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# Please, don't let me be misunderstood: intentionality, queer gestures, and feminist accountability

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PLEASE, DON'T LET ME BE MISUNDERSTOOD:  
INTENTIONALITY, QUEER GESTURES, AND FEMINIST ACCOUNTABILITY

By

Katelyn Heinekamp

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts  
In Women's and Gender Studies

at

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June 2015

For my parents,  
For my communities (and those to come)  
may you feel my gratitude infinitely  
may you envision a better world  
may you trust in radical possibilities  
and  
may your intentions always be good.

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## **Preface**

### *On the fear of theory...*

I have always had a hard time putting my emotion on paper. Writing about everything I thought was distant from my body was easy but putting emotion on a page was something I found deeply undoable. For so long I thought this struggle was based on the feelings I had—maybe they weren't meant to be written or thought in such a way that was clear—this allowed for my depression and anxiety to feel even more fuzzy. But, it never was the thoughts and emotions themselves that were so unattainable, it was the language I need to talk about them. My understanding of my own wants and needs, clarity of the life I envisioned or desired for myself was lacking a language through which I could express my sadness and my pain. In some ways I yearned for the words to explain my emotions, in other ways I enjoyed the infinitely complicated belief that emotions are never to fully be explained. I believe this relationship of clarity and pain, emotion and language, runs parallel to the relationship between feminists, activists, and the dreaded academic theorist. I understand and feel the pervasive privilege and power of normative collegiality and the language it uses. I understand the ways in which I am implicated in that system. In all honesty I searched for a project that allowed me to distance myself from what I once thought to be an oppressive form of speech; an elitist form of language used without accountability.

However, I now firmly believe there is a necessity<sup>1</sup> in understanding, reclaiming, and utilizing a language in and of itself—a language dignified within a particular field through which we can further understand intentional practice and everyday resistance. It was theory that allowed me to grasp the ineffability of my emotions and experiences, it was theory that clarified

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<sup>1</sup> I believe this necessity is not only for traditional academics but for feminist or queer identified people who suffer under interlocking systems of privilege and oppression. This necessity stems from the desire to have a language unto our own, one that can be challenged, changed, and utilized in academia while also in everyday acts of resistance outside of academic institutions.

my experiences, gave space for the questions and thoughts my body proposed, and it was theory that helped me understand the way my body was situated within the world and within my own consciousness and the collective consciousness of community. Although I understand the complicated position of power found within the language of theory and its position within often white, hetero, cis-, ableist, colonized academic spaces, I reject the idea that theory is solely separate from practice, that theory is not beneficial, and theory does not wholly understand every day experiences of the bodies it searches to connect to.

I want to claim that the issue at hand is not one of theory and its practicality but instead its relation to practice<sup>2</sup>. More specifically, I believe the definition of theory can be reclaimed in understanding that multiple mediums, all languages, all experiences of marginalization are theoretical insofar as they are also practice or experience. The question often becomes; how can we put theory into practice or can practice even become a theory? Using ideas of intentionality as practice, this thesis will broadly search to understand and explain the ways in which I believe intentional practice can be predicated on the language and transformative potentiality of theory in its abstract, often seemingly intangible possibilities. In its totality this thesis is one first of theory and second of praxis; this thesis undeniably grounds me in my body—this thesis searches to deny the challenges of theoryphobic knowledge processes and will work to destabilize the disconnect between theory and oppression. Or, in stating this more eloquently this thesis will show that...

*If you don't do theory, theory will do you.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A great deal of work has been done around this connection between theory and practice, particularly by feminists in the coining of the phrase “praxis.” However, while I validate and appreciate the impact that term has made, I believe its common usage often exists through the re-centering practice while further distancing theory and I will not be using the term praxis within this paper.

<sup>3</sup> This quote comes from the introduction of Falguni Sheth’s book *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race*, published in 2009. I wanted to acknowledge the reading (and re-readings) I do of this phrase and the ways this phrase offers possibility for multiple readings of what “theory” means and also who the “you” is directed toward. I believe the



In several sections of this project a collective *we* is used. I use that *we* through a coalitional context and with great intentionality; I use it to address all of you. However, through the use of *we* I do not want to claim experiences or thoughts of each of you but rather to account for the ways that we take up space together, and exist in a community together, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and even through text. This project uses the understanding of *we* from Juana María Rodríguez's book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Latina Longings*. She writes,

we...is itself a rhetorical gesture of future possibilities, an invitation to sit together in the emotion-laden spaces of meaning making and mystery. Rather than defining itself through the exclusion of its others, this 'we' is continually coming together and coming undone, a precarious bond that performs its own disarticulation of desire and discontent.

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phrase generally offers several meanings for the people who read it at different, situational times of their political, theoretical lives.



## **An Introduction; Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood**

*Intentionality, Mistake Making, Misunderstanding*

In 1964 the jazz singer and civil rights activist Nina Simone recorded a song called “Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood.” The song was a ballad, desperately praying to not be misunderstood. It was apologetic and wholehearted in its origination. The next year the song was famously covered by the white, UK blues rock band The Animals. This version of the song is unfortunately catchy with an upbeat tune that disregards the apologetic lyrics and profound implications of impending relationship turmoil. The prayers Simone had made to not be misunderstood were disregarded in the version covered by The Animals. They instead implied that whoever is claiming not to be misunderstood is being overdramatic. The chorus line of “Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood” moves from one of heartfelt, connective longing, to one of exasperated blame. While Simone placed emotional emphasis on ‘please’, The Animals focused on the imperative ‘you’ at stake in the ‘don't’ of the chorus line.

As one may assume from the title the song circles around the never-ending negotiation of misunderstandings and miscommunications<sup>4</sup>. Toward the end of the song the lyrics say, “If I seem edgy I want you to know that I never mean to take it out on you. Life has its problems and I get my share and that's one thing I never meant to do because I love you...” The lyrics themselves are representative of everyday conversations within interpersonal relationships—life has its problems therefore I have problems and will probably take them out on you despite the presence of love—the reality of this logic process is pervasive in both interpersonal and communal accountability (or however one holds themselves and others accountable). However, I believe that this probability (or some may think, inevitability) is more related to personal stakes.

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this thesis I address miscommunication. However, in order to address miscommunication I must define communication. Going forward I utilize and understanding communication as bodily, verbal, or otherwise specified gestures of relating to one another. Communication in this sense is situational, relational, never fixed, and always changing.

In other words, there is a probability of this harm because of the personal stakes intimacy places in one another's struggles. This is different than simply taking anger out on someone because of proximity. If one can listen closely, the song appeals to the humanity of people who have ever made a mistake or anyone who has ever done something wrong, but nevertheless has good intentions. The song continues to claim the humanity of mistakes, specifically mistakes that implicate emotion saying,

Oh, Oh baby don't you know I'm human, have thoughts like any other one. Sometimes I find myself long regretting some foolish thing some little simple thing I've done but I'm just a soul whose intentions are good, Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood.

The last phrase is repeated over and over as if to remind listeners that if ones intentions are good you will most likely (and without question) not be misunderstood. "I'm just a soul whose intentions are good. Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood." The key words of the chorus are intention and misunderstood but, phrasing aside, the theme of this chorus is manifested daily in the way people address intentionality. However, while this song is about the imperfections of relationships, or the ways that people will always make mistakes or cause harm (possibly without their knowing), intent is contingent on a sense of misunderstanding or that intentions are reliant on the possibility of mistake or harm. Syllogistically it would mean that humanity causes harm, harm is related to intent therefore intent is defined by the possibility or inevitability of harm, fault or misunderstanding itself. On its own one might think this process is not suspect. In fact, that reliant definition of intent (as claimed after a misunderstanding), is seen pervasively in common discourse. We un-intend or claim that we did not intend anything at all. However, because the impact of these discourses (of un-intent) are embodied and often traumatic, it seems as though living intentionally, or practicing intentionality and intent have become distant in their definition and in the ways they are practiced.

