

**taisha paggett**

**Self-statement for external tenure review committee**

**Materials list for this review: <http://paggettreview.wordpress.com>**

**Password: paggettreview**

I'm grateful for the opportunity to share my work with you through this tenure review for my time at UC Riverside. Since being hired in 2014, after a generative period as a visiting lecturer at Columbia College in Chicago, my interdisciplinary creative research—which re-articulates and collides Western choreographic practices with the politics of daily life to interrogate fixed notions of queer, Black embodiment and survival—has garnered national and international recognition amongst critics and scholars. That work has in turn fed and been nourished by the teaching and service work that I perform on campus.

In this statement I will offer a small background on how I came into making work and will organize my creative research into three main project streams: Dance as decomposition, the Fila Buster series, and the Company WXPT/Black death = Black dance project. (These groupings, which span work from 2009 to the present, are not explicitly chronological nor are they fixed categories.) I will also share a little bit about additional collaborative and community-based projects. I've given each work a number (for example #4) that corresponds to its portfolio page within the materials list, which you can find at the URL above. In doing so, I hope to convey the range and strength of my interdisciplinary dance praxis which has the body and space-making at its core.

### **Background**

I started dancing 20 years ago from what Hortense Spillers calls "a political passion," or to survive and understand the society around me as a Black, queer, working class, female body growing up in the arid racial politics and ubiquitous segregation of Central California. At times painfully shy, I spent the majority of my upbringing traversing the white, affluent side of town where I attended school, and the Black working poor side where most of my family lived. As any school to prison pipeline statistic would caution, I was kicked out of my school district by 15 and into a continuation program whose demographic was mostly people of color. An outcast amongst outcasts. At 18 I found myself in a beginning modern dance class at the local community college. Immediately this became an outlet I needed, and I immersed myself. However, in classes and rehearsals, I would be confronted with the same expectations, dichotomies, erasures, and generalizations of race, gender, and sexuality that I experienced outside of the studio. In this way dance was my first love and first heartbreak. In another way you can say it's how I got politicized and inspired to start creating my own body of work eventually. I'd spend hours in the school library pouring through dance books and VHS documentaries. Indeed, Alvin Ailey moved me, but it was in figures like Blondell Cummings, early Bill T Jones, Eleo Pomare and further Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti that I could see my reflection.

Believing myself to be too old to pursue dance formally, I studied Art History (another passion at the time) upon transferring to UC Santa Cruz and had my young mind blown by performance art and installation work. In 1999 I moved to NYC to be a dancer and experience what remained of the *Terpsichore in Sneakers* world that Sally Banes proclaimed. It was 9/11 that catalyzed me to focus on making my own work finally. In 2003 I started graduate school at UCLA's World Arts and Cultures/Dance Department and commenced to cultivate my creative platform and professional career. Being included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial and joining UC Riverside's Dance Department faculty was a meaningful acknowledgment of my work's successful circulation in the professional arena in that previous decade. Today I see myself not as a choreographer but rather an interdisciplinary dance artist with the arc of my career including community-based collaborations, social practice and 20 years of performance in the work of other artists.

### **1. Dance as Decomposition**

The *Decomposition* series is a body of work I started in 2009 that tests the limits of repetition as a conceptual and formal vehicle. It also asserts what I call 'introverted virtuosity' — a relationship to space and time that intentionally undermines expectations of the Black dancing body as a spectacle by moving at a pace which seems to slow down time and upset momentum. The term decomposition comes from French philosopher Henri Bergson:

*In learning a physical exercise, we begin by imitating the movement as a whole, as our eyes see it from without, as we think we have seen it done... We are right when we say that habit is formed by repetition of an effort; but what would be the use of repeating it if the result were always to reproduce the same thing? The true effort of repetition is to decompose, and then to recompose, and thus appeal to the intelligence of the body. - Matter and Memory, 1896*

