EMILIA-AMALIA Session VII:

How to Ask a Question

EMILIA-AMALIA Session VII: How to Ask a Question
Chapbook 3

The gift of the written story which connects thoughts and saves one from letting herself go is an exquisite image of what we have tried to explain, that is, that in women's struggle, the symbolic revolution—the representation of oneself and of one's fellow women in relation to the world—is fundamental and must come first.

— The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective

The practice of recognition transforms the personal into their political. Through sharing their stories and enabling their retelling, Emilia and Amalia recognized the desire in the other to not only be heard and understood, but to be constituted whole through the eyes of another. In biography, we can connect our threads of common desire, giving permission to speak from the self. These stories are a gift and a model for how to move forward.

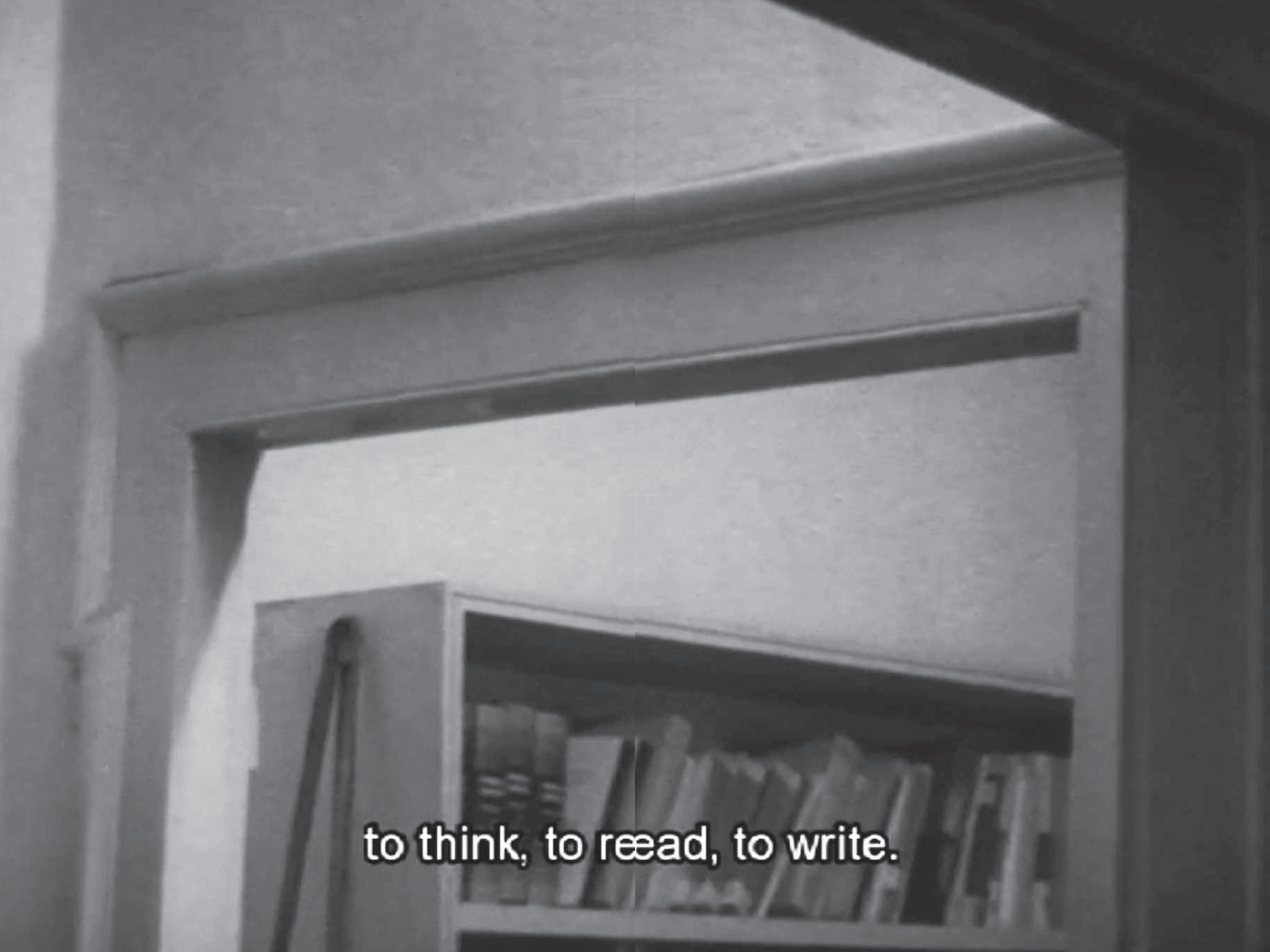
Leila Timmins

EMILIA-AMALIA is a Toronto-based feminist exploratory working group. Initiated in 2016, the group meets regularly to examine and employ practices of citation, annotation, questioning, interviewing and autobiography as essential feminist strategies that activate feminist art, writing and research practices. Each session is organized around a 'text,' a conversation, and a writing activity, but beyond that the meetings have taken many different forms. All meetings are open to the public and participants have varied widely.

One particular interest has been to elucidate the histories and strategies of feminism that have been obscured and overlooked in the narratives of "second-wave" feminism we have inherited. EMILIA-AMALIA asks how we might update and rewrite past practices so they can better respond to contemporary questions. Our aim has been to think through these questions from the differences and disparities between members and in a spirit of collaboration. For this reason, EMILIA-AMALIA is an open group that invites all levels of engagement.

We are all experts.
No one is an expert.
Expertise is not expected.

This series of five chapbooks is a partial record of the conversations, texts, images and output the meetings have generated and engaged with.


to think, to reead, to write.

p.4–5 Film still from *Scuola Senza Fine* (School Without End), Adriana Monti, Italy, 1983, 40 mins. Screened on 26 September 2016 at the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto as part of EMILIA-AMALIA Session IV: Education/Pedagogy. Image used with permission of Adriana Monti.