Much like the song, conversations around intent, or intentionality, are focused around a negotiation of understanding or unavoidable harm. However, with the feminist adoption of intentionality as practice, specifically through the lens of transformative and restorative justice<sup>5</sup>, intentionality has been claimed as a type of situatedness, or possibly even a lifestyle. Feminist practice often centers impact when discussing intent versus impact but still claims the practice of intentionality as a political decision. Clearly the distinction between intent and intentionality is greater than the grammatical (mis)uses of it.

However, defining intent and intentionality is far more complicated than locating it within a public rhetoric of bodies, lifestyles, practices, and places. In “Intentionality in Mediation” Anet Kate aims to break down what intentionality looks like through the practice of mediation. While this paper does not utilize a practice, or process, of mediation the definition of intentionality Kate uses is helpful. Kate explains that, “Intentionality can be seen as a subset of mindfulness” and more specifically, “Intentionality has been defined as: “the fact of being deliberate or purposive”” but, “Philosophy considers its meaning as involving mental states, thoughts, beliefs, desires and hopes directed towards a desired object or state” (Kate). While this definition is succinct it does not account for a relational definition of intentionality in practice or how claims of intent and intentionality operate.

In this thesis I will be addressing discourses of intentionality to further understand how intent and intentionality operate as a queer, feminist practice of accountability. By contextualizing intent versus impact rhetoric and questioning negotiations of un-intent I will claim that gestures of intentionality must re-center emotion, harm, and impact. Furthermore, I will explain that although the rhetoric of consciousness defines intent through ableist, Colonialist, white supremacist ideologies of power and privilege (through which responsibility is

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<sup>5</sup> For definitions of transformative and restorative justice please see page 18.

distributed), intentionality has infinite possibilities for reclamation. With the daily enactment of trauma enforced through claims of un-intent, I draw distinction between intent as a singular moment and intentionality as a queer process that necessitates a more accountable, healing focused feminism. This distinction allows one to acknowledge that because of our humanity, and the possibility of mistake-making, queer and feminist practice requires rhetoric of intentionality that allows room for moments of wrong-doing, or error.

## Positionality of Self

### *Introductions, Storying, Identity*<sup>6</sup>

To reclaim the personal is to reunite these: to pursue intimacy in a context of liberation; to battle corporations for the individual well-being of everyone. The personal keeps passion alive. A sustained personal life means attention to what kinds of relationships we need in order to remember our goodness, what kind of community keeps us strong, what nourishment we require in order to set about undoing the damages inflicted on us by our own encounters with oppression. What we need in order to maintain our integrity.

(Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity*)

This thesis aims to theoretically situate and define intentionality specifically as a queer/feminist<sup>7</sup> practice. In doing so it addresses the impossibility in perfection of intentionality and the language of mis-gesturing and accountability—this happens through several sections of the paper. This project first begins by clarifying the feminist frameworks used within this project and address my own positionality and comportment toward myself, others, and theory. I then address the current usage of intent, particularly in the way intent has been adopted by feminist ideologies in discourses of intent versus impact. Once clarifying what is at stake in both the intent and the impact of that rhetoric I draw distinction between intent as singular instantiation of thought and intentionality as a process and a practice—this then leads into a break-down of process and practice through an understanding of gesture, more specifically, gestures of intentionality and mis-gestures of intentionality. Finally, through a re-defined intentionality this paper ends with a call for more accountable discourses, and practices, of intentionality and accountability for healing and transformation.

Through centering traditional ideas of theory and personal storying, this project uses several feminist frameworks. In this section I identify and define the theoretical backings of this

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<sup>6</sup> This thesis is undeniably indebted to the ideologies of embodied theory and this project actively called me to be in my own body...a practice in which I struggle greatly. Going forward with this project I hope to further interrogate my discomfort in being in my body and the implications embodied, or living theory have in the creation and continuation of this project. This project is one of mind, of flesh, and of theory.

<sup>7</sup> Although queer and feminist are theoretically different frameworks, I use this in connection with one another as queerness is integral in the feminism I practice and use within this project. Please see the section on feminist frameworks for further clarification.

project to clarify the language, bodies, and experiences at stake in this work. I also situate my own identity and history in order to complicate the implications I have in systems of power and oppression within the concept of intentionality and intent versus impact discourses. Because the depth of feminist and queer knowledge is unmeasurable I want to acknowledge that this project does not, and never will, exist on its own. Instead this paper, my thought processes, and theoretical situatedness is indebted to the decades of identities working toward space and equity; my heart is grateful for the body of work and history through which this project has manifest—a project that is infinitely small in relation to the depth of transformation and healing other feminists, radical writers, and consistent troublemakers have created. I am forever grateful and endlessly humbled.

I came to this project for many reasons, all of which necessitate a presence of my body and my understanding of my own embodied life. Situating my body and identities within spaces, and within my own work, is never easy. In centering his own identities, disability theorist Eli Clare explains that,

Gender reaches into disability; disability wraps around class; class strains against abuse; abuse snarls into sexuality; sexuality folds on top of race...everything finally piling into a single human body. To write about any aspect of identity, any aspect of the body, means writing about this entire maze (Clare).

To write about any aspect of my identity is to negotiate the privilege of that maze. Growing up white, straight, and cis-gendered I was confident in the sexuality, sex, and gender I identified with. My mom stayed at home when I was a child, my dad worked for a large corporate bank and later switched jobs to become ordained as a Presbyterian Pastor. We were (and still are) upper, middle class and it was all so suburban<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> I am using “suburban” here as an adjective to address the pervasive culture of whiteness, patriarchy, upper/middle class nature of Chicago suburbs that are necessitated by conservative ideologies of privilege and entitlement. While I appreciate all that my parents have done for me in raising us in this place (as it formed who I am and holds many



While the language I have to negotiate the ways these privileges intersect over and through each other, and the ways they affect my relationship to other people, I have come to understand why I have been so distant in my feminism. What I mean to say is why I have been so distant from others, and myself, in my feminism; I always addressed the political stakes but struggled in addressing the intimate and the personal. The ways my body has been pathologized, medicalized, become an aspect of study, of illness is something I am learning to claim as part of my entire maze. When I think on my body, situating it within the whole of my identity, I cannot separate it from the 13 year old child squeezing and pinching the fat on my thighs, crumbs on my hands and shirt, tear stained face in the bathroom hiding from myself and the bingeing habits I have. The bingeing habits became purging, the bingeing and purging mediated the withholding of food; the counting of almonds, the memorizing of caloric value of small to medium apples was rhythmic, soothing to the ears and hearts of any fat child, teen, young adult with a body and mind like mine.

I was born a big baby, fatness was always a given. I was 12 when my mom first brought me to a nutritionist per a doctor's request. My mom just wanted to make me feel better, she knew I was unhappy, self-conscious, angry...I do not hold this against my mom, she was doing the best she could. The access to resources I had was through the sheer privilege of whiteness and middle classness; I often catch myself assuming access to financially draining options are available without complications—the dailyness and urgency of accountability is still very much a practice. I think of my mom often on bad days when I admit my bingeing, my days of giving in to the medical industrial complex, my days when I allow the mental “health” discourses of

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happy memories...I even call it home) I use this adjective to call in critique of the “cultureless white suburb” and address the way that culture in these spaces has become so normalized that it becomes invisible. By this I mean culture in these spaces is defined by PTA meetings, Homeowner's Associations, pool memberships, expensive cars, designer clothing brands, organic grocery stores, competitive-over committed youth, and over-priced coffee shops.

pathologization get into my head and the days when I realize that no one noticed because the growth of a body from big to bigger becomes obsolete.

It was not until recently that I realized I was distant in my feminism (and in the beginnings of this project), in the responsibility I felt, because of the ways my body was pathologized, the way it has become a center for the medical industrial complex and mental “health” rhetoric. My whiteness and middle-classness give me access to resources, my family gives me hope of love and support, and my feminism gives me a space to negotiate this aspect of my identity as a political project—specifically an anti-racist, disability focused political project that is personal and pervasive.

