



PROJECT MUSE®

How to See Black Space in Total Whiteness: taisha paggett's
underwaters (we is ready, we is ready) and the 2014 Whitney
Biennial

Jaime Shearn Coan

TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 61, Number 3, Fall 2017 (T235), pp. 72-93
(Article)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/669326>

How to See Black Space in Total Whiteness

taisha paggett's *underwaters (we is ready, we is ready)*
and the 2014 Whitney Biennial

Jaime Shearn Coan



Prologue

The stakes are high for the 2017 Whitney Biennial, the first to occur in the Whitney Museum of American Art's new downtown location. The 2017 Biennial, delayed by a year to accommodate the move, was intended to reflect the shifting sociopolitical terrain of the country at "a time rife with racial tensions, economic inequities, and polarizing politics" (Whitney 2017a). One painting, Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016), which portrays an abstracted Emmett Till in his coffin, quickly emerged as a flashpoint for criticism when *ARTnews* published an open letter to The Whitney from the artist and critic Hannah Black, who called for the removal and destruction of the painting (in Greenberger 2017). Debates on social media and web-based media outlets questioned the ethics of a white artist representing Black pain and historical trauma, as well as the dangers of censorship. Coco Fusco sharply reprimanded Black and others

who called for Schutz to be censored, and provided a short history of the tradition of white cultural producers making work representing Black suffering (Fusco 2017).

In response to the public outcry and demand for action, the Whitney, in collaboration with the writer Claudia Rankine, organized *Perspectives on Race and Representation: An Evening with the Racial Imaginary Institute* on 9 April 2017 (Whitney 2017b). Some of the presentations strove to historically situate the debate around *Open Casket*, including the particular circumstances contributing to Mamie Till's decision to show the world her son, disfigured by the hands of white supremacist men. In addition, references were made to the 1994 *Black Male* show, curated at the Whitney by Thelma Golden, as well as to the 1993 Biennial. It is certainly useful to look back to the 1993 show, which featured, among many overtly political and identity-based works, a videotape of Rodney King being beaten by the LAPD. The artist Lorraine O'Grady spoke of the need to hold the Whitney accountable "for its lack of material advancement of these issues that it's been facing now for 25 years—a quarter of a century" (Whitney 2017c).

Strangely, there was no mention at the Whitney event of the 2014 Biennial, which included in its program Donelle Woolford, a Black female artist, who in fact was an avatar created by the white artist Joe Scanlan. Coco Fusco was one of the most articulate critics of Scanlan's project (Fusco 2014), and yet she does not mention the last Biennial once in her most recent piece. (It is not my intention to equate the circumstances, but rather to attend to the unresolved problems.) It is the short cultural memory, both of the public and of institutions, that disturbs me—the speed with which critiques of institutional decisions come and go. This does not support the slow and unglamorous work of building racial equity in powerful cultural institutions.

At the close of the Whitney panel, the artist Lyle Ashton Harris asked for the mic and stood up to reject what appeared to be a conciliatory gesture by Claudia Rankine on behalf of the Whitney, saying, "I don't want to have a kumbaya moment" (Whitney 2017c). Black artists, and especially Black female, queer, and trans artists, inevitably garner less public attention when whiteness is at the center of critique. Mobilizing the 2014 Biennial as a nexus of thought upon which to engage the present Biennial, it becomes clear that new relationships to institutional spaces are already being developed by the participating artists themselves. It is up to us to follow.

How to See White Space

The 2014 Whitney Biennial, which opened on 7 March, emerged as perhaps one of the most infamous examples of what artist and critic Coco Fusco termed a "rupture of decorum," in which "artists are forcing the politically and racially antagonistic dimensions of relations between the museum artists, labor, and the public into the open" (Fusco 2014). For this Biennial the museum selected a different curator for each of its three floors, each of whom came from other institutions: Stuart Comer (chief curator of media and performance art, MoMA, NYC), Anthony Elms (associate curator, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia), and Michelle Grabner (artist and professor, Department of Painting and Drawing, School of the Art Institute

Figure 1. taisha paggett, underwaters (we is ready, we is ready). The Whitney Museum of American Art, 2014. (Photo by Ashley Hunt)

Jaime Shearn Coan is a writer and a PhD candidate in English at The Graduate Center, CUNY, and a 2017–2018 Mellon Digital Publics Fellow at The Center for the Humanities, CUNY. He served as the 2015–2016 Danspace Project Curatorial Fellow, and is a coeditor of the Danspace Project Platform 2016 Catalogue, Lost and Found: Dance, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now. Recent critical writing can be found in Twenty Looks (XL): Finale, Critical Correspondence, Drain Magazine, The Brooklyn Rail, Jacket2, and Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory. jaimesbearcoan@gmail.com

of Chicago). In the case of the Biennial, the antagonism coalesced around the representation of Black female artists—both in quantifiable terms and, perhaps more importantly, in qualifiable terms, through the decision on the part of Grabner to include Donelle Woolford, the fictional Black female artist conceived in 2005 by the white male artist and Princeton University professor Joe Scanlan. Since then, Scanlan has variously employed five Black female actors, including Jennifer Kidwell and Abigail Ramsay, to perform as Woolford. For the 2014 Biennial, Woolford showed two works in the gallery and (Jennifer Kidwell) performed a Richard Pryor stand-up routine from 1977, *Dick's Last Stand*, at various off-site locations nationwide (Whitney 2014b). While Donelle Woolford was listed on the Whitney website as well as in the catalogue as a participating artist, neither the names of Joe Scanlan or the actors hired to perform Woolford were included (Graves 2014).¹

Another invitation made by Grabner to the “real” Black female artist Sienna Shields led, via Shields, to the inclusion of the HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN? collective (YAMS) in the Biennial. The event that garnered massive critical attention to these curatorial decisions and institutional practices was the withdrawal of YAMS from the Biennial less than two weeks before it closed. This controversy became the subject of much arts writing and popular media. However, the critical discourse surrounding YAMS has largely been based on their strategic interventions and not on an analysis of their film, *Good Stock on the Dimension Floor*. Much less discussed were the off-site screenings of the film that YAMS pulled from the Biennial. But an even more palpable absence has prompted the question that drives this essay: Why is it that, amidst these highly visible debates around the Biennial, taisha paggett, an interdisciplinary Black female artist primarily working in the field of dance, drew very little critical attention?

Most media coverage interpreted YAMS's withdrawal from the Biennial as a direct response to Joe Scanlan's Donelle Woolford project—a version of the story that focuses on a single problem-artist, or one bad egg.² The collective has countered this interpretation of their withdrawal, describing it as a strategy of public resistance against the white supremacist structure of the Biennial, as detailed in the following statements by collective members:

SIENNA SHIELDS: Michelle Grabner came and visited my studio last summer. And the work that she saw was collaborative in nature. When she asked me to be a part of the Whitney Biennial, I thought about it for a while and decided it would be more interesting to me—and more true to the nature of the work—to participate as a collective. Also, I was pissed off about the history of the Whitney and its lack of any kind of initiative in changing its white supremacist attitudes. So we formalized our collective and group to not only do this project, the movie, but to use this opportunity to infiltrate an institution and to experience firsthand what happens in the art world in terms of white supremacy, to expose how the doors are closed for the majority.

CHRISTA BELL: One of the ways that we have discussed framing our participation—even before it started—was as a protest. Our participation inside of this white supremacist institution is a protest in itself. Of course we were aware of the politics of exclusion, the politics of white supremacy that make up the institution of the Whitney. I think a great way to consider this is that the entire participation was a protest, and the withdrawal was part of the protest. [...]

1. For Jennifer Kidwell's account, see “Performance and Para-Fiction: Jennifer Kidwell on Playing Donelle Woolford” (Kidwell 2014).