Whereas Bergson was talking about the phenomenology of learning a singular action, I extended this to think about identity formation. In a word: We are what we repeat (and refuse to repeat.) In ***Decomposition of a Continuous Whole (2009, 2010, 2012, 2016) (#4)*** I blindfold myself and, across four hours, quietly traverse the walls of an empty space with a crayon in one hand that marks the surface with every step. The minimalist movement score that I follow (*high over-curve. pause. root to pivot. descending diagonal...*) leaves room for me to sense-feel my way through and attempt to reproduce the same trace with every repetition. The resulting wall drawing is a poetic transgression that refuses both dance's ephemerality and the invisibility of Black female labor. Called a "space-claiming act of phenomenological exploration" and positioned alongside Carolee Schneeman's 1973 performance "Up to and Including Her Limits" in Amelia Jones' 2015 essay, this work has been performed in four venues including the Studio Museum in Harlem, and as part of a 2016 Joan Jonas retrospective and event series at DHC/ART and Centre Phi in Montreal, along with Simone Forti and Tanya Lukin-Linklater.

***A Composite Field (2012) (#5)*** was my first collaboration with LA sound artist Yann Novak. Against the somewhat cold lines of our venue, the MAK Center for Art and Architecture's Mackey Garage in Los Angeles, we created an intimate environment by limiting the audience to 20 so they could share the "stage" with me and witness closely the details of my score, which was informed by photosynthesis, the movement of a plant toward the sun, and the masculine exoskeleton of my costume. To accommodate more people, we chose to perform the work three times in a row, thus giving my loose score an additional challenge to recreate itself through muscle memory with each repetition. In 2015, I would place documentation of these performances side-by-side to create ***Composite Fields (#6)***, a three-channel installation that reveals a new composition created from slippages in and out of the para-unison. The combined slow tug of light, time, body, and sound across the large projections provoked scholar Sarah Stefana Smith to coin the work a "methodology for contestation" that "breaches technology" in her 2015 essay for *Drain Magazine*.

## **2. Fila Buster project**

Another stage of my work centers on Fila Buster, a figure and concept that I first "invented" in 2012 from a desire to prod postmodern dance's notion of the neutral body and instead translate choreographic material into a living, breathing subjectivity. Still thinking about how repetition, time, and space-making could be political, my research led me to the filibuster, precisely that of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which gave fuel to the Civil War. I was also reading slave narratives and the story of Sojourner Truth. Thus Fila Buster was born: A queer Black feminist trans-historical figure who attempts to choreograph questions around how we relate to and make use of familiar objects of the world. This body of work, which spans 2012-2018, would be a way to name, conjure and (re)claim a series of ontologies that centered Blackness as an experience of endless transformation, refusal, unfolding and power.

In the 2012 performance at SomArts in San Francisco titled ***Fila Buster (2012) (#7)***, this refusal of neutrality is shaped by her hyperbolic silhouette (a Victorian bustle and exaggerated afro wig, extended by a soapbox on which she stood, and makeshift podium of microphone and clamp lights) as well as her actions—35 minutes of suspended silence and stillness, engaging Steve Paxton's small dance, followed by a sudden litany of words that, through repetitive speech, confesses her omnipotent existence:

*She's a fugitive, a refugee, a time traveler, a gypsy, a half-sister, the future... She's an oracle, an orator, the dictator, your preacher, your best friend forever and your worst fucking fear... She's on a soapbox, on stage, on air, on the rag, on Facebook, on the curb, on the side... She's from the teens, the 20s, the 30s, the 40s, 50s, the 60s on up... She's feeling fat, but don't you worry, feeling funky, feeling peachy, feeling everything, feeling nothing, feeling horny, feeling white, feeling sick, feeling her heart... She's a grandfather, a great-grandmother, my sister, a fossil, this essence, a witness, a farce...*

The companion piece to this performance, *vestibular mantra (or radical virtuositities for a brave new dance) (2012) (#8)*, a work in writing that further employs repetition and tugs on the form and semantics of stage directions to tell a story of liberation, was published online and later featured in a 2017 exhibition catalog organized by the Whitney Independent Study Program and The Kitchen in NYC. [Other small works in writing like *modest epoch: in which we seek transformation (2013) (#11)* and *Performance on the Eve of Negro Spring (2014) (#12A)* would further stand in for conventional notions of the performance document and attempt to make words dance.]