This project is dependent on situating myself within a community that I long for<sup>9</sup>, a community that understands and has stakes in these problematic discourses of pathologization, of craziness, madness, fatness, desexualization, uncontrollability, and often loneliness that are put on my body and my intersectional identity. As a white, cis-, straight, somewhat Christian, middle class, private university educated, U.S. citizen woman I find that intentionality, and the violence of claimed un-intent has transformed my understanding of radical imaginings of healing and the insurmountable possibilities for accountability, and soothing, restorative change.

There are many moments that brought me to this project. Moments of unintentionality on top of unaccountability on top of phrases like, “I didn’t meant anything by that” surrounded the pain I negotiated in intimate spaces with partners, with my community, and with my family. In this moment I define unintentionality as unrealized awareness or awareness that is not enacted. More specifically, one who acts unintentionally has not fully realized/embodied/enacted an

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am calling for the continuation of the communities in which I already reside, value, and love. My communities of biological and chosen family are spaces in which I see this accountability most possible and urgent. I thank my parents for allowing me to witness the community they have built within our family and I thank my friends for embracing critical friendships with unquenchable love, gratitude, and resilience.

awareness of the implications of their identities/words/actions in a particular moment or conversation. Unintentionality is claimed as an act of de-politicization despite the institutional backing of bodies often enacting claims of unintentionality. In other words, privileged, normative bodies can exist within the world without an accountable sense of awareness as their unintentionality is deemed apolitical. Throughout this project I will share the intimate details of moments of unintentionality that sparked this project and while I do not want to give more power to someone who has harmed me, or someone who already basks in the power they have, I know that sharing stories is necessary as they are integral in understanding my own political leanings.

*When reflecting on my own situatedness as a student who had been consumed in a student/teacher relationship, I realized my concerns for theorizing around a broken heart as underrated or illegitimate were creating a separatist space between the lived experiences of my body and my own person understanding of a feminist, relational politic. I realized there was and is an untarnished necessity for understanding the possible complicities in the power and trust at stake in our intimacies, in the dailyness of the power negotiations on repeat, in the negotiations of intent.*

*To the few that I have told of the intricacies of my once pleasurable relationship—a symptomatic relationship of the patriarchal institution within which we both reside—it has been negotiated in terms of consent. The consensual nature of the 32 year old them<sup>10</sup> and the 20 year old me was never questioned as we both desired the consumption of each other's bodies. At the time, and often now, I reflect on the ways that consent was deemed a non-issue insofar as my grades were not questioned, my body not in physical harm's way but I see now the nuances in situating my experience this way. While my body holds the desire for power dynamics to be a non-issue, my mind is able to reflect on the dailyness of this reflective loneliness through a new politic related to my own understanding of agency and their appeal to intent.*

*At the end of what seemed like no time at all, they said that it was never their intent to cause harm or to complicate an otherwise “healthy” intellectual bond between a student and a teacher. Their intent was dependent on a definition I will go into later, an ideology of the*

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<sup>10</sup> For the sake of confidentiality I will be using they/them pronouns to separate the individual from distinctive characteristics or markers.

*distribution of responsibility. “I didn’t mean anything by that,” was their favorite phrase. By “that” they meant the hundreds upon hundreds of graphic, sexual text messages sent to me, the dozen inappropriate, rarely clothed pictures they sent, the one picture they sent of a former student in her underwear (I presume, without her consent). We rarely spoke of the ways in which power dynamics had impacted our relationship to each other. While I had constantly been critical and accountable for the intention I had in keeping their job safe, and undoubtedly supporting their “good” character, they were allowed to leave the relationship, unharmed, and untarnished with the claim of unintentionality. The moment was stark and has been with me since; that moment was necessary to start this entire project. Everyone makes mistakes and I was the biggest mistake of their career; we both knew that, but finding the spot between over-humanizing and constant, unaccountable forgiveness and dehumanizing, with punishment and anger, is complicated and one I believe to be intrinsically tied to a notion of intentionality...one necessary to claim the language of intentionality as a transformative, queer/feminist practice of healing. When I think on our time together, and how I feel now, the soundtrack of our troubles was “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood.” They were The Animals’ cover, I was Nina Simone’s apologetic prayers.*

## **Framing Queer & Feminist Knowledges**

### *History, Theory, Practice*

To theorize the connections between intimacy and institutional power is to attend to the uneven and potentially transformative effects for the subjectivities that are formed within this conjuncture.

(Carrillo Rowe, *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances*)

In this thesis I use the radical workings of feminist and queer scholars to ground my theoretical work as well as my personal storying. I use the term radical as used by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in the 1981 introduction of the groundbreaking book, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. They “use the term in its original form—stemming from the word ‘root’—for our feminist politic emerges from the roots of both our cultural oppression and heritage.” They use this term as the writers of their book, and themselves, “want nothing short of revolution.” The radical words that have influenced this project, and largely frame the theoretical basis of it, are grounded in anti-racist feminist theory, queer theory, disability justice/disability studies, and a theory of coalition which I believe to be honed by transformative and restorative justice advocates. This section briefly frames and identifies how I recognize these frameworks and how they will operate within this thesis to understand how this project is implicated in a larger, political body of work and coalition.

### *Anti-Racist Feminisms*

In the famed work, *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde recounts all that is personal and political to her and her communities through storying and poetry. Her work is both deeply intimate and profoundly radical as she says, “Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power” (Lorde). In practicing intentionality I work to acknowledge my own whiteness, as whiteness is something that tends to take over; I echo Audre Lorde’s thought that ignoring my own racial identity, as well as the racialized spaces through which this project was created, is a

threat to the mobilization of joint power, and the joint possibilities of this project. For this project, and the rest of my personal/political/academic work, I am actively grounded in the decades of work of anti-racist feminisms. My own understanding of anti-racist feminisms is in the dedicated and critical resistance against white supremacy while centering an intersectional lens and works to center the voice, experiences of women of color. I also address this definition of anti-racist feminisms as inherently transnational as many Global North feminisms operate through singular lenses of white, liberal politics. Later in this project I will address colloquialisms that specifically focus on intent; however, this intent is invested in white innocence and institutional racism. But, in order to understand racialized colloquialism I want to center an active definition of racism which weaves throughout the text.

Blogger and radical writer Mia McKenzie writes in her book, *Black Girl Dangerous: On Race, Queerness, Class and Gender*, an incredibly succinct definition of racism, something I thought to be an impossible task. She writes,

Racism is, in reality, a huge, systemic, deeply-rooted plague that exists everywhere and affects everything, that degrades and starves and rapes and murders people without losing its breath. It is built on hundreds of years of oppression and genocide. It is in our government, in our entertainment, in our literature, in our corporations, in our language. This entire country was *built on it*. It is everywhere, and it is insidious and subtle just as often as it is open and obvious (McKenzie).

Her definition addresses an assumption about racism: that it is interpersonal and that it is simply disliking someone based on the color of their skin...this understanding of racism is wrong.

McKenzie's definition of racism is integral in understanding what anti-racist feminisms look like not only because McKenzie's blog is a radical, current medium for anti-racist action but also because it addresses the systemic nature of institutions that anti-racist feminisms works to destabilize. Anti-racist feminisms has a long heritage of women of color centered advocacy, discourse, and embodied work.

Because there are so many women of color focused feminisms (and because historiography of this work is often delegitimized) I decline to address the historical lineage of the origination of the phrase “anti-racist feminism”—doing so would only disregard the incredible work of some people of color whose experiences, voices, pains, losses, heartbreak, defeats, and triumphs have manifested globally. By this I mean, providing a trajectory of the history of anti-racist feminisms calls into question whose history is being shared, whose history is understood/appreciated, and whose history is deemed legit enough to share or acknowledge as a theoretical starting point. Rather than recounting the problematic, white-washed histories of this discipline, this project frames anti-racist feminisms as a call to work in solidarity with women of color in creating a collective discourse of intentionality. More specifically, in writing this project I wanted their work to be represented as integrally as they are in my own political leanings, theories, and relationships.