2. In addition to this tendency in framing, there is also the factor that, as YAMS is made up of about 38 people, various viewpoints have been expressed. For instance, member Maureen Catbagen focuses on Scanlan in a *Hyperallergic* article published on 14 May (Heddeya 2014).

I want to clarify. This is not about Joe Scanlan. We are not protesting Joe Scanlan, or Michelle Grabner. We are protesting institutional white supremacy and how it plays out. (in Davis 2014)

Contrary to YAMS's statements, the official response to the withdrawal from the Whitney framed YAMS's position as a case of antagonistic in-fighting among artists. A *New York Times* article, "Racially Themed Work Stirs Conflict at Whitney Biennial," demonstrates bias by its very title, locating the "conflict" outside of the museum's purview and treating it as a singular problem. In this article, "the museum" is quoted: "'Throughout its history the Biennial has welcomed provocative and challenging work, as well as the discussion that arises from it,' the museum said. 'We continue to support all the artists in the Biennial and the choices of the three curators of the exhibition'" (Lee 2014). The museum presents itself as a neutral space, and does not take into consideration the extremely disproportionate social and economic positions of the individual artists, nor does it acknowledge its own power in relation to the distribution of resources. While the *Times* utilizes a standard practice of ascribing a quote to an institution and not to an individual person employed by the institution, this position of objective anonymity reinforces the lack of accountability exhibited by the museum.

In her 6 May *Brooklyn Rail* article, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Thoughts about the Donelle Woolford Debate," Fusco reads the Whitney's response as essentially defending everyone's right to do what they want without addressing the cause of the controversy: "[...T]his is a whitewash [...]" (2014). She goes on to interrogate the implications of the wide-scale support of Scanlan's project, placing the projected (white male) fear of irrelevance next to the material reality, which is that Black female artists are scarcely participating in much less running the art market. Fusco asks:

How and why do these fantasies come to life when they are so patently untrue? What is the collective emotional investment in a white male artist's fantasy of black female artistry in a milieu that is overwhelmingly dominated by white money, power, and tradition? Why does that milieu take great pains to mask the reality of white dominance with a fetishistic display of black bodies and style? (Fusco 2014)

This critique is reflected in a statement from YAMS, who claimed that Grabner's late-announced choice to show their video on 7–9 March and 12–25 May at unspecified times (as part of a loop with other film and video)³ meant that many of the YAMS artists showed up at the preview receptions, some coming from great distances, functioning as visible Black artists in the Biennial when their work was in fact not even on display and would not be for more than two months. YAMS also cites microaggressions such as the initial failure on the part of the museum to post a wall tag for their work and the difficulty YAMS had in getting all of their names included in the catalogue, whereas Joe Scanlan was permitted to completely attribute his Biennial contribution in the catalogue to Donelle Woolford, so that it appeared she was an actual artist and not a fictional creation (Davis 2014). It was in light of Grabner's choices, including her refusal to meet with YAMS to discuss their concerns, that Sienna Shields sent a message on behalf of YAMS to all 2014 Whitney Biennial artists on 13 May, stating: "We appreciate that the Whitney Museum has attempted to fashion an institutionally

3. Currently, on the Whitney's 2014 Biennial website, YAMS's film is listed as having been screened on 7–9 March (Whitney 2014d). However, according to a webpage archived on the Wayback Machine on 15 March 2014, the original dates listed were 7–9 March and 12–25 May (Wayback Machine 2014). Additionally, there are specific times listed on the current website but no times listed on the archived page, or on an archived page from December 2014, which appears to support the fact that specific screening times were assigned later. There is not currently and has never been mention of the YAMS's withdrawal from the Whitney on their site (Whitney 2014c and 2014d).

circumscribed bandaid. However, this is a wound that deeply penetrates the surface of *our skin*” (in Heddaya 2014).

In an article published in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Art and race at the Whitney: Rethinking the Donelle Woolford debate,” Carolina A. Miranda asks: “How could the Whitney possibly justify including [Joe Scanlan’s] work in a Biennial that included only eight ‘real’ black artists, only one of them a woman?” She then quotes Grabner: “‘As an artist [...] I am compelled by all types of artwork: critical, formal, process-based, political. This is how I think about diversity and representation in my curatorial endeavors. Art criticism, as Samuel Beckett says, is not bookkeeping.’” Grabner, in framing herself as an artist and not a curator (she is both), disavows the power she holds in her position as a curator in the Whitney Biennial. Miranda finds it “frustrating” when Grabner defensively points out the prime real estate position she gave to Dawoud Bey’s large photograph of President Obama—but continues: “To lay this all on Grabner, and even the Whitney, however, misses the point. The issue the work raises is far bigger” (Miranda 2014).

This point—the lack of racial equity in the art world—is the very point that YAMS’s intervention targets. It’s not just Scanlan; it’s not just Grabner. When Ben Davis asked if they had ideas for steps that institutions like the Whitney could take going forward, YAMS collective member Andre Springer offered: “More transparency. Also, the idea of looking at inclusion not from the perspective of, ‘we need numbers’ but actually of having the knowledge to understand different aesthetics, about where different art comes from and what that means.” YAMS collective member Christa Bell added:

I also find your question a little unfair. To ask us, the Yams, “What are the steps? Can you give me a 1-2-3-step idea of what needs to be done...” It’s unfair in the sense that we have the least resources, we have the least institutional power to set the agenda. And yet the question is consistently pointed at us. Our entire purpose is to contribute to an environment in which white supremacy is not tolerated. That’s our first step, and it should be our last step.

After that it is the responsibility of the Whitney, or Yale, or Princeton, all of the institutions who are part of Joe Scanlan’s arts collective, to investigate themselves, to interrogate their methods of curation. Let’s turn the question part of this program back to them. We’re just artists. I feel like we’ve done our part to bring attention to a problem that is just so embedded, so nasty, in the culture of art in this country. So let’s turn that question to the institutions. What are they going to do? What’s their 1-2-3 step plan? (in Davis 2014)

Springer makes the prescient point that, beyond a quota system, a shift in aesthetics needs to take place. Bell’s response, in turn, addresses the implicit assumption that the burden of “race work” belongs to Black artists. She redirects this responsibility away from her collective of (mostly) Black artists, who, as she points out, have comparatively limited resources, and onto the institutions, thereby reinforcing YAMS’s challenge as a redress to the very structures of white supremacy. Like Fusco, Bell points to the mutual reinforcement of institutions at work: academic, governmental, cultural, and artistic.

At the close of her essay for the Biennial catalogue, Grabner includes several pie charts, which show demographic information for the artists she conducted visits with in preparation for extending invitations for the Biennial (not the artists that she actually *did* invite): “The infographics designed to accompany my essay are meant to reveal transparency in my curatorial practice and, similar to the conversations, an endeavor at forthrightness” (2014:265). Categories for these charts were: gender (male and female only), age, geographic location, MFA, teaching, gallery representation, and relationship to Grabner. There is no breakdown of race, an absence that is hard to miss, and even harder to justify. This analytic, rather than offering useful infor-

mation about unequal distribution of access across intersecting factors, presents each category in isolation. This is also an interesting contribution from the curator who has made statements about diversity not being about bookkeeping.

Eunsong Kim and Maya Isabella Mackrandilal, launching one of the most polemical critiques against the 2014 Whitney Biennial, “The Whitney Biennial for Angry Women,” dismiss the inclusion of Donelle Woolford as a Black female artist due to the absence of lived experience in Scanlan’s fictional persona⁴: “She didn’t live the life of a thousand little cuts, the infiltrator’s life” (2014). They point out that YAMS is “a collective of 38 mostly black & queer artists but barely gets treated as one artist.” In the final section of their essay, Kim and Mackrandilal take a sharp turn: “We’re tired of talking about them. We all know who they are. Let’s talk about us. Let’s talk about the people on the margins of things. Let’s talk about the ones who slip through.” And then they turn to taisha paggett: “Would the average viewer of the Whitney Biennial know that paggett was in the show? Probably not. Her name haunts the page of the museum guide, she is in ‘Other Locations’” (Kim and Mackrandilal 2014). taisha paggett’s name does not appear in most of the articles I have surveyed, even though these articles are primarily concerned with the representation of Black female artists in the Biennial.⁵ She does get a brief mention in Miranda’s article, albeit a parenthetical one: “(That woman, incidentally, was taisha paggett, an L.A.-based dancer and choreographer whose presence at the Whitney was ephemeral, lasting only for a series of performances at the museum held over a period of five days)” (Miranda 2014).