*LET'S USE THESE THINGS (2012) (#9)*, my first solo exhibition and “performative installation” at Commonwealth and Council gallery in Los Angeles employed and enchanted everyday materials. This show featured three works: *The Windows and the Sun (10/8, 4:24 pm)*, which utilized the repetition of white string and finely lined metal nails to trace the outline of the sun's reflection in the gallery at precisely 4:24pm on 10/08/12; *Proscenium*, a “painting” created by the task of dipping my locs in paint before whipping them around to mark the three walls of a small room within the gallery, completed by a cluster of lit candles in the shape of a stage thrust where I originally stood as if to memorialize an unknown act; and *Fila Buster in the Autotuniverse (2012) (#9A)*, a video made with long-time visual art collaborator Ashley Hunt in which aerobics and bodybuilding, through Fila Buster's speculative conjuring, are posited as practices of transformative agency. The video features the hair-whip action of “Proscenium,” thus concretizing the installation's choreo-narrative of its materials, as well as its intent to claim an environment of queer Black healing and release that would be later explored in the five-day performance for the Whitney Biennial, *Underwaters (we is ready, we is ready) (2014) (#12)* and its precedent work *Modest Epoch (2013) (#11)* at Public Fiction in Los Angeles.

Both *Underwaters* and *Modest Epoch* were experiments in understanding how we live inside of ideas, how daily domestic actions like eating, sleeping and the rise and fall of emotional states across a day influence movement, and how the Black body could push the limits of the institution to create space for its own regeneration. In *Underwaters*, across five days I executed a score that moved through four figures and temperaments in the gallery and on the street. My score held me in a vow of silence that I broke only to engage conversation about Black performance with a selection of seven artists including Ni'Ja Whitson and Niv Acosta. In a favorable *New York Times* review, Gia Kourlas mentions me as a “magnetic dancer with a rare ability to control the space around her [as if protected] by a force field while consumed by motion,” and further states: “*Underwaters*’ is not simply an endurance test, but a way to turn an ordinary space into a ritualistic site of magic and healing.” This work was also the subject of Jaime Shearn Coan’s 20-page critical essay, “How to see black dance in total whiteness,” published in *The Drama Review (TDR)* in 2017.

### 3. Company WXPT and Black death = Black dance

*We don't stand upright, those truly living, rather we dance in the spaces between the horizon and the vertical. This is the struggle, this is the living.* - 2018 Interview with Kemi Adeyemi in *Gulf Coast Magazine*

This third chapter of my work encompasses projects that I've made since my 2014 hire and have been supported by significant grants including the MAP Fund, NPN's Creation and Forth Fund, and the now-defunct UCIRA (University of California Institute for Research in the Arts) grant. Being seated in UCR's Dance Department yielded an opportunity to further investigate and employ dance practices and conventions as a philosophical imprint for understanding, engaging and confronting the politics of everyday life. As the erasure of Black and Brown bodies to state-sanctioned violence moved into national visibility and the protest movements out on the street grew in number, I wanted to stretch the physical limits of institutional art spaces further, more deeply prod the troubling racial history of Western postmodern dance practices, and re-occupy these predominantly white spaces with the presence and histories of people of color. In 2015 I formed *WXPT (we are the paper, we are the trees) (#18)*, an intentional community in the form of a dance company made up of queer people of color and allies, dancers and nondancers alike, to imagine a new mode of political resistance. Seeing gravity as a metaphor for understanding the complexities of being a racialized body in the US (much like the *vestibular mantra* text from 2012), we used our outdoor rehearsals, intentionally centered in Contact Improvisation, as a vehicle to engage difficult dialogue around the rapid succession of violence happening on the national level. *evereachmore (2015) (#13)*, commissioned by Clockshop, was WXPT's premiere site-responsive performance built from our weekly rehearsal

practices. This hour-long work included a procession through the Bowtie parcel, a stretch of undeveloped parkland on LA's east side, and featured cameos by Fila Buster who appears as a foreboding, spectral presence. The performance was included among *Art in America's* "Best of Los Angeles for 2015" list and received a feature on KPCC radio.