To counteract the problematic story telling of a history that is not my own, this project is centered around recounting the words women of color thinkers who are anti-racist, queer, radical, and necessary in centering accountability. More specifically, this project worked to center women of color scholars scholars that are not solely queer theorists but anti-racist, queer theorists; these people are radical thinkers, poets, prison abolitionists, coalition creators, and alliance builders. This usage of women of color scholars was not done to tokenize their political identities but to account for the overwhelming whiteness of my project because of the whiteness of my own body. In thinking of this project I worked to give room for the words of Sara Ahmed, Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Audre Lorde, María Lugones, Juana María Rodríguez, and so many more to center the theoretical frameworks of this project. These women provided the voices and thoughts that inspired this project and I hope to do their words justice; Writing this project, with

using as few white scholars as possible, was an act of gesturing intentionality. I believe calling for practicing accountability requires anti-racist strategies. More specifically I believe that the phrases of intent speak so often to the colloquial discourses of claims of “not being racist”<sup>11</sup> while intentionality addresses the active resistance of racism that is inherently anti-racist; this is something I will address later in this project. This project was also largely shaped by transformative justice scholarship which is so largely impacted by anti-racist feminisms in an understanding of historical, systemic violence, pain, privilege and oppression.

### *Queer Theory*

Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, troublant. The word ‘queer’ itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European root *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English athwart.

(Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*)

Queer theory has been tested in its definition and in the way it manifests in academia. It has been called out for its difficulty in defining its nature and calls into question the canon of academic feminisms. However, this project is largely influenced by queer theory and will use several queer theorists in framing and creating a theoretical body of work. I want to address as well that all queer theorists chosen for this paper are theorists with anti-racist, coalitional politics—this decision was made, and practiced, with great intent. In the thesis of my argument I claim that intentionality must operate as a feminist practice of accountability through queer gestures rather than a distribution of responsibility. For this to be true a definition of queer, as an aspect of my particular feminism that is being utilized for purposes of this project, must be defined unto itself and as it relates to a body of thought. In thinking on queer theory, I often define queer theory through the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In her piece, “Queer and Now,” Sedgwick explains that,

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<sup>11</sup> While different than the other examples I believe the idea of “reverse-racism” operates in similar fashion and is equally problematic.



a lot of the most exciting recent work around ‘queer’ spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all; the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example (Kosofsky Sedgwick).

With this definition at play in this project I want to continue the destabilization of binaries and intermeshing of identity formations, those that exceed gender and sexuality, within this project and utilize these fundamental ideologies of queer theory both in the theoretical groundings of this work but also in defining queer itself as subject. Most critiques of queer theory, however, come from critiques of postmodernist thought particularly in relation to the self or subject. In other words, for postmodernist feminists “there is no core self, identity, or subject who acts to express herself or himself, but, rather performances or actions create the interior self” (Archer Mann). This claim of the nihilistic approach to politics disregards the postmodernist understanding of construction that builds both the subject and its agency within queer theory.

While leaving room for social agency and resistance, postmodernist feminists understand the deconstruction of identity to be freeing in the vast possibilities of expression of personal and political thought outside of “normative” ideologies of subject formation. This definition then could lead one to question, “Do queer moments happen when this failure to reproduce norms as forms of life is embraced or affirmed as a political and ethical alternative?” (Ahmed, *Queer Feelings*). In other words, is queer theory (or a queer moment) enacted upon the refusal of normativity or upon the affirmation of this alternative? I want to hold this question in thinking on the metaphorical body at stake in the politics of queer theory and at stake in this project. We can also use this question to ask...do queer moments happen when accountability is affirmed?

By claiming a practice as queer not only am I saying that it can operate within queer communities but also that it is intrinsically anti-normative. This project believes that by queering the relationships we have to one another, through an acknowledgment of needs for accountability

and new language around intent, a new coalitional lens can be found and practiced. For this project, I believe that accountability, as a moment of intentionality, becomes a queer moment in both the refusal to distance ourselves from one another, and in the affirmation of that practice. More specifically, queer gesture (as I will define later) works to actively create relationships and accountability to one another in ways that are not defined as normative—gestures of intentionality ask us to admit our faults, our inherent dependency on each other’s intentions, our complicated connections to each other’s pains...this works in opposition to the ways systems of power want us to address one another. Queer theory allows us to destabilize those notions and rebuild and envision something new, connected, and powerful.

### *Disability Justice/Theory/Studies*

To put it bluntly, I, *we*, need to imagine crip futures because disabled people are continually being written out of the future, rendered as a sign of the future no one wants...This erasure is not mere metaphor...It is my loss, our loss, not to take care of, embrace, and desire all of us. We must begin to anticipate presents and to imagine futures that include all of us. We must explore disability in time.

(Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*)

Centering disability justice within the theoretical groundings of this project is very important to me. Prior to my exposure to the activist world of people with disabilities I was never offered a language to address “mental health” or “mental illness.”<sup>12</sup> Accessible discourses of pathology, medicalization, and institutionalization were absent in the negotiations of “mental health” that I had and I longed for a way to describe the experiences I was having—my feminism always lacked a sense of solidarity or coalition with other people who had been medicalized, “treated,” or impacted by food/trauma related experiences of mental pathology.

As disability scholars actively work to discursively change the everyday usage of the term “crazy,” I believe that colloquial uses of eating “disorder” habits needs similar change. If

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<sup>12</sup> I put these terms in quotes to address the problematic trajectories of “good” health that they imply. Also, I believe the terms are painfully individualized and focused solely on brain function rather than a whole, embodied experience. This discursive struggle is one I am looking into within other projects and I hope to find new, intentional language to better situate “mental health” within a disability studies framework.

crazy is problematic, because of its history with institutionalization, pathologization, and violence, why would bingeing/purging not operate in similar ways? These everyday enactments of language of pathologized eating gives verbiage to a discourse of crazy—binging operates as a way of acting “crazy.” Although this seems as though it is a different project than the one at stake current in this paper, the two are unquestionably linked as the center of both thesis’ are; whom do we have to be accountable for? And, in what ways do we pick and choose the moments of intentionality we practice?

There have been countless times in which I sit in classrooms, or public spaces, with feminists who address their accountability for their positionality; they address the ways they acknowledge their whiteness, their sexuality, their citizen status, etc...there is undoubtedly a moment in which one claims how “crazy” the world is. While what they mean to address is how painful and violent institutions are, they actively choose which communities to be accountable for, or which they are intentional in addressing, and disability activists, or “mental health” communities are not one of them. However, I do believe that this is common situation requires language to address the wrongful enactment of unrealized awareness as institutional systems have created walls for us to address the problematic histories of words centered by disability theorists. I believe accountable intentionality gives room for spaces to have these conversations. And, for the language in which I approach intentionality as a whole, I hope to hold the work, and experiences, of people with disabilities and disability justice advocates/disability theorists.

### *Coalitional Contexts*

The cultivation of such practices to shift one’s own sense of self in relation to consciousness building and knowledge production has the potential to shift feminist spaces. The practices disrupt the hegemony of white privileged power and the relational dynamics it produces

(Ann Russo, “Between Speech and Silence: Reflections on Accountability”)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I want to acknowledge the usage of Dr. Ann Russo’s work as she was one of the few chosen white women to be represented within this text. Not only do I appreciate her work but I value her as a person and mentor whose

This text is a coalitional text and as I stated previously, it does not stand on its own but is indebted to the work of other scholars, activists, and radical thinkers. Through an understanding of the interconnectedness of feminist theory I root this project within coalitional contexts which I situate within transformative justice politics and a politics of belonging (both of which are essential to the understanding I have of my own feminism at stake in this project).