“Other locations,” “ephemeral”—the register of these descriptors strikes ghostly undertones, much like paggett’s absence from the public dialogue around the Biennial. And yet, these descriptors are also strikingly accurate in a more positive sense: paggett’s work is very much an intentional accumulation of traces and (Other) places. However, her almost constant presence in the museum over a period of five days, as well as the extension of her performance outside of the space of the museum, can hardly be seen as a minor event. paggett’s work, alongside the YAMS’s, challenges the Whitney Biennial’s curatorial practices.

In situating paggett’s *underwaters* (*we is ready, we is ready*) within this incendiary Biennial, I hope not to flatten her work, which is far-reaching, but I do want to redress the lack of discourse around it. The YAMS’s off-site events and the text of their Biennial catalogue essay demonstrate affinities with paggett’s on-site performances and catalogue text. Perhaps the concerns and tactics of these artists are less divergent than they appear. paggett’s work challenges an art world that is deeply in need of having its politico-aesthetic roots in whiteness dislodged. paggett’s work facilitates an unlearning of the epistemologies that shape the viewing of Black performance within the white cube. Once the white space of the institution is made visible, the construction of Black space can be more clearly felt.

The Making of Black Space

taisha paggett’s *underwaters* (*we is ready, we is ready*) took place in the gallery lobby of the Whitney Museum from 16–20 April 2014. This was not the first time that paggett has presented her movement-based work in a gallery or museum; paggett has created works for a variety of spaces, including black box theatres and the outdoors. Invited to participate in the Biennial by curator Anthony Elms, paggett, rather than producing a ticketed limited-engagement show,

4. Although this is complicated by the fact of the lived experience of the actors who play Woolford.

5. Perhaps the most succinct critique came from Kimberly Drew a.k.a. @museummammy, social media manager at the Met, in this tweet: “i take back all of my @whitneymuseum excitement. did a count 9/103 artists are black... NINE. and one is a fictional black person BYE” (in Frank 2013).

conceived *underwaters* as an immersive environment. Also described as a “residency” by the museum (alternatively, it could be described as an installation, durational performance, or even an occupation), paggett would move in and out of the space in the guise of four different personae during museum hours over a period of five days.

The four personae, never named or defined, range in gender presentation, era, age, and aesthetic. From my particular subject position as a queer, white transman, I will venture to describe them 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. paggett changed from one to another in front of spectators, undressing and redressing slowly as she faced a clothes rack placed at the back wall, on which hung dresses, pants, shirts, hats, and wigs, and under which stood pairs of shoes, ranging from high heels to men’s loafers to sandals to sneakers.

paggett adhered to a vow of silence throughout the duration of the piece, except when she produced sound via a persona (paggett 2014b). In other words, she would not “break” from the performance—opening up the possibility that, in pushing herself beyond the conventions of a black box performance, even beyond the boundaries of performing, she could create a space for personal healing as well as the healing of “historical trauma locked in the ether and the body of ‘the black’” (paggett 2014b). paggett’s repurposing of the lobby gallery into a transhistorical space capable of facilitating communication with spirits and other nonpresent entities functions as a counterpublic amidst the seemingly ahistorical instantiation of the present represented by the Biennial.⁶

After her proposal to create a work that featured a large group of Black dancers was rejected due to budget limitations, paggett endeavored to “still include their presence somehow, even abstractly, or if nothing else, to use this as a call to connect with other Black dancers and movers and drive home the idea that this performance, and artmaking in general for me, is research” (paggett 2014b). Over the course of her five days in the gallery, paggett conducted seven interviews with Black female and transgender dance artists. All of these interviews occurred off-site and were transmitted via her cell phone back into speakers attached to the ceiling of the gallery. paggett exceeded the bounds of the museum quite literally by leaving it to conduct her interviews during the hours that she was supposed to be performing. The off-site interviews were the only locations where paggett spoke, and only the interviewees could hear her. The transmissions, while live, scrambled the voices, so that they were present, yet incomprehensible, in the gallery. Placing limits on (white) access, the interviews function as spaces of/for blackness. “Invisible” to spectators, inaccessible to ticket-holders, and closed to documentation by the Whitney, these Black spaces transcend the institution.

paggett’s employment of personae destabilizes and rejects the representational role assigned to Black female artists in an art world dominated by white men. Her inclusion of others (a move that feels akin to Sienna Shield’s decision to extend her personal invitation to a collective of Black and queer artists) and her extension out of the museum during hours when she is officially “performing” demonstrate a resistance to proscriptive institutional policies that police bodies. In an institution where art objects are markers of value, her utilization of domestic objects and her interest in residue and traces (from the various temporalities and geographic zones that her personae inhabit, as well as the traces of daily life that the performer leaves behind), reorganize artistic and social economies. Moreover, paggett’s work serves a pedagogical function through its exposure, due to the shared proximity of performer/persona and spectator, of the relational nature of identity.

6. This follows José Esteban Muñoz’s claim that “counterpublics that contest the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere [...] offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency” (1999:1).

On my first visit to the Biennial, I pass through the crowded and noisy lobby, where people are chatting in groups, looking at guides, taking selfies, and notice an open entryway to the left of the elevators. paggett, watched attentively by several museumgoers on both sides of the opening, is pacing slowly back and forth just outside the entry. One foot lines up exactly in front of the other, as if she is on a tightrope. She is wearing a simple off-white dress and too-big black loafers. As she walks, she smoothes her dress and her hair, her eyes far away. It feels as if she has been transported from another time and place, keeping her composure in the midst of a new and unfamiliar environment.

Once I enter the gallery, I find that, aside from the presence of paggett and a group of spectators, there is a lot to take in. To the left is a hair and makeup station: a shelf with a sponge, a pic, liquid makeup, and safety pins; and a mirror hanging on the wall. Nearby on the floor, bunches of bananas, pitchers of water, and banana peels are lined up on top of a white board laid on the ground (required by the museum in order to keep organic material off the floor). A ball of yarn rests in one corner, somewhat unraveled. Off to the right stands a bucket of dirty water with a dirty rag hanging over the side of it. Scattered across the space are dozens of



Figure 2. taisha paggett, *underwaters (we is ready, we is ready)*. The Whitney Museum of American Art, 2014. (Photo by Ashley Hunt)

folding chairs (to be placed in various configurations over the course of the five days), stacks of white plates, tea lights placed on individual plates, and a swept-up pile of shattered plates. Near the doorway is a high stand containing two clock radios, a phone, and a microphone. On a low shelf against the right wall: sage, a musical triangle, a small pile of pastels, a digital wristwatch, droplets (blood?) pressed between film, a pile of hand towels, and books—*Matter and Memory*, *Geomancy*, *Demonic Grounds*—with a broom laid flat in front. Handwritten text appears on the wall above the shelf: PRODUCE TEARS and TURNING OBJECT INTO SUBJECT. Ripped-up strips of paper clutter a nearby plate on the stone floor.

