialogue with Black, queer folks, paggett distinctly infuses underwaters with a queer phenomenology of race, disorienting the typical patron by removing the familiarity of the whiteness within the institutional arts complex: her construction of a Black queer space resists the infiltration of racism. In other words, the phenomenological disorientation caused by racism limits the Black body’s capability for “doing things”; thus, for her work to be seen, paggett constructed a Black-oriented space within an institution that would otherwise be disorienting. Within the constructed space of her four performative identities, paggett’s movements indicate a relationship to bodies
outside of the museum’s walls; through her gestures, she transmits multiple experiences and forms of knowledge. Writer Jaime Shearn Coan links paggett’s movements with José Esteban Muñoz’s idea that “gestures transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture” (Muñoz 67). Coan connects this concept of gesture’s atomization of movement to Black histories and the Whitney, positing that gesture is a communal activity, pluralized and not constrained to a distinct ephemerality or body (“Black Space in Total Whiteness” 82).

On a wider spectrum, addressing the whiteness of the institution, it is crucial to think about archetypal bodies that effortlessly inhabit public space. Principal to the argument that institutions are shaped by whiteness is recognizing that white bodies do not have to acknowledge or encounter their race—being white is not a hindrance to navigating or accessing such institutions. White bodies correspond with the assumptions of Western public and social spaces: “[they] are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape” (Ahmed, “Queer Phenomenology” 134). When a body arrives that is incongruous with a space, it creates disorientation. Race and gender scholar Nirmal Puwar emphasizes this point, describing that the proximity of non-white bodies in a familiar (white) space makes the space seem strange (43). Further, she argues that the white body is a “somatic norm” that disorients the non-white body within public space (8). Ahmed perceptively transmits this concept as bodies not being “in line” (or straight), positing that the proximity of non-white bodies in institutional spaces have a queer effect (“Queer Phenomenology” 135). It is important to note that Ahmed does not equate bodies of color with “queer,” but rather shows how the “queering” of space (or of phenomenology) refers to instances when the normative is not reproduced—when there is a disruption in the definitive norm (“Queer Phenomenology”
198). In my analysis of paggett’s performance practices, not only in *underwaters* but also in the development of her collaborative platform WXPT, I use “queer” to signify and emphasize disorientation or disruption within white and coherent spaces. In addition, I employ one of Eve Sedgwick’s characterizations of “queer” in relation to space and feminist performance, which imbues the concept of a self with multiple truths, or a body with intersecting identities with a multiplicity of meaning. In this instance, “queer” dislodges the coherent, allowing many definitions to intertwine—an “open mesh of possibilities” within gender, race, and identity (Sedgwick 7). Sedgwick also theorizes about “queer” in relation to feelings and hyperbolic expressions typically associated with “gay” (Jones, “Thinking Feeling” 12). This understanding, in the context of bodies on the margins, contributes to the performative practice of art-making that requires participants, both audience and performer, to engage seriously with thinking through what it means to feel (Jones, “Thinking Feeling” 13).

paggett’s claiming of space for and centering of Black, queer narratives within the white frame demonstrates this notion of queer feeling, as she commands viewers and artists to participate critically with what it means to be a body on the margins.