Rather than create another performance, the praxis of WXPT was then turned into a pedagogy that sought to answer the question: "what is a Black dance curriculum today?" as well as create a new interface that turned dancers into facilitators and audience into participants. (Here "Black dance" is a play on words meant not to point to the canon of African diasporic dance but rather to the perpetually unstable condition and resiliency of Black American life.) The resulting project, ***School for the Movement of the Technicolor People (2015 – present) (#14)***, presented at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions with the support of a MAP Fund, involved a free-to-the-public dance curriculum and event series run mostly by WXPT; a large-scale, mixed-media installation created with collaborators Ashley Hunt and Kim Zumpfe; and opening and closing performances in the form of a scored movement choir, thus turning a white-cube gallery into a porous public space of tactile engagement across six weeks. Inspired in part by a "school for colored youth" speculated to have been founded by a distant member of my family in the early 1900s of East Texas, the dance school and installation was also exhibited in 2016 at DiverseWorks in Houston and in a smaller format for the Fusebox Festival in Austin that same year. (Please refer to the "exhibition catalog and curriculum booklet in #14 for more on the classes, installation materials, and WXPT.)

My father's passing, in tandem with the mounting death archive in the media, provoked new research questions about how we mourn, specifically from a place of trauma, individually and collectively. Through a summer 2016 commission by the Getty Villa, I created ***Mountain, Fire, Holding Still. (2016) (#15)***, a ten-hour site-responsive performance-as-vigil in which weight and gravity were materialized in the form of a 40 lb. nebulous black mass that traveled with me. Being a commemoration itself to Mount Vesuvius' volcanic devastation in 79AD, my scored walking meditation through the site's outer gardens sought to occupy and bridge diverging histories.

I want to end this section by sharing a bit about two works connected to WXPT and mourning but that also 'resist the enclosure' of the categories I've offered up here. With the support of a CHIME grant, I created ***Decomposition of a Mutable Landscape (2014, 2016) (#16)***, a solo performance about rage, fear and erasure. First shrouded in a long wig reminiscent of a Fila Buster figure from *Underwaters* and then later "dressed" in a hoodie and exposed bottom, the performance interrogated the coherence of racial, sexual and social narratives, and employed the formal device of decomposition in a tight score that moved through a string of repeated actions. The 2016 version was curated as the conceptual anchor for UC Irvine professor Simon Leung's evening of performance, *Decompositions*, which included work by Yvonne Rainer and Kabir Carter. The first version of ***counts orchestrate, a meadow (or weekly practice with breath) (2017 – present) (#17)*** was a physical installation and weekly rehearsal/performance praxis presented at ICA in Philadelphia, in which two bodies (myself and WXPT collaborator Meena Murugesan) engaged a score of deflated contact dance, enacting the border of death and aliveness, and testing the limits of social intimacy as we merged our bodies against each other, the objects, and even audience members in the space. This work was accompanied by breath scores solicited from members of my community that sought to bring the presence of disappeared bodies into the room. The piece was the subject of a 2017 article by Wilmer Wilson in *Movement Research Performance Journal* alongside the work of EJ Hill.