The persona who occupies this space looks like paggett, but, aside from being dressed differently than she usually dresses (nothing unusual for a performance), she registers no awareness of who is around her—that is, she does not distinguish us one from another; she seems to see us in soft focus. Her concentration is directed elsewhere—it seems that she is aware of other images, other information. There is no designated performance area or stage, so it feels especially strange to be with her but not with her. Although the wall text outside the door mentions personae, they are not listed or described, so I must interpret, make up my own stories, feel my own responses—along with each individual spectator. Over the course of the two days I spend in this space of paggett’s making, I encounter all four personae.

1. *Domesticity/Dreamer*

She wears an off-white cotton dress and plain black low-beeled shoes, moves with the grace of middle age. Her primary actions are sweeping, walking meditatively, picking up the pieces of plates broken by another persona, re-composing the space. She ends with a little old-fashioned dance, very proper, holding the edges of her skirt.



Figure 3. taisha paggett, *underwaters (we is ready, we is ready)*. *The Whitney Museum of American Art*, 2014. (Photo by Christopher Golden)

Wearing a cotton dress, knee-length and off-white, in flats or barefoot, she walks slowly and carefully, smoothing her dress, fidgeting with the buttons, playing with her hair. Her eyes are far away; she is silent. She sweeps, she washes the floor, often with her face turned downward. Her simple movements are graceful, distilled, fluid.

2. *Masculinity/Old Age/Anger*

He wears a gray suit jacket and white pants, an afro wig, oversized scuffed shoes (resembles Adrian Piper's Mythic Being). His primary actions are staggering around as if drunk and smashing dishes against the wall.

His toes circle his shoes as if they are too drunk to know the way forward. He pulls an oversized suit jacket over his head, hobbling, making doddering old man movements. Grasping for dishes, almost blindly, he unstacks them, moves them around on the stone floor, restacks, lurching and staggering across the room. Putting on an afro wig, he pauses, then drops the shaky quality quite abruptly to pick up and hurl plates against the wall, like Frisbees. After finishing, he sits down on a chair with his head down, breathing, his head shaking slightly.

3. *Femininity/Sexuality/Youth/Magic*

She is dressed in tight white pants, a clinging white short-sleeve shirt or topless, a long straight wig, wearing strappy high heels or barefoot. Her primary actions are traveling through the space, gathering and shifting, energy, dancing around the periphery, playing the triangle. Her catalyzing moment is yelling, "It's my fucking history!"

Standing in very close proximity to spectators, she combs out a waist-length, straight-haired brown wig. She takes off her pants, lays them out on the ground, folds and hangs them up. She puts on tight white pants, then a hairnet and the wig, finger-combing the hair forward, covering her chest.

4. *taisha*: casual athletic wear (leggings, sneakers, kneepads), sometimes with the addition of black liquid makeup on face and neck; primary actions: writing, lighting candles, moving plates, keeping track of time, exiting the space.

paggett walks to the clothing rack and selects leggings and a T-shirt, removes her clothes down to her underwear, slowly dresses. She drinks water. She places tea lights on each plate placed around the space, lighting them with a lighter or candle to candle. She leaves, very intentionally, moving quickly. She reenters, charging forward and retreating in reverse along invisible lines. She lunges; her movements are those of an athlete preparing to compete, her body is strong and rubbery.

paggett cycles through these personae each day, in a fixed order. Each persona reaches a “breaking point,” which instigates the transition to the next persona. They are marked by different costumes, which have variation, and each persona has an affect, embodiment, and movement score of its own. The weight and shape of the costumes, including the wigs, is very important; she considers the costume as an “exoskeleton,” allowing her to “feel the body more as a three-dimensional sculpture” (paggett 2017). Her quality of movement emerges out of this contact, as she imagines, kinesthetically, how the persona inside a particular pair of tight jeans or a boxy suit jacket might move. Although the personae are distinct, they are also interdependent; their tasks correspond/respond to the actions of the others.

paggett describes the movement scores as “a set of tasks in place to support an energetic arc” (paggett 2017). These movements are weighted with iconographic significance, and made more discursively precise through the use of costume and gesture, which further signify gender, class, and historical period. The movement scores, developing in an accretive fashion over the duration of the work, contribute to the coherence of each persona; they are, quite literally, “a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (Butler 1988:523). Although based in the physicality of the body (gesture, speech, swagger, etc.), Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and (gender) identity is often engaged with on a discursive level. paggett’s work *performs* the process of identity formation in real time.

The costume changes happen in full view, and with a sense of ceremony. paggett slowly straightens out and folds the garments as she puts them away. She often pauses while dressing, performing an action or sequence of movements, so that she seems to be between or among personae. The passing between personae is a public process—the Butlerian artifice and constructedness show. paggett is traveling through iconographic territory—blending and transposing gestures, speech, and objects. Her use of personae denies an essentialized representation of gender, and also of blackness. Fred Moten, in his essay “The Case of Blackness,” among other things a conversation with the fifth chapter of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), points to the fugitivity of blackness:

Perhaps the thing, the black, is tantamount to another, fugitive, sublimity altogether. Some/thing escapes in or through the object’s vestibule; the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out. The air of the thing that resists enframing is what I’m interested in—an often unattended movement that accompanies largely unthought positions and appositions. (2008:182)

paggett resists the “framing” of blackness and of gender, but also the frames enforced by the gallery space and the dance concert space. In an interview recorded about a year prior to the Biennial performance, paggett responded to a question I asked about her interest in creating installations in visual arts settings: “How I started was not thinking that I wanted to be interdisciplinary. I just started thinking about the frames in dance. Why are they so set? Identity, and the notion of the black dancer was one of those frames” (in Coan 2013). The “air of the thing that resists framing” fills the gallery as paggett slips through the movement scores that are linked to each persona.

paggett's Biennial installation maps new meaning into the gallery space, through her gathering of objects, her movement scores, her moving between personae. But it is not she alone who is creating the space; she may be setting intentions for it, but the space is made by everyone in it, including spectators. In her Biennial catalogue entry, paggett describes her priorities: "more cleaning house. more acknowledging inner-historical (mine and yours) thoughts, frames and ideas. more constraints and regifting to unearth meaning from the things that already exist. tapping into their layers" (paggett 2014a:231). That parenthetical "mine and yours" reminds us that paggett's body is not the only one that carries historical and geographical traces. Material and imaginative places move among and between us all—not only those who are present in the space but those not present too.

One of the books stacked on the shelf near the door (paggett leaves a visible trail of research) is Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), a book that aligns the disciplines of geography and Black studies, with a specifically Black feminist perspective. McKittrick argues that the idea that space "just is" not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly calibrates where, and therefore who, we are" (2006:xi). She warns against being seduced by a passive relationship to space: "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). Like identity, space and place are constructed and relational, not "merely containers for human complexities and social relations" (xi).

At one point paggett unclips a piece of white poster board from a pants hanger on the clothing rack and kneels down on the floor to write: "SOME PARTS OF ME ARE VISIBLE, OTHERS NOT. SOME MAY BE REACHED BY FOOT. OTHERS ONLY BY SEA." In this text, paggett links her body to place(s) that she has known but that may be invisible to the spectators in the Whitney. The riddle-like quality of the text refers to places that require various modes of transportation to access while also alluding to imaginative or discursive places, places of knowledge and feeling, places of experience.

After she is done and leaves, the written text remains. The next day, when I reenter the space, this text has been shredded and placed on a plate—the object remains but is no longer readable. If I had not been present at its making, I would not know it existed. The texts that paggett creates in this piece take on the quality of transmissions later literally deconstructed. The texts too become places that are no longer accessible, proof of the instability of the archive.