*Dance as an Act of Feminist and Queer Resistance*

Following Sedgwick’s valuation of “feeling” and the weaving of possibilities, paggett’s centering of multiple Black feelings and narratives in *underwaters* is not only feminist, but also queer. Another multidisciplinary work of paggett’s, *A Composite Field* (2014), a 3-channel video installation created with sound artist Yann Novak, situates paggett’s body in conversation with the politics of formal media, considering how the danced body casts itself within political and social realities (Silver 8). Identifying Sedgwick’s queerness, feminist art historian Amelia Jones suggests that paggett’s video work is queer “in
its bodily enactment, gender-critical and anti-racist agency, and claiming of space” (Jones, “Thinking Feeling”15). Queerness here follows both Sedgwick’s and Ahmed’s formulations. Through Sedgwick’s lens, paggett interlaces meaning by calling upon multiple emotional selves in her exploration of similar but nuanced feelings and actions, depicted through video and photo documentation. Similarly, in another work of paggett’s, Decomposition of a Continuous Whole (2012, 2010, 2009), she is blindfolded and feeling her way through the space of the gallery, employing space-claiming as the performative act (Jones, “Thinking Feeling” 14). This disorientation of and within coherent or white space is suggestive of Ahmed’s articulation of queer as “oblique” (“Queer Phenomenology” 161). Applying both characterizations of queer to paggett’s proficient choreographic movement and subtle claim of the Black body’s right to take up space (within both the tangible and on-screen institutions), she weaves together interdisciplinarity and disruption of the obstinate art space. I posit that paggett’s performance practices are both feminist and queer, as she disconnects the expectation of the “Black woman” and “Black dance” from the normative white coherent gaze which only recognizes it as such, and replaces it with practices of multiplicity, thus infusing the institution with Blackness. Writing about the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Coan signals this shift: “paggett’s work challenges an art world that is deeply in need of having its politico-aesthetic roots in whiteness dislodged…[and] facilitates an unlearning of the epistemologies that shape the viewing of Black performance within the white cube” (“Black Space in Total Whiteness” 77). Suffusing her Blackness into the art world is a challenge, an act of rebellion in defiance to the perpetual histories of exclusion of Black art and the dismissal of her body through white colonization (“School for the Movement” 14).
Existential phenomenologies found in immersive art practices require both the performer and the viewer to engage with feelings that necessitate deep contemplation of how we negotiate our embodiment with and around others (Jones and Silver 13). When bodies engage together in space, the context of the frame and the individual bodies must be in dialogue with one another. This exchange, however, does not have to be in service to or defined by a conclusion, prescribed meaning, or an answer. Rather, similar to the practice-based foundation of consciousness-raising, the action lies within the “doing.” The action is the process and not the result. Or, the result is the process. In a conversation regarding “aboutness,” a term paggett uses to label the feeling of obligation to comprehend or define a performance, she articulates, “So, it’s not about not caring what the audience gets. This work might not be ‘about’ what the work is about anyways—it could simply be about us being together in space” (Coan, “Conversation with taisha paggett”). This idea of “being together in space” is demonstrated in multiple ways across paggett’s practices: in WXPT’s School for the Movement of the Technicolor People and between the four Black characters in underwaters. She resets frames and restructures performance, and resets the need to find one particular meaning in a performance, so as to allow for multiple gazes to coexist—and to be dismantled. The result is expanding and remaking the art and performance experience. This reformation is contingent upon the capacity of both viewer and artist to be willing participants in the experience itself, and to not seek the “aboutness” of the work. This mutual participation, or simultaneous existence, is one that Coan recognizes in paggett’s work, and aligns with philosopher Jean Luc Nancy’s ideas around the ontology of “being-with”—the contention that the experience of “being” is not singular (as it is largely understood), but rather is always in coexistence. Thus, “with” is not secondary to “being” (Nancy 29). paggett
identifies this “being-with” in her Whitney Biennial catalogue essay by introducing “us-ness.” She writes, “The experience is not for me but for an us-ness that dies and comes alive depending on what we’re open to receiving, what interpretive frames we’re speaking to/from, and how deeply and consciously we’re breathing (the underseeing) as all of this is going down” (“notes on process & understanding” 231). Broadening Nancy’s philosophy of “being-with” also connects with how he contemplates community in poignant ways. He argues that community is not a fetishized imaginary of common-being, but rather an “imprecise collective of beings who have in common the experience of singular finitude” (Welch and Panelli 350). In other words, community is not found in unity of orientation or experience, but in a shared understanding that “being” involves being-with-others. “Being-with,” too, is evocative of physicist and feminist scholar Karan Barad’s concept of “intra-action,” which queers one of physics’ accepted forces, “interaction.” In an interview with DOCUMENTA (13), Barad explains:

The usual notion of interaction assumes that there are individual independently existing entities or agents that preexist their acting upon one another. By contrast, the notion of “intra-action” queers the familiar sense of causality…and more generally unsettles the metaphysics of individualism (the belief that there are individually constituted agents or entities, as well as times and places). (Kleinman 77)

The concepts of “being-with” and “intra-action” are present in paggett’s performance practices and woven within the feminist practice of a sentient ethos.

In the winter of 2017, paggett and Toronto-based art historian Erin Silver coedited an issue of C Magazine, a Canadian contemporary art and criticism periodical. In the issue, paggett and Silver emphasize the temporal place of intersectional feminisms in relation to
lived realities and bodies that matter, referencing Judith Butler’s seminal question, “Which bodies come to matter—and why?” (Bodies That Matter xii; paggett and Silver 6).