For means of this project I define transformative justice through the definition offered by transformative justice/activist group Generation FIVE. They explain that transformative justice “responds to the lack of—and the critical need for—a liberatory approach to violence” and that is is “A liberatory approach seeks safety and accountability without relying on alienation, punishment, or State or systemic violence” (generation FIVE). They continue to provide larger goals of justice based projects such as healing, agency, personal/communal accountability, support, and resistance. This project centers those same goals. More specifically this project came out of my own understanding of radical imagining of a future world where intentionality is enacted daily, and intent is not a defense mechanism for unaccountability. Generation FIVE grounds transformative justice in this envisioning of futures saying, “The goal of dismantling oppressive structures is...perhaps impossible, if we are not also prepared to build alternatives. This is not merely a rhetorical failure or a failure of analysis; it is a failure of practice.” This failure of practice exists within this process through the acknowledgement that we are not given space to fully address our wrong-doings in an accountable way; I believe this distance is created by unequitable, interlocking systems of domination.

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dedication to envisioning a better world has inspired me to be a better person. I hold dearly her spirit, her love, her compassion, her determination, and her never-ending trust in process. Giving room to quote her work means much to me as her works, and her presence, have so largely impacted my personal coalition politics, my relationships with others, and my relationship with myself. Thank you Ann for all that you have done. ...so much gratitude.

However, I do not address this project as solely a project with values of transformative justice but a project that centers belonging. I firmly believe that “Alliances are the interface between intimacy and institutionality” and that subversive quality of alliances allows for radical possibility (Carrillo Rowe). When I began imagining this project I envisioned it as one that centered the possibility for healing during the everyday enactments of unaccountability (something that manifests through privilege and lack of awareness). While that visioning came from a place of pain, it also stemmed from the undeniable longing I had for clearer relationality between the intentionality of those with whom I situated myself toward, loved, worked in coalition with, cried for/with. It is through this visioning that I call into this section, the passage that grounded my personal journey toward this project, and toward the people who made it possible saying,

“whom we love is who we are becoming, that the duo power/knowledge must also account for the politics of love...questions of whom we love are inseparable from the politics of subject formation, belonging is political. The sites of our belonging constitute how we see the world, what we value, who we are becoming. The meaning of ‘self’ is never individual, but is forged across a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflection” (Carrillo Rowe).

## **Complexities & Definitions**

*Intent, Discourse, Willfulness*

*In the beginnings of my graduate program I took a class on transnationalism and globalization. The program in Women's and Gender Studies was run cohort style so I knew almost everyone in the class as it was required that we all take it. I believe cohort ideology was fostered from the political leanings of departmental faculty—they all embraced a particular kind of coalitional consciousness. Our relationships to each other were still developing in a space where our personal lives and bodies were the political stakes that had brought us all together, even if for vastly different reasons. Having been deeply entrenched in the department, and academic feminism for my undergraduate degree, my research interests were very clear. I adored the complicated language of queer theory and critiqued the gendered notions of philosophy...my passions at the time, and even now, were for discourse and I was very distant from the ways certain aspects of my identity were left out of those critiques, particularly my body type, and that was not accidental. I was battling the daily struggle of anxiety and binge eating. The stress at school brought back the countless packs of cookies and days of counting calories, fat, sugar, and sodium. I made it clear that my academic interests were not on the fatness of my body. I actively worked to make my body type obsolete in the feminism I presented to others and often to myself.*

*Upon checking my email one day I found a message from someone in the class, someone I barely knew and someone who was not attempting to get to know me. They asked if I wanted to be part of a fat studies journal that they were starting. When you have traumatically bad thoughts about your body daily events become impossible. Grocery shopping is an anxiety ridden yet calculated mess, clothing shopping is an unimaginable future, and every look you get seems as though it is calling out your weight; you imagine everyone knows that you will go home to devour pints of ice cream and most likely purge hours later. But now I was faced with something I had never had before, a person intimately tied to the spaces in which I resided, and would reside for the next year and a half, calls into question a political leaning that I worked so hard to avoid and not address. This is not a congratulatory moment for their implication in the revelation I had to accept my weight as part of my feminism...this is a moment to hold the despair of an unfortunate, unaccountable moment.*

*I responded with a generous “no” because I knew in addressing the painfulness of what their assumption did would result in one claim...it was not their intent.<sup>14</sup> This moment is not to whine or claim oppression of fat bodies like mine but rather I want to call into question what I was really thinking upon receipt of the email. If what was sent wasn't their intent or was done unintentionally then what was their intent? What was their understanding of intentionality prior to sending the email that would possibly cause a claim of unintent? Was there something else happening there that I did not understand or was I simply subject of an unaccountable mistake?<sup>15</sup>*

I believe claims of unintent are universal. This truth can be seen through the belief that humans are intrinsically tied to the probability of mistake-making and this may have been the case when receiving that email. In other words, no one is autonomous...we are all implicated in institutions of oppression that regulate our humanity as people who make mistakes (despite our best efforts not to). However, I have found that the instances of claiming intent versus intentionality are often quite different and I believe the distinction between the two is more complicated than verbiage or grammar. But, when defining intent, and therefore defining intentionality, there is a definitive implication in phenomenological notions of consciousness. These ideologies assume that intent is inherent in consciousness therefore one is always intending. In fact, this project actively works to distance these definitions of intent and intentionality from the vast body of philosophical work around them. Stemming from a Colonialist, imperial, Global North centered philosophy, consciousness, as related to intent, necessitates a kind of consciousness that is undeniably ableist in its definition and practice. This notion of ableism is dependent on a normative idea of intellectual ability or capacity that is

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<sup>14</sup> While I did not receive an email back explaining their intent I often heard this claim made in classes after this moment often when they consistently assumed I was interested in fat studies or body positivity movements; these assumptions were most often made vocally in front of several classes.

<sup>15</sup> As I reflect on this instance, and the several instances I have had with this person, I struggle in mending the torn possibilities of friendship and coalition. I know that this is a fault of my own. While forgiveness has occurred and anger has turned into reflection, I hope to continue to address the humanity of this person. I realize the line between dehumanizing and overhumanizing is very thin; I am openly struggling in that bias within myself.

present in discourses of consciousness. Going forward when discussing consciousness I will substitute the term awareness and hold the complicated able-bodied notions that term holds as well. Nevertheless, I believe awareness, in the context of this paper, addresses a more multifaceted understanding of embodiment that is not solely mental but instead fully implicated, felt, practiced, nuanced, and flawed.

Negotiating spaces of intent is difficult in the relational and personal work of addressing pain caused by intending or not intending. Sara Ahmed, in her newest book *Willful Subjects* searches to qualify not what intention wholly means but what it means to will something, to be willing and willful. However, she explains, “Whether or not we assume there is faculty of the will, the language of will is the language of intention: the will as a verb allows us to make promises as well as to break them” (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*).

Intention, as similar to the will, is then further deconstructed clearly as Ahmed quotes Hannah Arendt in saying,

In order to will, the mind must withdraw from the immediacy of desire, which, without reflecting and without reflexivity, stretches out its hand to get hold of the desired object; for the will is not concerned with objects but with projects, for instance, with the future availability forms the desire into an intention (quoted in, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* ).

This ideology of will, as concerned with this project, draws distinction between will and intention while I believe delineates from an ideology of agency<sup>16</sup> as a similar kind of directional movement. In other words, by willing (or intending) one is reaching or moving toward something, particularly something with future availability. This desire of availability and immediacy determines the directional movement of the will into an intentional project (or practice).

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<sup>16</sup> I use the term agency to address the discursive way agency is often associated with intent or willfulness. This can be seen in claims of meaning or not meaning something as an acting agent.