There are objects everywhere, accessible, but it seems impossible to touch them. They are magic, talismanic. It is paggett's space, or the space of her four personae, held together by silence. The traces of the personae accumulate in the space: banana peels, worn clothes and wigs, fragments of dishes, dents in the wall from flung dishes, the shredded text. They are present always, when paggett is absent and when she is present. The traces all link to her body. They are visual (and olfactory) but also bear witness to sound. Sound, like movement, is ephemeral—its traces are less easy to track. Moten understands the ephemeral as a mode of resistance (2003:47). The moving of plates on the stone floor, the sweeping, the removal of clothes and makeup: "The value of the ritual as meaning seems to reside in instruments and gestures; it is a *paralanguage*" (Moten 2003:48).

paggett smooths her hair, her dress; she taps a plate and looks to the corner of the room: her dancing itself is gestural, in that it is reaching somewhere, stretching beyond the white walls. While paggett's gestures are witnessed by those in the gallery, they are also a form of communication to others who are not present, not visible. José Esteban Muñoz writes: "Concentrating on gesture atomizes movement. These atomized and particular movements tell tales of historical becoming. Gestures transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer [and Black and female] histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture [The Whitney]" (2009:67). Gesture then, is a communal activity, never singular, never restricted to a single temporality or body.

The way that paggett embodies the personae and moves between them destabilizes the notion of a fixed “self.” Although one of the four figures she moves among is herself, it is still a self that is performing. Moreover, this persona, marked by contemporary clothes and more pedestrian or postmodern movement sequences, is sometimes altered by the application and removal on her face and neck of dark liquid makeup. David Batchelor, in *Chromophobia*, explores the historical line of interpretation (from Plato on) of the cosmetic application of color as an exercise in deceit: “If surface veils depth, if appearance masks essence, then makeup masks a mask, veils a veil, disguises a disguise” (2000:54). Makeup functions as a façade, yet the make-up’s concealing properties more completely reveal the skin underneath, calling into question the signification of the skin altogether. This painting on or over the skin also serves to *make visible* the intersubjective experience Fanon refers to as the “epidermal racial schema,” meaning the registration of the historically sedimented racial gaze in the body, the force of which overpowers the Black subject’s own corporeal schema: the previously felt outlines of their physicality ([1952] 1967:112). In its conjuring of traditions of minstrelsy, blackface makeup further casts the performer into being the object of racial looking. But in paggett’s case, applying blackface is an agential act, hailing the gaze of the spectator in a way that makes the racial gaze explicit—impossible to deny.

When wearing the liquid makeup, paggett seems to move in a force field, exiting the gallery space past spectators who appear to be shocked. Is it the dark makeup or the sudden departure that causes this reaction? Or is it the combination of the two? paggett mixes up images and actions of abjection and agency. Blackness, in her performance, is nothing if not fugitive. For some spectators in the lobby gallery of the Whitney, there is perhaps a disjuncture between their experience within paggett’s installation and their customary ease within the walls of an art institution. Sara Ahmed makes a compelling argument for the differentially experienced sense of belonging in white institutional spaces: “White bodies are comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape*” (2007:158)—in other words, where their bodies are expected because they have always been there. It is when non-white bodies appear in white spaces that a “process of *disorientation* [occurs]: people blink, and look again. The proximity of such bodies makes familiar spaces seem strange” (159).

In paggett’s gallery space, the lights are bright, there is no stage, no designated area for spectators to occupy. Because paggett makes no eye contact and does not speak, spectators are simultaneously aware of her presence and their own but are also aware of being unaddressed. The spectators are compelled to set their own courses for how to compose themselves. Many remain perched in the doorway, occasionally even wearing the audio guide headphones distributed by the museum; others come right up close to inspect everything. Some talk loudly; others snap photographs interminably. paggett never looks directly at anyone, a choice that could create either a sense of autonomy or discomfort. I find expressions of self-consciousness, surprise,



Figure 4. taisha paggett, *underwaters (we is ready, we is ready)*. The Whitney Museum of American Art, 2014. (Photo by Ashley Hunt)

and curiosity—as well as the embodiment of a stiffness that expresses no reaction at all. In this space, everyone is on display (see Coan 2014).

paggett's personae function as various "positions" or identities, which are, as Stuart Hall writes, "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" ([1990] 1994:394). The personae allow paggett to move around in time and space, positioning herself in multiple locations, thereby shifting the positions of the spectators in relation to her and to her personae with their various historical and cultural iconographies. While the spectators might have a fixed conception of the performer's identity, as well as their own, as they watch paggett slip into and out of personae, they may call their assumptions into question. Hall's formulation emphasizes the contingency of identity, depicting it as something both within and outside of our control: "cultural identity is "[n]ot an essence but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position" (395).

Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* envisions a rhizomatic structure in which "each and every identity is extended with a relationship through the other (1997:71). This spatialization of the politics of identity hearkens back to McKittrick's claim that "Black matters are spatial matters" (2006:xiii) and also provides a useful analytic for the encounters of racial difference that occur within the space. The philosopher Jean Luc Nancy's text *Being Singular Plural* develops a model and grammar for an ontology that is brought into being through the compresence, or simultaneous existence, of others: "the singular-plural constitutes the very essence of Being" (Nancy 2000:28–29).

In a mode that resonates with the choreographic, Nancy depicts position as "its distinction *from*, in the sense of *with*, other (at least possible) positions, or its distinction *among*, in the sense of *between*, other positions" (12). The singular-plural is not a universalizing of singularity but a mutually reinforced pressure that is constitutive—perhaps a physical analogue for this would be contact improvisation, in which weight must be continually distributed between bodies and yet actual matter does not transfer from one body to another. To exist in the mode of *being-with*, "from one singular to another, there is contiguity but not continuity" (5). The title of paggett's work, *underwaters* (*we is ready, we is ready*), expresses grammatically a Black vernacular that emphasizes the collective "we," a plural singular. But might not the "we" refer to the personae? And might it not also refer to everyone in the room? This expansion of references is reinforced by paggett in her Biennial catalogue essay:

also remember: 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. (2014a:231)

In considering paggett's performance at the Whitney, the affective labor she expends on the basic level of just *being* a Black female artist in the museum must be taken into account. Cherise Smith, in her study of body-oriented performance, maintains that "identity-formation and negotiation require an audience" (2011:19). Moreover, she writes, "the body is the locus of anxiety around which fear of difference aggregates" (18). Here it's useful also to remember Butler's assertion that "The visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful" (1993:17). This tension has a lineage in performance reaching back at least to the 1960s. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, in *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*, articulates the tension as "the space between interest in performative communication and resistance to exhibition, between body and beholder" (2008:7). Or, more simply, "between the body being, and being watched" (6). In her catalogue essay, paggett demonstrates an affinity with Rainer's concerns by quoting her: "another question: 'where do i look when you're looking at me?'" (2014a:229).

When I say that paggett's destabilization of a fixed notion of Black identity results in the creation of Black space, I mean that she creates a capacious space for a range of Black lived

experience. This is one strategy for eliding the proscriptive nature of Black representational art that Darby English outlines in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*.⁷ English calls for a prioritization of perception over conception in the viewing of art by racialized artists (2007:34). He describes a process of positive identification, wherein spectators scan for information they can index as racialized (34). This information is then collated according to and against other, previously held ideas or frames. What English is describing is a kind of feedback loop that prevents new knowledge production from forming in response to complex, contradictory art. In a similar vein, paggett speaks about the pitfalls of “aboutness”—which she identifies as an approach to performance that is more concerned with content and interpretation than with the experience itself:

I feel like work is an experience. When you even say that word “about,” it fixes—like it has to have a certain conclusion, or have a series of logic in place. I feel that that’s really limiting and not useful at all. 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. (in Coan 2013)

In “vestibular mantra (or radical virtuosities for a brave new dance)” paggett writes:

*stay visible, stay wanting more, stay addressing
what’s not there and what the
audience isn’t willing to see.*
(2012)

As I observed during *underwaters*, the spectator is not always willing or capable of seeing. Many spectators don’t make it past the entryway, unwilling to even enter, remaining onlookers. Occasionally, these onlookers are even wearing headsets. Those that do enter do not necessarily register their surroundings. At one point, as paggett lights candles on plates and then moves the plates around, two white men in their 40s appear to have hacked into the phone system (which is meant to transmit paggett’s interviews when she leaves the space). One of them speaks directly into the mic on the platform, telling a narrative, which at some point involves him loudly exclaiming: “I’m gay!” (This proclamation causes me to wonder whether paggett’s queerness is visible to him.) His friend walks around, talking into his phone, which now functions as a microphone: “Watch out for that shoelace, watch out for that banana,” getting a kick out of himself. This strikes me as an example of spectators bringing their accustomed modes of comportment into the gallery. They don’t attempt to adjust themselves to what they observe, but instead, inhabit their experience and “take up space” without any interaction with the performer. While they are engaged and active, there is no dialogic relationship and presumably, no shift in their conception of themselves or the worlds around them. The expectation of the spectators to be entertained also made itself present when, reentering the space after it had been cordoned off due to dish-breaking, several people surrounded the persona, who was seated and breathing heavily for some time. I overheard one adolescent boy, who was white and with his family say, “C’mon art lady, do something!”