Addressing the urgency of questions about how feminism connects with post-election social and political events, alongside the challenge of retaining sinuosity with resistance movements, they coalesce critical thinking around future and pluralistic feminisms, and seek methods which center the lived experiences of people of color and other incoherent bodies in resistance (6). In this context, performance is a sinuous practice linked with generating disruptions within the shifting fields of art-making and feminism, and, arguably, in social and political movements of crisis, as well.

**Building, Healing, and Sustaining**

The concept of a *sentient ethos* can be mapped onto WXPT. Their manifesto begins simply with “WXPT is a process” (School for the Movement). Arguably, the group’s origin is rooted in the feminist practice of consciousness-raising via paggett’s experimentation with deliberate community-building. Consciousness-raising’s primary exchange of personal narratives and desires is shaped by the ostensibly intrinsic human need to belong, and to build political coalitions from these bonds. As the participants, mostly strangers to one another, gathered for the first time to devise what it might mean to commit to the company and to each other for an extended period of time, stories of “identity, movement, desire for connection, and seeking personal expansion” became anchors of connection (School for the Movement). Centering practices of sinuosity found within a *sentient ethos*, WXPT’s platform builds a movement capacious and flexible enough to generate fundamental belonging and unity without the inherent power dynamics and exclusion often operating within community. These elastic community-building practices evoke Miranda Joseph’s ethical practice of
questioning and rethinking community (ix). Moreover, it is evident that paggett infuses WXPT with feminist and intersectional practices through the group’s attention to individual differences, and “direct discussion on issues related to Black life, anti-blackness and queer people of color” (School for the Movement).

Fig. 3. WXPT performing evereachmore at the LA River. Clyne, Gina and Matt Rose. “evereachmore.” The Bowtie Project, 2015, clockshop.org/project/evereachmore/.

WXPT’s first project platform, evereachmore (2015), works with the practice of weight exchange between pairs and trios moving in and out of unison (see fig. 3). As WXPT centers Black queer people (all collaborators are queer people of color and allies), congregating “together in difference,” a phrase paggett uses, is vital to the foundation of the project:

Unison is typically thought of as two or more people doing the same movement simultaneously, “in unison.” It is a technical term but also a metaphor—a metaphor for how cultural things (language, identity, patterns of movement) hold different people together, in step, in time, able to identify with one another. (School for the Movement)
A reframing of contemporary dance and movement insists on connection and flexibility through unison. *evereachmore* requires the artists to move nearly a mile in distance along the bare banks of the Los Angeles River (see fig. 3). Bodies continuously in connection, navigating the individually collective movement score and signaling the future of possibility through unison, “being-with” is marked in the shapes generated by the bodies’ shared phrasing. This transfer of weight and singular-plural movement gesticulates a way for the body—both the performers’ and the viewers’—to contemplate “the unwieldiness and uncertainty of…the body as a modality of political and social categorization” (Ellison 30). This vacillation between holding space and holding weight for a body (specifically the Black body) muses on the disorientation of phenomenology through continuously shifting weight, diverging and connecting flesh, and an obligation to linking bodies in motion. Bodies shift their weight in contact improvisation, a dance form that arguably generates disorientation by trusting the body’s kinesthetic intelligence in the improvised transfer and exchange of weight between bodies. Contact improvisation is a modality that embraces these moments of disorientation, both the corporeal experience of being unstable and the psychic experience of uncertainty (Albright 16). In likening the modalities of contact improvisation and *evereachmore*, the disorientation of bodies of color as they transpose energy parallels the disorientation that racism instills on the Black (and queer) body. Accordingly, the methods of *evereachmore* generate a platform for queer bodies of color to be in flux and to transfer instability and uncertainty (or disorientation), thereby creating unison in resisting normative and hegemonic structures. Furthermore, contact improvisation’s exploration of collective weight exchange between individual bodies parallels consciousness-raising’s action through the communal sharing of individual experience and burden. Both practices are rooted in
historically cordoned-off white spaces, yet through paggett’s adaptation and critique, they become new, interpretive frames for bodies on the margins.

It is imperative to consider site in paggett’s practices, not only her blackening of institutional spaces, but also her focus on examining space as sites of resistance. She uses space as a framework for her preparation and processing, providing her with an initial boundary from which she can begin to organize her movement (“taisha paggett and WXPT”).