The differentiations between the types of movement, occurring in intent, have become a question for my understanding of intentionality in relation to these ideologies as emotions or practices. And, “emotions are intentional in the sense that they are ‘about’ something: they involve a direction or orientation towards an object” which further signifies the willfulness of intent as something dependent on emotion and the possibility of agency’s dependence in similar fashion (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* ). Claiming intent as a form of emotion, and emotion as a norm of intent, as Ahmed does, complicates the idea that I believe to be incredibly pervasive—the idea that intent stands as its own as a singular event, or a powerful and active understanding of one’s intellectual situatedness within their comportment toward the world. Having intent cannot be a singular act but processes of work, negotiation and practice; it is intentionality that encompasses that act of processing.

This differentiation between intent as a singular moment, and intentionality as a process, stems from my own interpersonal acknowledgement of when intent and intentionality are enacted in everyday conversation. Intentionality automatically creates the visceral reaction of a thoughtful process; we can think of the moment with a friend who states that they like to buy locally because it helps them situate their way of consuming intentionally. In that moment intentionality operates prior to the actual event—they knew they wanted to buy intentionally so they did so through local options rather than buying local and *then* questioning what intent they had in their approach. Meanwhile, intent (in my own personal relationship to it) resonates with the everyday language of, “That wasn’t my intent.” The obvious follow up question would then be “what was”? However, this follow up question would be deemed illegitimate because there was not necessarily an awareness of intent prior to the moment of discomfort/violence/miscommunication. I will give another example; as a white person actively

involved in anti-racism/anti-violence work I find myself negotiating when and if I should attend particular events given the pervasiveness of whiteness. Having the intrapersonal dialogue prior to the event is one of intentionality (what would my presence do to the space at stake?) while intent would manifest (most likely) in the aftermath of an event lacking an intrapersonal dialogue, critique, or awareness of identities.

As discussed above, this differentiation is one of directional movement which I consider to be the movement, or directional change, or responsibility. In other words, intent (not intentionality) manifests as the distribution of responsibility. In claiming something was not one's intent one is claiming that they are not responsible for the harm that has occurred while processes of intentionality necessitate a sense of accountability for the possibility of harm/mistake. If we think back to the introduction, the language of miscommunication in Nina Simone's version of "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" is of particular interest; intent in the song is undeniably centered around miscommunication while miscommunication is predicated on a pardoned responsibility. This logic assumes that through miscommunication *neither* party can be held responsible for any emotional aftermath. However, this ideological distribution, or abstraction, of responsibility is dictated by the person who is enacting harm—it is a way to distance themselves from a tangible sense of accountability.

Miscommunication is not necessarily the problem as miscommunication is pervasive in the dailyness of struggle and its relationality within interpersonal relationships. Sara Ahmed even acknowledges that emotions are imposed by miscommunication when she says that, "Emotions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don't necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* ). While intent is emotionally-laden, I believe that the claims of intent (which

rely on a passing of responsibility) are separable from the emotional contexts of miscommunication. By this I mean that miscommunication in these moments of intent (in the aftermath of pain) is enacted as an attempted apoliticization furthering distancing oneself from harm they could have caused.

When actively searching for work on the definition of intent, I struggled greatly. It seemed as though there was a pervasive, assumed definition of the term that is so definitively used by feminists. Coalitional theorist María Lugones was one of the few theorists I found to question the positionality of intent outright. She asks the question, “What is the time and space of the intending?” (Lugones). In breaking down this question there are two aspects to Lugones’ question—time and space—but I find space to be of particular interest<sup>17</sup>. When working with (and critiquing) colloquialisms there is an undoubtable desire for unlearning as these popular expressions inundate our own sense of awareness. This is an interesting process not only in its difficulty but in its proximity to spatiality and relationality (because in essence, what we learn and what we choose to share or retell in the process of teaching is an issue of space). I believe that we learn of space as a physical, tangible, spherical, identifiable thing with distinguishable lines, boundaries and markers.

Despite our understanding of space in its totality or theory as expansive and ineffable, we understand its physical manifestations and limitations. In my undergraduate career I watched the way that philosophical discussions recount the numerous ways a chair has taken up physical space in its creation, its being, and destruction. Chairs have distinct boundaries. They touch the floor, the touch bodies; they take up a particular amount of space in particular physical ways.

However, what is the spatiality of the word chair? Of the idea chair? How does language create,

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<sup>17</sup> Here, I choose to address solely the context of space, as related to intentionality, because of the spatial politics of language. While I believe addressing the implication of time, and when exactly intentionality is enacted in time, I believe this paper later touches on this topic through the notion of gesture.

maintain and regulate the space of bodies, meanings, objects, identities, all that is tangible, intangible, personal and political?

We know, as stated above, that material objects (such as a chair) take up physical space, however the comfort in space or the comfort in norms allows one to reexamine spatiality as a term not just used for physical instantiations. Ahmed explains comfort and space in the example of sitting in a comfortable chair. She explains that,

One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view. The disappearance of the surface is instructive: in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies. The sinking feeling involves a seamless space, or a space where you can't see the 'stiches' between bodies (Ahmed, *Queer Feelings*).

What Ahmed is saying here is crucial in understanding how intent/intentionality is a spatial term insofar as it is extended into spaces and spaces extend into notions of discursive intent. The concept of fitting and disappearances reestablishes how normative and privileged bodies and ideologies operate. More specifically, this notion of disappearance of surfaces as instructive could simply be explained as the way surfaces (norms or normative bodies/ideologies) disappear in spaces of comfort insofar as they are unexamined; this is how norms stay normative, this is what bodies are defined in relation to, this is why intent is defined by distributing responsibility and without accountability.

I believe that Lugones would agree with this distribution of responsibility through a normalized, spatial, and relational context as she continues in her critique to say,

Intending may 'feel' as arising in a subject, but surely the production of intentions is itself a haphazard and dispersed social production. Subjects participate in intending, but intentions acquire life to the extent that they exist between subjects (Lugones).

Lugones' idea of social production implies a notion of responsibility as publicly formed (particularly given the rhetoric of miscommunication). Furthermore, Lugones situates intentions relationally as spatial terms through which subjects are connected—this is fundamental in

addressing the transformative potential of a more accountable notion of intentionality rather than a defensive absolving of responsibility. I echo the longings of Lugones when she imagines something different than the common discourses of intent/intentionality that operate currently. She explains that what she is proposing is, “a viable sense of intentionality for moving against the interlocking of oppressions that animates oppressions as intermeshed” (Lugones). I trust that animation is possible.

## **Gestures of Queer Intentionality** *Embodied, Discursive, Practiced*

While distinguishing between intent and intentionality, the separation has been made through an acknowledgement of process. Intent, with the implied connotation of singularity, as discussed earlier in this paper, signifies a call towards a singular moment of awareness; however, intentionality, as coined in feminist spaces, has become intrinsically tied to an ideological process of continuing awareness, questioning, and accountability. In resituating intentionality I want to call into question these definitive notions of process. Without prescribing steps of process the term itself can become abstracted. Where does that process begin and how is it manifested through physical and/or ideological steps or stages? How does it perpetuate itself within spaces and bodies? What does intentionality as a process, and a practice, actually look like?

By using the notion of ‘gesture’ from Juana María Rodríguez’s book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* I will claim that understanding gestures of intentionality allows for a clearer understanding of the transformative processes as stake in the claims, and impact, of a queer/feminist intentionality. I believe the relationship between intentionality and gesture is two-fold; intentionality exists as a gesture itself and there are gestures of intentionality insofar as processes of consciousness and embodiment rely on transmitting signifiers of the process occurring—no process exists unto itself. The following section of this thesis will define gesture through the work of Rodríguez and situate gestures of intentionality that are intrinsic to processes within queer, feminist politics.