*stay knowing that if they get this dance, there might be something wrong.
stay knowing that if something is only to be gotten, we
might all be doing something wrong.*

(paggett 2012)

While primarily addressing the spectator, this quote also demonstrates that paggett does not exempt herself from this same process—of falling prey to “doing something wrong” as a result of being too focused on a perceived outcome or direction or meaning for the work.

7. The title of my essay is obviously playing off of his.

Improvisation relies on an awareness of the body in space and time, in relationship to other bodies and objects. In its connection to the present, it can lead to new, contingent, and contiguous ways of being. How does the presence of spectators impact the performer? Can the performer be simultaneously here and somewhere else—herself and others? Even though there is no direct contact between paggett and the spectators, the space is undoubtedly charged with what moves between them—it is a shared field.

Towards the end of the second day, paggett changes into tight white pants and a long brown wig, which she finger-combs forward to cover her chest and face. She starts moving along the periphery of the space, always maintaining a steady rhythm as she travels with shoulders hunched and face obscured by her wig. She then enters a corner and begins a slow dance, squatting low with a flat back, her arms stretched behind her, picking up speed and becoming more fluid, shuddering as she twists and rolls her hips. Soon she punctuates her movement with jumping, causing her hair to lift and reveal glimpses of her face and the front of her body. Her breath becomes loud and labored. The room is thick with concentration. And then she stops. She walks over to the low shelf, picks up her triangle, and moves along the periphery again, ringing the triangle among the spectators. I move back to give her space as she changes back into her “regular” clothes. She takes a piece of paper from the clothing rack, places it on the floor, writes on it, props it against the wall, and walks out. It reads “OH WONDER” (see Coan 2014). When she exits the space, what happens to the spectators—do they exist without her?

While I have been primarily focusing on the spectators who are general contemporary art consumers, there are also many present who are familiar with paggett and her work. These are the spectators who tend to linger, and to return. There are also spectators who are less accustomed to being in white institutions and more accustomed to being in Black spaces. On the second day, I enter the space just after paggett has left, where there is a group of young people who appear to be part of an educational tour. I ask a boy what he has seen. He is Black, probably around eight years old. “It was a Black lady throwing things,” he says. His framing



Figure 5. taisha paggett, *underwaters (we is ready, we is ready)*. *The Whitney Museum of American Art*, 2014. (Photo by Ashley Hunt)

of paggett in this way (he repeats “Black lady” a few times) matches with his somewhat incredulous and humorous affect, hinting at the incongruity of the presence of someone with these identity markers occupying this institutional space, and behaving badly no less. His response, which should also be considered in relation to who is requesting it, demonstrates that he is trying to make sense of what he has seen alongside everything he has learned about what and who belongs in a museum.

Because I spend so much time in the gallery, I become familiar with one of the security guards (paggett always has a guard present, per the Whitney): a Black woman in her early 40s. She is very friendly and interacts affably with the museum guests, who are often very confused after wandering in from the lobby. She often reassures them that they can enter; she tries to make them comfortable. The security guard represents the institution that she is employed

by, and yet her identity markers of Black and female are not reflected in the administration of the Whitney. In a way, she serves as a cultural translator as much for those who are unaware of how to engage with this particular aesthetic form as for those whose hesitation might have more to do with their discomfort with an encounter of racial difference. I wonder how paggett is impacted by her presence, and that of the other guards who take turns in her space.⁸ Rather than reflecting the hushed gravity of the space, the guard exclaims to me with a big smile: “taisha’s crazy! That girl’s got some tricks up her sleeve!” Another time, I find myself rather jolted when I am in the empty gallery taking notes and the guard says loudly to me, “She’s back!” and I turn to see the mute paggett behind me.

Beyond the placement of the security guards and at times, a fire marshal (due to the presence of the lit candles), other interventions on the part of the Whitney also mediate the space.

WARNING: Taisha Paggett’s [*sic*] performance involves periodic nudity. Sharp items may occasionally be thrown and may be present on the floor. Please be attentive.

This sign, placed just outside of the gallery, identifies potential threats to the spectator: nudity and violence. No threats to the performer are identified. Hortense Spillers, in her canonical essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” explores the paradoxical position of the Black female subject as “a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the natural treasury of rhetorical wealth” (1987:65). She argues that Black women have historically been kept outside of the gendered space ascribed within the field of whiteness as well as the male-dominated historical representation of blackness (80), highlighting the important role that language, syntax, and grammar have played in that process. Spillers links the violence perpetuated against Black women in the US—from the ledgers of Middle Passage to slave codes to the Moynihan Report and, I will add, to today’s alarmingly high rates of murder for Black transgender women—is multiplied exponentially by the historical erasure and silencing of this violence. The sign placed at the entry to paggett’s installation, positing paggett’s nudity as a possible threat to the spectator, is thoroughly implicated in the grammar of this historical erasure. Spillers ends her essay with a call to action: “it is our task to make a place for this different social subject” (80).

paggett’s *underwaters* imaginatively takes up Spiller’s call to “make a place” for the Black female subject not only through the creation of personae and the production of texts but also by bringing interviews with Black female and trans artists into the work. paggett writes:

and then there’s this relationship to land, geography... i’ve been pawing over texts about geography and Blackness and the notion of being geographic and these ideas support my interest in traversing the city, in defying the walls of the prestigious institution, in not being beholden to the space that I’m “supposed to be in,” in seeing the street as a museum. (paggett 2015)⁹

The first interview paggett conducts takes place on Wednesday 16 April at 4:45 p.m. The phone rings. I am alone in the gallery. I press the green button to activate the transmission, as instructed by a small sign. paggett is still right outside, but leaves shortly. A few moments later, I hear voices—it sounds like men on the moon, or an echo chamber. I catch stray words and phrases. Speakers are spaced throughout the room, facing down from the ceiling. Mostly I catch the fillers: “Um...yeah...it was sort of,” and the rhythm of the conversation. It seems like at some point paggett is talking about her experience during the day, especially about difficult moments.

8. paggett appreciated the presence of the guards, experiencing them as witnesses (paggett 2017). Looking over photo documentation, it appears there were times when the security guards were the only spectators present.

9. Compare this to the description from the Whitney: “Moving freely in and out of the Museum, she will perform a score that leads her through subtle choreographies and tasks” (Whitney 2014a).

I feel I'm eavesdropping on an intimate conversation. It feels appropriate that I can't really hear the interview. It also feels temporally disorienting—the performer is talking about her work and I am still in it, standing among its traces. People walk in and then out again because “no one is here.” There is no cue that the speech is live, living. I walk downstairs to use the bathroom and there is paggett and her interviewee sitting at a table in the Whitney restaurant, looking totally nondescript, talking naturally.