The second iteration of this work, currently featured in this year's Made in LA exhibition at the Hammer Museum, engages an intergenerational ensemble of six Black collaborators in a weekly practice of reading, discussion, and a rotating series of self-recorded mini dance studies that appear on monitors in the gallery across the summer. Thinking here not of repetition but rather the echo as a method of analysis, the breath scores and videos play in doubled form (two monitors and two tall speakers personified somewhat as bodies) in a four-count delay to create an analog composition. Taking the idea of 'a meadow' to be a metaphor for the dance studio and further, for a possibility, both installations feature a carpeted field (more clearly in the ICA iteration) reminiscent of the *School*. This land politic shows up in *i believe in echoes*, my two-hour companion performance presented on Father's Day, in which Fila Buster implicates the viewer in her steadfast migration across space and their bodies, and the sound of breath scores are balanced by Malcolm X's powerful 1963 House Negro/Field Negro speech.

### **Collaborations, Performance and Turning Dance into Social Practice**

A critical counterpoint to my interdisciplinary dance praxis is building collaborative projects that engage communities, and dancing inside the work of other artists. To that end I've included in this materials list: My ongoing collaboration with Ashley Hunt, *On Movement, Thought and Politics (2004-present) (#20)*, in which we've created "par course" projects with veterans, garment workers, and teens; *itch dance journal (2006-13) (#19)*, the printed discursive platform that I co-founded with LA choreographer Meg Wolfe; *Force (2017) (#21)*, the special edition of Toronto-based *C Magazine* that I co-edited with Canadian scholar Erin Silver, which also prompted the publication to donate \$1000 to Black Lives Matter; and the week-long **People of Color retreat (2017, 2018) (#22)** which I co-organize with emerging visual artist Gabby Miller to offer a free-of-charge experience of respite and renewal to over a dozen artists, community organizers, and farmers in the woods of Northern California. Lastly, I'd be remiss to not address my performance work for other artists as a crucial part of my total creative research. An 11-minute video reel **(#23)** highlights some of the most impactful projects that I've been honored to perform in across my professional career.

### **Teaching and Service**

Around a full professional schedule, I've stayed committed to my teaching and service work on campus. I feel privileged to teach at UCR, which I hold to be one of the most important universities in California in its service to first-generation students and students of color, particularly at the undergraduate level. Since 2014 I have taught the expected full load of graduate and undergraduate studio courses, opening students to new levels of experimentation and curiosity in their own creative research. I've held countless services roles in the department—from chairing an FTE search committee and numerous MFA projects, to co-organizing the department's upcoming 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration and contributing to the rebuild of our undergraduate curriculum. Earlier this year I took five students to the International Blacks in Dance conference and, outside of the department, have been active amongst a consortium of faculty gathered to build a Black Studies program on campus. I've also been a mentor within the Black Student Mentoring Program inaugurated last year.

### **CONCLUSION**

The next couple of years will see me building deeper roots in some of my more recent work. This fall I will premiere a solo exhibition in Vancouver at the Audain gallery via Simon Fraser University, and in 2019 will mount an iteration of WXPT and the *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People* for Toronto Photographers Workshop (TPW) gallery with the support of an 80K grant from the Toronto Arts Council. This iteration will include Seika Boye, director for the Centre for Dance Studies at the University of Toronto, as the local lead facilitator, and will inaugurate a critical conversation on 'Black dance' and the historical and conceptual movement of African diasporic bodies on both sides of the North American border.

I've had the fortune and support to amass a body of work that pushes against the persistent marginalization of people of color, and that asserts the importance of embodied space-making through idiosyncratic pulls, plays, and politicizations of Western choreographic concepts, dance conventions, and frames. In doing so, my work unmoors new possibilities of social, political and personal life within and outside of the dance studio, and expands our understanding of what all dance looks like and can produce. This impact was materialized in 2017 when I was granted with the local Avest Award amongst ten other "womyn, and womyn-led community arts organizations" honored for their "outstanding contribution to arts in Southern California." Across my career I have also accumulated a Herb Alpert nomination as well as numerous US Artist award nominations. Earlier this year I was included in a list of "10 Contemporary Black Choreographers You Should Know," alongside Cynthia Oliver and Camille Brown in ArtsBoston. Though I could easily add another ten artists to that list, I'm grateful to know that the efforts of my creative research have made a mark on the dance canon.