In her book Rodríguez works through a definition of gesture in the physical and metaphorical sense. More specifically she states, “Gestures can be literal—actual movements of the body—or figurative, gestures that reach out to manipulate how energy and matter flow in the

world” but continues in opposing the nature of that singular definition for the sake of the book’s politics (Rodríguez). In other words, gesture, in connection to queer politics relates to more than literal instantiations of bodily movement although the importance of those movements should not be diminished. Furthermore, in relationship to the queer politics and Latina identities at stake in the book Rodríguez states that in the text, “gesture serves metaphorically to register the actions of the body politic, those activist interventions that push, jam, open, block, and twist social forces in the material world” (Rodríguez). Drawing from these definitions one can make a connection between gesture and intentionality, more specifically through the notion that gestures and intentionality register actions that are necessary within a body of politics. I believe that claiming intentionality as gesture is then predicated on the fact that intentionality is an activist intervention just as those interventions are physical and metaphorical gestures defined by Rodríguez.

Finally, in defining gesture, Rodríguez places the term within a process itself—a continual action of meaning making that allows gestures to “form part of the ongoing impossible and necessary work of transmitting meaning, a deeply social process that reaches for connection” (Rodríguez). This can be broken down further and is applicable in claiming intentionality as gesture. If intentionality is part of meaning making (insofar as it offers meaning to instances of discursive and/or interpersonal claims of accountability) within social processes of queer, feminist politics that strive for connection through practice then gesture is inherent to the process of this form of intentionality.

Later in the text Rodríguez even claims a notion of intent within her ideology of gesture. She explains that,

...like other enunciations of language, gestures are never transparent. Instead, they invariably risk producing an absence of understood intention, and an excess of ascribed

significance. This absence and excess carry a temporal displacement, where the production of meaning shifts from the moment of a gesture's execution to the moment of its reception" (Rodríguez).

There are two notions within this passage that I want to look at further; first, the lack of transparency within gesture risks the lacking of an understood intention and second, the shift of meaning from the execution of gesture to its reception. I want to call attention to the fact that Rodríguez, in the first part of this passage, does not claim that gestures, because of their lack of transparency, have an absence of intentionality completely. The key word in understanding the distinction at stake is *understood* intention. In other words, intention is intrinsically involved in gesture but the temporal projection or displacement of gesture is at stake in the understanding what that intentionality looks like.

With the rhetoric of intentionality generally centered on intent versus impact discourse<sup>18</sup> and who is doing the intending, as discussed in section one of this thesis, I believe the second half of Rodríguez's statement is integral. More specifically, the absence of understood intention shifts meaning of that intent from its execution to its reception; this allows for the meaning (or definition) of intent to be decided upon receipt of the gesture much as impact focused discourses do but it also reconnects notions of a possible, queer, feminist intentionality with a rhetoric of impact and understanding.

With gestures of intentionality outlined as multi-dimensional actions (physical, metaphorical, etc.) how would one address instances in which intent was present but gesturing was enacted incorrectly? Despite ones longing for an absence of harm, and a longing for perfection, there is no pinnacle moment of perfect intentionality which absolves you from all wrong doing—there is no perfection in the practice of intentionality and we need accountability

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<sup>18</sup> By this I mean a dichotomous discourse that centers impact or intent rather than the connections between the two. While anti-violence activists have worked to center impact I believe they do so by making intent obsolete; a task I do not wish to do.



for when wrong doing occurs. But, how do we distinguish the moments in which the intentionality was operating but flawed? How can we claim the mis-movement or mis-saying of something that causes harm? While the answer is accountability, and I believe this to be true as well, the language of unintentionality does not suffice. Instead, we can acknowledge, in moments of mistake-making, that we may have had intentions that were good but we, as people can often do, mis-gestured.

When I think of mis-gesturing intentionality I often think of the phrases that occur after the impact has been made. When reflecting on my interpersonal relationships I think about my discomfort in the ways intent versus impact rhetoric centers the impact and allows intent to become obsolete. In many ways this transition into the unquestionability of intent delegitimizes the pain of impact. If the intent has no room for contestation, as it was absolved of meaning by claiming un-intent, what does that mean of the impact that occurred? The logic would follow that if the intent discursively at stake had no meaning then the impact that followed is also deemed illegitimate. We can see this in the colloquialism, “I didn’t mean anything by that.” The phrase is one of unintentionality, specifically a mis-gesturing of intentionality, and it lacks an understanding of what language we need to address harm and accountability in interpersonal relationships.

There is an obvious gesture occurring within the phrase that operates as a prompt for an undoing of what was said; this undoing occurs with an emphasis on the word ‘anything.’ In saying ‘I didn’t mean *anything* by that’ one is claiming that what they said is void of any meaning—it is a phrase not only without intention but without discursive significance. The distinction between lacking of meaning and lacking intention is necessary particularly because language exists through definitions that we intend within a cultural understanding of the

flexibility of language. This is a moment of unintentionality; in claiming that was unintentional one appeals to the prefix of the word, un- which means lacking. This makes the assumption that there was no intent at all rather than acknowledging the misnomer in how what was said was delivered or gestured<sup>19</sup>. We can think of this through the adjective, ‘bad.’ While there are several ways ‘bad’ could be defined, it is often cultural relative, or discursively relative in the intentions at stake in an interpersonal discussion.

However, it seems as though when someone claims, ‘I didn’t mean anything by that’ that what they really mean is ‘I didn’t mean anything *bad* by that.’ Although ‘bad’ in and of itself is subjective, the implication within the phrase ‘I didn’t mean anything bad by that’ is an acknowledgement that something problematic, troublesome, painful, or negative has occurred. While both phrases sound similar, I believe that the distinction between the two exist on purpose in conversation. In the removal of ‘bad’ one attempts to rid themselves of intention because what they said was free of meaning—this is a moment when one mis-gestures and attempts to de-politicize the pain they have enacted onto another person. In this de-politicization one removes the need for accountability as they subtract any questionability of intent and meaning. In the removal of bad one allows themselves to redistribute the responsibility of feeling, of impact, and of miscommunication onto the person that was harmed.

*This sort of mis-gesturing, through de-politicizing or removal of meaning and personal implication, is often used in particularly racialized ways. Throughout my time in graduate school I worked for a transformative justice based, anti-violence group. In a series of anti-racism workshops students shared personal stories around racism and violence that they endured—the event was heartbreaking, transformative, and powerful. One striking similarity in each experience was in the linguistic trauma people of color faced; it was these stories of*

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<sup>19</sup> However I’m not claiming or condoning a sort of Cartesian mind body dualism where the mind intends and body gestures but rather I want to acknowledge that through a process of accountability, or a process of intentionality that occurs through gestures, we can actually acknowledge the humanity of mistake making in a fully embodied way.

*interpersonal, discursive trauma, and a need for intervention, that encouraged an event we had never done. We wanted to create nonverbal responses to the verbal violence enacted daily in interpersonal spaces and we had an event that we called the “Notecard Revolution.”<sup>20</sup> In sharing what students wanted to write a notecard in response to there was one similarity in the room...we had all had a conversation with someone (or several people) who prefaced a sentence in saying, “This might sound racist, but...” We wrote a notecard to be given to someone who claims this phrase which read, “Suggesting that you are not racist seems to imply that you know what you said is probably racist. Your definition of racism is lacking. I would encourage you to consider how you are participating in a historical system of structural racism.” While our conversations in that space centered on the incorrect definitions of racism we see so pervasively and in mainstream politics, I believe there is an undeniable enactment of refusing intentionality when someone prefaces their racist statements.*

While “I didn’t mean anything bad by that” operates as a mis-gesture of intentionality, as one might not know ways to be accountable for their impact, “This might sound racist, but...” exists in opposition to intentionality as a practice and process. In stating that one didn’t mean anything bad by something they acknowledge that there was something bad that happened after the trauma occurred and could be addressing the basic humanity of mistake-making. However, the claims of knowing that something might harm outline intent prior to the trauma occurring and rely on power and privilege to let that happen; this places the burden of work (and trauma) onto the opposite person in this discussion, particularly if that person is a person of color. I believe the work of feminist theorist Aimee Carrillo Rowe is particularly helpful in addressing this discursive trend through the idea of white innocence. She says,

Locating power as embodied within individual interlocutors risks decoupling it from its structural force. As such, it relies on white feminist innocence in the form of “playing dumb”—displacing the labor required by transracial feminist alliances onto women of color (Carrillo Rowe).