From the description on the Whitney Biennial site:

As part of the research aspect of this work, she will interview a number of female and transgender dancers and visual artists including Niv Acosta, Callie Lyons, April Matthis, Kenya Robinson, Regina Rocke, Kaneza Schaal, and Ni'ja Whitson about how they understand the term “Black performance.” Although these interviews and other actions will take place offsite, they will be transmitted to the gallery by telephone, processed through a delay pedal, and amplified in the space so as to become part of the abstract sonic texture of the room. (Whitney 2014a)¹⁰

It is significant that the interviewees are named, as initially they were not mentioned at all on the website. paggett's inclusion of other Black female and transgender artists in her work for the Whitney is a gesture that simultaneously exposes a system and points to new models. The interviews are not semantically accessible to the spectators in the gallery. While paggett is inside the gallery, she is mute. The only times in which she is a speaking subject, she is addressed and addressing another Black female or transgender artist. On one level then, the inability of the spectator to *hear her* (to comprehend the content of her speech) feels like a tactic of exclusion, of protection and privacy. At the same time, the spectator does *hear her*; the abstract sound of the interviews function as an improvised score, as something that communicates beyond words. If we consider Fred Moten's contributions to understanding sound as a more generative field for Black lived experience than sight, we can also see how sounds communicate more than they seem to, serving as: “sites of communications never to be received; rites of affliction, tragedies, bodily divisions; spatial/social arrangements” (2003:45–46).

Although paggett does not speak while in the gallery, she does hum, sing, and create noises through actions: the swish of her dress, the scrape of plates across the stone floor, the flick of a lighter as she lights a candle, the gulps as she swallows water, the jangle of hangers on the rack, the shatter of porcelain as it breaks across the wall, the brush of the broom, the slosh of water against the sides of a plastic bucket while paggett washes off the dark makeup from her face. All of this sound communicates; it mixes with the sounds created by the spectators as they walk around, speak softly or loudly to each other, crinkle their programs, clear their throats.

paggett's writing, whether on paper or the wall, also communicates.

LET'S BE HONEST, I ONLY DO WHAT I WANT TO DO. I DO NOT DANCE
THE WAY I SUPPOSED TO DO. I ONLY DANCE HOW I WANT TO DO. I
ONLY DO WHAT I NEED TO DO. I ONLY CATCH WHAT I HAVE TO DO. I
ONLY ACT HOW I BORN TO DO. I ONLY TOUCH¹¹

These words, written in a single faint line across the perimeter of the walls of the gallery, approximately eight feet off the ground (as high as paggett could reach), are interrupted but not stopped by the doorway; the break occurs right in the middle of the word DANCE. Like all the texts produced in this space, it is unclear who exactly the author is. What is clear is the tone

10. This description has changed considerably; the interviewees were not listed until after the conclusion of the performance.

11. The text of “Performance on the Eve of Negro Spring” grew over the next two days and is printed in full in *TDR* (paggett 2014c).



Figure 6. taisha paggett, *underwaters (we is ready, we is ready)*. *The Whitney Museum of American Art*, 2014. (Photo by Christopher Golden)

of defiance, the utter disregard for spectators' expectations. It also breaks syntactical "correctness," in a manner that Spillers would surely appreciate. Written on the wall, the text is visible, lasting—a counterpoint to paggett's muteness. paggett refers to the text as a floodline (2017), which gives a new resonance to the title, *underwaters (we is ready, we is ready)*. The text accumulates incrementally over the course of the performance. Through photo documentation, I find out that on the last day of the performance, paggett went around and crossed out all the "I"s and replaced them with "WE"s, shifting from singularity to the singular plural.

This grammatical shift signaled an arrival of sorts for the fourth day, 20 April, which happened to be Easter Sunday, in which paggett enacted a vision of "queer church" (paggett 2017). On this day, the femme persona repeats her dance at the wall, her hair taking fantastic shapes as paggett leaves the ground in a series of jumps straight up into the air. She then commences her rounds of the space, playing her triangle, clearing the air. In the center of the room is a pile of broken plates on which tea lights are burning; around this heap of jagged white ceramic reflecting the flickers of light, the folding chairs are arranged in concentric circles.

From this point on, the costumes of the personae remain on the rack, and paggett, having changed back into her casual wear (this time not in the palette of grey, black, and white, but a mix of colorful patterns) sits in stillness with her eyes closed. The chairs are arranged in concentric circles, and a few scattered spectators join her. paggett remains still for some time, her arms held out straight and resting on her knees, tears slowly traveling from her shut eyelids down her cheeks and chin.

Perhaps the personae, based in part on members of paggett's family and community and have passed through her body one at a time over the previous three days, are now taking up a more permanent residence, or perhaps they have flown, released. The *we* of *underwaters* is not static; it shifts from moment to moment—it heeds history. The *we* of *underwaters* believes in geomancy: a form of divination linked to the land. Maybe there is a future worth seeing.

Coda: Beyond Staying Or Leaving, *Being-with*

While YAMS's and paggett's tactics *could* be construed as binary opposites—as the decision to *leave* or the decision to *stay*—both projects can in fact be framed as generative critiques that, through collective means, make space and place (both imaginative and material) for Black(female)ness in the art world. Two strategies on the part of YAMS other than that of withdrawal align with paggett's work. The first is located in their catalogue text, where, rather than be interviewed, as most of the artists in Grabner's section do, they interview the reader/spectator:

Can you pretend that we, all thirteen of our black* bodies, are standing in front, to the side, and behind you? Can you imagine that you are alone with us? [...] That you're alone, encircled by thirteen black bodies, *in the dark*? [...] *How* do you feel? How do you *feel*? We've always felt you, but how do *you* feel?

And if you feel safe enough (and you may wonder, rightly, on this sharp and glittering question of safety), will you close your eyes? And if we invited you to be the fourteenth black body, can you, with eyes closed, know yourself as one of us? From moment to moment and for eternity, you are us?

*Throughout, *black* is used as designated by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) [...] to refer to all of the racial bodies against which whiteness is defined in the Western literary canon.

(in Comer, Elms, and Grabner 2014:352)

This direct address, with its reliance on not just a “we” (the plural first person) and a “you,” but an “us” that is a possible, future “us,” pushes the reader/spectator beyond abstract thought into an affective and proprioceptive experience: “How do you *feel*?” The fact that the YAMS artists locate the imagined reader in the dark is significant. The dark is a field of blackness, is Black space. In effect, they are reversing their own position as Black artists functioning in a white space by creating a Black space for the reader/spectator to enter. The invitation to join YAMS in this imaginative place is a demonstration of the possibilities inherent in making identity positions visible and explicit.

The film that YAMS was scheduled to show in the Biennial, *Good Stock on the Dimension Floor*, is described on the Whitney's website as a: “multipart film that reimagines the traditional opera to pose a central question: ‘What happens to the black body when it is haunted by a “blackness” outside of it?’” (Whitney 2014c). paggett's work can be seen as one response to this question: her body became a site where the racial gaze could be interrogated; she opened her body up to be “haunted” by various historical and iconographic intersections.

In addition to YAMS's open letter, they also presented two screenings of their film in an alternative location, outside the purview of the Whitney. On 29 and 30 May 2014 YAMS hosted two evenings at Freecandy, a creative coworking space in Brooklyn. In addition to the screening there were live performances by YAMS collective members and their collaborators—singing, dancing, performance and video installations—plus a free bar and a makeshift art gallery. The events started at 8:00 p.m. and went late into the night. The crowd was mixed in terms of race and age and fame but was largely made up of queer people of color. Is this the space that YAMS alluded to in their catalogue essay?

While YAMS had technically already withdrawn from the Whitney by the time they hosted these events, the events cannot be divorced from the Whitney Biennial. As such, like paggett's extension of her Biennial performance outside of the museum, including other spaces and other subjects, YAMS likewise expanded the Biennial, creating a space where blackness is not circumscribed—proposing instead, following Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*: “the production of space as unfinished, a poetics of questioning” (in McKittrick 2006:xxiii). The events created by the YAMS collective were immersive, nighttime spaces, where boundaries between spectator and collective member became less apparent.