Los Angeles (or, in this case, the L.A. River), in contrast to the white cube, is a vast, expansive landscape; the continuity of concrete urban sprawl gives an impression of eternally extending and merging proximities and communities. Similar to the institution, it is immobilized by distinct neighborhood boundaries, ubiquitous crosshatched freeways, and filled with endless motion and inhabitants’ movements in quotidian life. For some bodies, the city is ripe with opportunity and prospects; for others, it is asthmatic and isolating. paggett’s interest in historical acts of resistance and the collective labor of bodies during the Great Migration informs evereachmore’s exploration of Black queer solidarity within the sordid landscape of the riverbanks—an emblematic site of the exhaustive negation of bodies on the margins. Through these references, the process of bodies in motion attempts to uncover economies of resistance and discover new understandings of unison and space (“taisha paggett and WXPT”).

paggett’s movement practice not only contends with the landscape as a site of shared labor, but also with the Black body as a domestic site of labor and power (V. Phillips). This dance-making practice is the continuous negotiation and pursuit of problem solving through the body. Within this practice, paggett is loyal to the blackening of spaces, specifically the white spaces she tends to operate within. She is committed to expanding the conversation of
what Blackness is and can be, and dedicated to pulling “Black dance” into the present and future, creating a path to talk about “Black aliveness” and resiliency through contemporary movement. By centering processes of practice, performance, connection, and sociality, her work with WXPT underscores an exploration of Blackness and the Black body through temporal displacement and the flexibility she creates out of unison (Ellison 30).

By employing teaching and rehearsing as a type of performance, *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People* is one of paggett’s platforms for probing Black aliveness, innovation, and futures (V. Phillips). A project developed out of WXPT’s exploration of anti-Blackness and Black life, *School for the Movement* is a significant installation and performance platform that addresses the question, “What is a Black dance curriculum today?” (*School for the Movement*). Returning to paggett’s dismissal of “aboutness” and call for togetherness, *School for the Movement* actualizes the idea of making audiences and bodies conscious of what happens when performance (in this case, dance) is formed, dismantled, and restructured for Black bodies. The potency in paggett’s practice lies in this shared space of “standing together in difference,” where artists and bodies try to understand each other and the world around them, employing somatic practices as a method of survival.

paggett closes her email correspondence to WXPT with the signature “in unison.” It is unexpectedly breathtaking to see this sincere sign-off published firsthand in *Movement Research* in an email written immediately prior to the launch of *School for the Movement*. paggett’s eloquence and rectitude saturate her ruminations, even as she laments her inability to find words and meditates on the disembodied dialectic required to persevere within a marginalized body’s resistance. She knows, however, that words assist in expressing the
urgency of a movement school in light of the instability of contemporary sites of refuge for a body on the margins. She writes of this unsteadiness to her collaborators, finding articulation in the power of the danced body:

speaking of death and erasure, there is this word “body” which i’m learning to unmoor, hoping to retrieve in this process. to excavate. the body itself, in the context of Blackness, has been proven to be a contested site, one of pre-determined, inevitable death. power undone, abandoned, destabilized, vacated. conversely, “Black dance” stands up, rises up, pushes against gravity, as action, as an undoing, as an overdue unlearning-learning towards a deeply necessary resumption of holistic, comprehensive, multidimensional real-time power, agency and capacity…(Black) dance is what we are. Black dance is the void-no-longer from which we (un)learn to speak, from which we learn to stand. (paggett, “WXPT: Letter”)

In the context of physical embodiment, Black dance, and the notions of “being-with” and “intra-action,” I return to the shaping of the “Black body” by and for normative coherent spaces. “Kettled by the long arms of the law, and corralled by the invisible hands of racial capitalism,” the Black body is one that is perpetually unstable as both the object and the subject—an idea that paggett centers in the WXPT’s mission for its projects (Ellison 29). This process of centralizing Black queer people “in unison” is one of healing, sustaining, and building—and is significant to the integration and practice of a sentient ethos.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

Curating a Sentient Ethos

Physicist Karen Barad posits that “[i]ndividuals’ do not exist, but are not individually determinate” (emphasis added, Barad qtd. in Kleinman 77). Individuals, she explains, only exist through “intra-action” with one another, because of repeated interactions with each other, and do not exist prior to interaction. Individuals are realized through recurrent, collective relationships and configurations. Barad’s notion of “intra-action” is similar to Jean Luc Nancy’s concept of “being-with”— the contention that the experience of “being” is not singular, but rather is always in coexistence (Nancy 29). Both models of “being-with” and “intra-action” are constitutive notions in my proposal of a sentient ethos. This assembly of modalities examines, cultivates, and supports the emergence of pluralistic feminisms within performance curation.