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<sup>20</sup> This event was largely inspired by the work of artist and philosopher Adrian Piper who created an art installation of what she called, “calling cards.” The exhibit debuted cards written by Piper that addressed what she wanted to say to people who physically or verbally acted racist and/or sexist toward her.

This notion of white innocence allows someone to intentionally address their understood racism prior to enacting violence and place the burden of clarifying if/how it is racist onto a the person of color. I do not believe that a preface such as “I know this might sound racist, but...” often operates as a mis-gesture of intentionality. While some may argue that someone could use the phrase as a preface for general unknowing of their implications as a white person, I believe that white innocence (and the pervasiveness of white supremacy) is the underlying basis of the preface and that through their disclaimer they are absolved of any harm they enact.

When thinking of mis-gesturing, or gestures in the totality in which Rodríguez described above, I want to position, or redefine, the relationality of these gestures (or acknowledgement of them) as inherently queer. More specifically, I believe acknowledgement of, or accountability for, mis-gesturing is a necessarily queer gesture. By this I mean we are not supposed to acknowledge our mis-gestures, we are not even supposed to gesture toward the mistakes we have made—institutionally, systems are built on the reliance that marginalized people will distribute their responsibility, continually replacing the burdens onto other bodies. Systems of domination do not want us to be accountable to one another but accountability in interpersonal relationships is not only necessary for our everyday livelihood but in envisioning a better world; I believe this reimagining, this destabilization of what our relationships to each other should look like is always already queer and by queering gestures of intentionality (even including mis-gestures) we can work to destabilize the institutions that condone unaccountability.

## **Imagining Possibilities**

### *Healing, Accountability, Community*

*My family has always been one of traditions. Holiday traditions with antiqued ornaments, on-goings jokes from birthday cards given years past, the small sticky notes my dad leaves around the house reminding my mom how much he loves her; my family works hard for things to feel familiar. Our traditions are not always physical—we have common expressions of our own which dictate the ways I negotiate my own identity and values. I cannot remember a time when I didn't hear the phrase, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression" from my parents<sup>21</sup>. Every first day of school, every interview, first date, meeting, college visit, band competition, high school dance, began with that phrase. As a child I read that phrase as a call for perfection...a request that instead said, "Please don't screw this up." It seemed to me as though they were saying there was no room for mistakes—this one time is all you will ever have. It was a lot of pressure for a child; it was a lot of pressure as a teenager, and even sometimes to this day when I catch myself thinking that any mistake, no matter how small is unforgettable, permanent. Although the logic is true—you never get a second chance at a first impression—you still have a second, third, fourth, infinite number of daily impressions with room for mistake-making, accountability, and possibility. As a young adult I now see this as a phrase futurity...a request from my parents that was really saying, "Go forward with intention."*

Throughout this project I defined how intentionality operates as a process, one that must include an understanding of mistakes that may happen. I firmly believe that intentionality is the acute, embodied practice of acknowledging and enacting accountability through daily, queer gesture. But, what does accountability mean and actually look like within these gestures of intentionality? Although the language of mis-gesturing allows one to acknowledge the harm they enacted, what would the next steps be? How does this offer a new interpersonal lens and how, in the words of Aimee Carrillo Rowe, "do we forge feminisms of possibility out of the wreckage of our betrayals" or our pains and losses (Carrillo Rowe)?

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<sup>21</sup> My parents also love to use the phrase, "don't do anything I wouldn't do." While humorous and slightly obscure, I believe it offers less meaning within a context of this project but is worth mentioning as it is a phrase of awareness and intentionality. Thanks mom and dad.

I use the definition of accountability from a Creative Intervention Toolkit focused on ending interpersonal violence. They define accountability as, “the ability to *recognize, end and take responsibility* for violence” and continue in saying accountability,

...involves listening, learning, taking responsibility, and changing. It involves conscientiously creating opportunities in our family and communities for direct communication, understanding and repairing of harm, readjustment of power toward empowerment and equal sharing of power, and rebuilding of relationships and communities toward safety, respect, and happiness (Creative Interventions).

The key aspect of the definition is not necessarily to recognize violence (as this project has discussed that at length) but to end and take responsibility for the violence itself. While intent is a distribution of responsibility onto the person being harmed, intentionality as a beginning process of queer gestures is dependent on this idea of taking responsibility.

Taking responsibility for ones actions, mistake or not, is not an easy task as it requires us to admit that we are wrong, that we are flawed, that we cannot always do right. I even believe that the opposite can be true; that it is difficult to admit that sometimes we are right; we are right in demanding justice, we are right in feeling the deepness of our breathes as a reminder of the dailyness of our bodies; we are right in questioning the language that surrounds us, even language of our own. In the words of Audre Lorde, “Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us” (Lorde).

How do we reclaim the language of intention and responsibility that has been used to turn us against one another; that has created our betrayal and torn apart relationships with friends, lovers, families, colleagues, partners? How do we acknowledge that “the need for sharing deep feeling is a human need” (Lorde)? The answers to these questions are not concrete and this is not a project which will offer exact steps one can take to reach a new level of intentionality or

accountability as I believe none of those steps are fixed or universal. But, “just as the stolen body exists, so does the reclaimed body” (Clare) and just as unaccountable moments exist (despite our pleading), so does a possibility of linguistic re-centering of intent *and* impact.

This project is not arguing that in practice people can get away with anything because there is always the possibility of something going wrong and that good intent can be their reasoning—this project actively argues against that. I believe the argument at stake is far more nuanced and I believe we are not equipped with the language to account for our own learning processes, short-comings, and basic flawed humanity when acting through an intentional lens. We act and then we fall back on our popular discursive expressions to save us, to a great detriment; we *should* gesture with deep thought and reflection, great appreciation and gratitude, and an understanding that you can offer healing if you mis-gesture. Changing how we address one another *is* a revolutionary act<sup>22</sup>. I know that this is small; I know that this is true, and I offer thoughts, hopes, and possibilities for those who ready.

*For the person who claimed it was not your intent- question if your honor, your pride is worth more than the comfort, livelihood, and heart of the person you harmed. Know that no one is perfect. Remember that everyone needs support.*

*To my \_\_\_\_\_ - I never know what to call you, your unintentionality clouded your name, your impact flooded my vision. But thank you for reminding me of the healing potential of naming impact, of naming the unwelcomed possibility of intimate pains. Thank you for the anger, it pushed me into people who love me fully. It offered me something you refused.*

*To whoever feels the burden of mis-gesture- we know how you feel, we have been there too. You are never alone in your mistake-making.*

*For the person who was harmed by unintentionality- breathing helps, feel the pulsing of your heart beat, remember healing, remember space, and remember community will always find you.*

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<sup>22</sup> This phrase came to me through the loving guidance of a professor and mentor without whom this project would not have been possible. Thank you, H.

*To whoever prefaces their sentences to absolve responsibility-try again. Know your body, know your privilege, question yourself, question your surroundings. We are done with pains from you.*

*For my parents-I have gone forth with intention. I know I have a second chance to make another impression.*

*To the others who binge, who purge, who withhold-Your experience should never be a colloquial phrase. Not all communities will do that to you; you will find them, you will heal.*

*For those who question theory-this is all theory; this project, beginning to end is representative of the voices of theory I hold daily. This is academic enough.*

*To all who need it-despite impact, you will heal.*

*For my friend who wrote me this poem; “You will love yourself, like the waves of the ocean, you will be enough.” – I treasure it.*

*To all who find this-you will be enough.*

*You will heal.*

*You will be enough.*

*For those who hope to practice intentionality- we are all learners, we are all participants, I am right beside you.*

*To Nina Simone- I hope to never let you be misunderstood, I hear your prayers. Your intentions are good.*





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