YAMS's and paggett's work created space for Black life within an institution that historically has been inhospitable to Black lives. In a moment when public pressure is massing to reform if not upend the structures that reinforce anti-Black racism and white supremacy in the US, the contributions of paggett and YAMS to the Whitney Biennial are examples of the creation of vibrant Black spaces, spaces of *being-with*. paggett refers to the possibilities inherent in this mode of being when she writes in her catalogue essay: "it means we have to lean into one another in order to feel" (2014a:231).



Figure 7. *HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?; Good Stock on the Dimension Floor: An Opera, 2014* (still), video, color, sound, 54 min. (Collection of the artists, © HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?; courtesy of Andre Springer)

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2007. "A Phenomenology of Whiteness." *Feminist Theory* 8, 2:149–68.
- Batchelor, David. 2000. *Chromophobia*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, 4:519–31.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia." *Reading Rodney King / Reading Urban Uprising*, edited by Robert Gooding-Williams, 15–22. London: Routledge.
- Coan, Jaime Shearn. 2013. "A Conversation with taisha paggett." *Dancer's Turn*, 20 June. Accessed 18 March 2017. <http://dancersturn5678.blogspot.com/2013/06/a-conversation-with-taisha-paggett.html>.
- Coan, Jaime Shearn. 2014. "taisha paggett's geography of we." *Brooklyn Rail*, 6 May. Accessed 18 March 2017. <http://brooklynrail.org/2014/05/dance/taisha-paggetts-geography-of-we>.
- Comer, Stuart, Anthony Elms, and Michelle Grabner. 2014. *Whitney Biennial 2014*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Davis, Ben. 2014. "The Yams, on the Whitney and White Supremacy." *artnet news*, 30 May. Accessed 19 December 2014. <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/the-yams-on-the-whitney-and-white-supremacy-30364>.
- English, Darby. 2007 *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. (1952) 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Frank, Priscilla. 2013. "What Does Diversity in the Art World Look Like?" *Huffington Post*, 16 November. Accessed 18 March 2017. www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/16/whitney-biennial-2014_n_4283531.html.
- Fusco, Coco. 2014. "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Thoughts about the Donelle Woolford Debate." *Brooklyn Rail*, 6 May. Accessed 18 March 2017. <http://brooklynrail.org/2014/05/art/one-step-forward-two-steps-back-thoughts-about-the-donelle-woolford-debate>.
- Fusco, Coco. 2017. "Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till." *Hyperallergic*, 27 March. Accessed 19 April 2017. <https://hyperallergic.com/368290>.
- Glissant, Édouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Grabner, Michelle. 2014. "MG's WB." In *Whitney Biennial 2014*, by Stuart Comer, Anthony Elms, and Michelle Grabner, 260–65. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Graves, Jen. 2014. "Why Did a Mostly Black Queer Collective Remove Their Work from the Whitney Biennial?" *the stranger*, 15 May. Accessed 1 May 2017. www.thestranger.com/slog/archives/2014/05/15/why-did-a-mostly-black-queer-collective-remove-their-work-from-the-whitney-biennial.
- Greenberger, Alex. 2017. "'The Painting Must Go': Hannah Black Pens Open Letter to the Whitney About Controversial Biennial Work." *ARTnews*. 21 March 2017. Accessed 19 April 2017. www.artnews.com/2017/03/21/the-painting-must-go-hannah-black-pens-open-letter-to-the-whitney-about-controversial-biennial-work/.
- Hall, Stuart. (1990) 1994. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 392–403. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Heddaya, Mostafa. 2014. "Artist Collective Withdraws from Whitney Biennial [UPDATED]" *Hyperallergic*, 14 May. Accessed 18 March 2017. <http://hyperallergic.com/126420/artist-collective-withdraws-from-whitney-biennial/>.
- Kidwell, Jennifer. 2014. "Performance and Para-Fiction: Jennifer Kidwell on Playing Donelle Woolford." *Hyperallergic*, 23 December 2014. Accessed 14 March 17. <https://hyperallergic.com/170408/performance-and-para-fiction-jennifer-kidwell-on-playing-donelle-woolford/>.
- Kim, Eunsong, and Maya Isabella Mackrandilal. 2014. "The Whitney Biennial for Angry Women." *New Inquiry*, 4 April. Accessed 19 December 2014. <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-whitney-biennial-for-angry-women/>.
- Lambert-Beatty, Carrie. 2008. *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Lee, Felicia R. 2014. "Racially Themed Work Stirs Conflict at Whitney Biennial." *New York Times*, 16 May. Accessed 20 February 2017. www.nytimes.com/2014/05/17/arts/design/racially-themed-work-stirs-conflict-at-whitney-biennial.html?_r=0.
- McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Miranda, Carolina A. 2014. "Art and Race at the Whitney: Rethinking the Donelle Woolford Debate." *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June. Accessed 18 March 2017. www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-donelle-woolford-controversy-whitney-biennial-20140609-column.html.
- Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Moten, Fred. 2008. "The Case of Blackness." *Criticism* 50, 2:177–218. Accessed 27 August 2014. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/crt/summary/v050/50.2.moten.html>.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press.
- Nancy, Jean Luc. 2000. *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- paggett, taisha. 2012. "vestibular mantra (or radical virtuositities for a brave new dance)" *THE *FFCENTER*, 7 December. Accessed 18 March 2017. <http://theoffcenter.org/2012/12/07/blog-salon-3-vestibular-mantra-or-radical-virtuositities-for-a-brave-new-dance-by-taisha-paggett/>.
- paggett, taisha. 2014a. "notes on process & understanding." In *Whitney Biennial 2014*, by Stuart Comer, Anthony Elms, and Michelle Grabner, 228–31. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- paggett, taisha. 2014b. Personal communication with author, 10 April.
- paggett, taisha. 2014c. "Performance on the Eve of Negro Spring." *TDR* 58, 4 (T224):2–3.
- paggett, taisha. 2015. Personal communication with author, 10 April.
- paggett, taisha. 2017. Personal communication with author, 16 March.

- Smith, Cherise. 2011. *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *diacritics* 17, 2:64-81. Accessed 3 November 2014. www.jstor.org/stable/464747?origin=JSTOR-pdf.
- Wayback Machine. 2014. Screenshot: 15 March 2014. "HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?" Accessed 14 March 2017. <https://web.archive.org/web/20140315222743/http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2014Biennial/HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN>.
- Whitney Museum of American Art. 2014a. "Taisha Paggett." Accessed 18 March 2017. <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2014Biennial/TaishaPaggett>.
- Whitney Museum of American Art. 2014b. "Donelle Woolford." Accessed 18 March 2017. <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2014Biennial/DonelleWoolford>.
- Whitney Museum of American Art. 2014c. "HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?" Accessed 18 March 2017. <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2014Biennial/HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN>.
- Whitney Museum of American Art. 2014d. "2014 Biennial Film & Video Screenings." Accessed 15 March 2014, 19 December 2014, and 14 March 2017. <http://whitney.org/Events/HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN>.
- Whitney Museum of American Art. 2017a. "Whitney Biennial." Accessed 19 April 2017. <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2017Biennial>.
- Whitney Museum of American Art. 2017b. "Perspectives on Race and Representation: An Evening with the Racial Imaginary Institute." Accessed 19 April 2017. <http://whitney.org/Events/PerspectivesOnRaceAndRepresentation>.
- Whitney Museum of American Art. 2017c. "Perspectives on Race and Representation: An Evening with the Racial Imaginary Institute." YouTube, 11 April. Accessed 19 April 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLGMkf7HL8.