By activating “intra-action” and “being-with,” I argue that curatorial practice does not exist without engaging multiple identities, or idiosyncrasies, and multiple methods of process. With a sentient ethos, these modalities work in congruence to form a matrix that operates not only within and for contemporary performance practices, but also within and for social practices, by valuing discursiveness. Simply put, performance practice is a social practice.

I find a meaningful curatorial practice through the mingling of the four feminist methods in a sentient ethos, which value the multiplicity and unraveled margins within individuals and explore the tethering of pluralistic identities together. I uphold a commitment to a decidedly critical and thoughtful practice through the operation of these intersecting methods: emphasis on the artist’s lived experience and situatedness, immersion with
communal spaces, articulating and engaging with specific lineages, and a sinuosity within performance practices. These notions of multiplicity help to envisage new perspectives within contemporary performance and contribute to a project of reframing and representing dominant social and political structures.

The abundance of feminism in contemporary society demands a criticality beyond the daily absorption of mainstream popular feminist culture and content. Infusing a sentient ethos’ practices is valuable in realizing and utilizing intersectionality as an effective tool in valuing distinct epistemologies. By encompassing better questions and a commitment to provocation, my curatorial practice employs intersectional feminism as a strategy to build capaciousness around the pluralism of artists and their practices. This practice demands critical contemplation of sustained oppressive systems that limit incoherent bodies. The creation of a conceptual shelter through a sentient ethos’ framework supports the knowledge-seeking and method-building required to dismantle systems of oppression. A sentient ethos is, quite plainly, a conscious culture. Its responsibility is to value individual complexities discounted by white heteronormativity. It is a capacious movement that challenges the inherent exclusion of community; it instead honors both autonomy and multiplicity. It is a process of dismantling hegemonic patriarchal structures through the practice of “intra-action” and “being-with” the “other.”

I am committed to questioning how to explore narratives of opposition, valuing bodies on the margins as important participants in these narratives, and analyzing how these bodies are situated in relation to power. It is critical to unearth and dismantle what is centered as “normal” in order to address significant social disparities. This is evident in both Young and paggett’s engagement with queer phenomenologies and reorientation of bodies in space,
generated through a multidisciplinary, multidimensional, and multicentric way of “being-with” each other. Both artists employ disorientation as a means of engaging with physical and personal space in new ways, thus expanding how performance can be envisaged. Each is building a flexible yet supportive community through the shared understanding that “being” involves being-with-others (Nancy 29).

Intersectionality and multicentricity are central to applying a sentient ethos to my own curatorial practice and the broader arena of performance in Los Angeles. Intersectionality is key in order for this practice to be a means of resisting oppressive structures. Within this resistance is the reclamation of space as well as capacious healing for bodies on the margins. The concept of multicentricity, as defined by Meiling Cheng in her multiple Los Angeleses, plays a similar role. As Cheng writes, “The multicentric paradigm consequently has the potential to become a resistant strategy for those who are involuntarily relegated to the margins by the existing power structure” (13). By employing multicentricity, the methods of a sentient ethos encourage acknowledging individual’s margins and centers and other bodies’ margins and centers. In this way, a sentient ethos dismantles the “invisible center” with the recognition and empowerment of multicentric bodies on the margins.

A sentient ethos is crucial in contemplating the ecology of contemporary performance, specifically in Los Angeles, as it calls for methodologies and practices that move beyond existing exclusionary frameworks and upholds a multicentric, capacious practice for the future. Through “intra-action,” “being-with,” and multicentricity, a sentient ethos strategizes about how to best engage with intersectional feminism. It requires that all participants autonomously connect with their individual center while concurrently recognizing and valuing the individual centers of others. The importance of connecting these
interrelated methods—of identifying them as the practice of a *sentient ethos*—lies in acknowledging that these practices, together, are powerful. The naming provides a canopy for the practices’ flexible structure and malleability.

I find fibers of a *sentient ethos* interwoven in both Paggett and Young’s practices, operating as flexible anchor points in the artists’ sustained dismantling of hegemonic systems. I believe that their practices are sites of restoration and resistance, and when contemplated through a feminist lens, greatly inform my process and discipline as a curator. The methods identified in a *sentient ethos* support and deepen my unfolding and expanding practice of curation in Los Angeles.
Works Cited


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