EMILIA-AMALIA Session VII: How to Ask a Question
8 February 2017
hosted by Gallery 44

Following Kyla Wazana Tompkins's call for questions that "move from theory to the world," this session will consider the kinds of questions we want to pose to texts, to ourselves, and to one another. Deploying her strategy of editing and revising questions, the writing activity invites participants to craft questions that might serve as mandates for the future work of the group.

Text

Kyla Wazana Tompkins's "We Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know" (please read beforehand): avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2016/09/13/we-arent-here-to-learn-what-we-know-we-already-know/

Writing Activity

What can we ask of feminism?

This session is part of a five-session arc inspired by Kyla Wazana Tompkins's essay, "We Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know," to explore strategies for asking questions as a political and feminist practice.

In this next chapter, EMILIA-AMALIA shifts our focus from reading texts together to writing and acting together. These sessions will examine how feminism can manifest in a daily "practice of doing" that allows participants to take space and make space for one another's experiences. Each session will consider the different modes of questioning that shape our relation to the world, to ourselves and to our feminisms.

We Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know

Kyla Wazana Tompkins

Kyla Wazana Tompkins is Associate Professor of Gender and Women's Studies and English at Pomona College. Her first book, *Racial Indigestion*, won the Lora Romero First Book Publication Prize from the American Studies Association. She is at work on her second book, entitled *So Moved: Ferment, Jelly, Intoxication, Rot*. Her work can be found at her website kylawazanatompkins.com

This essay first appeared in Avidly, a channel of the Los Angeles Review of Books edited by Sarah Mesle and Sarah Blackwood, on 13 September 2016.

What is a good question? And, how do we teach students to work at writing good questions? In my feminist and queer theories class, a core course in the Gender and Women's Studies curriculum that I've been teaching for quite a few years now, students each have to develop discussion questions about an essay or work they will be presenting to the class. Borrowing an exercise from one of my own mentors, Linda Hutcheon at the University of Toronto, during the first or second week of the semester I have students write discussion questions out and hand them in to me. I then respond to their questions with feedback about how to make their question one that will provoke an even deeper engagement with the assigned text both on their part, and on the part of the class. I've named the handout **"some notes on how to ask a good question about theory that will provoke conversation and further discussion from your colleagues"** and I attach it to the back of most of my syllabi.

I like this exercise because it not only gives me an early sense of the feel of the class but, more pointedly, early intervention into discussion—question writing helps shape the conversation in the classroom for the rest of the semester, making asking questions more important than performing a perfect mastery of the text.

I wrote the handout attached below about seven years into teaching this class in part because I came to realize that as teachers we spend very little time talking to each other about how we read theory, never mind how we teach it. In one of my other disciplines —English Literature—we work very hard, for instance, at teaching

close reading. But there's something about the speculative language of theory, its hostility to penetration especially by undergraduates, that really needs a lot of scaffolding.

For one, teaching theory, especially a very difficult but nonetheless introductory class in theory like this one, takes a lot of student-soothing. In this I take comfort and wisdom from Judith Butler's very fine *New York Times* essay in response to the charge of bad writing that she incurred in 1999. I tell my students: theory is both descriptive of the world we live in and speculative as well, in that it seeks new worlds and new language to understand what seems to be "natural" and "normal." If the ideas that theory wants to express were easy to say, they would not need to be said. The work of undoing what you know, or what you think you know, is hard. You're going to have to work hard. *We aren't here to learn what we already know.*

One challenge is that theory is not theology, though it sometimes tries hard to be, and though students, particularly students looking for language with which to critique various forms of power, often treat it that way. So while a great deal of the work of the classroom is excavating the argument and work of the text (as I will discuss below when I talk about the form of the presentation handouts that I expect students to share with each other), the next step is to get students to interact critically with the writing, to begin to push at the limits of not only the content, but also the shape of the thinking contained within the content. This is where rehearsing and writing discussion questions comes in. Let me walk through some of the handout here.

SOME NOTES ON HOW TO ASK A GOOD QUESTION ABOUT THEORY THAT WILL PROVOKE CONVERSATION AND FURTHER DISCUSSION FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES

- Read theory three times: once to get a mental map of the article/ chapter/ paper; once to get the gist of the argument; and once to find your questions.
- Take notes in the margins: mess with the text. Underline, star, jot down questions.
- Take a break.
- Think about the pieces of the text, phrases, expressions, moments that tweak your instincts, that bother and harass you. These intuitions and "feelings" are the ends of intellectual threads that you may want to excavate.
- Linger over passages that are unclear or that strike you as particularly helpful or that don't jar well with you. Why do those passages set off your instincts?
- Relate those passages to the whole text: how is this piece of the text part of a larger context?

This is where I set the highest possible bar for reading practices in my class. You won't really begin to understand what you are reading until you read it at least three times; that's the difficulty and challenge of reading theory. My evaluations consistently note this about my theory classes: they say, this is the hardest class I've ever taken, or the most demanding. My only response is: good.

- Contextualize the writing. You should know, and your handout should provide, the following information: who wrote the essay/chapter; what is their discipline, or interdisciplinary nexus; what else have they written; what is the/are the central arguments; who is the writer in conversation with; what are some key passages; what are some key terms; what did you not understand?

As I noted, this is actually an outline for the handout that students will produce in the class. In essence, these are crib sheets for students' future reference, and I've also returned to them many times when I'm cramming for classes as well. But the real work of the handout is also to begin to map the intellectual constellations of the essay, to start to chart patterns and cross-conversations happening in the field, to track keywords as they are used differently across the various readings. The "conversations" category cues students to read footnotes and endnotes; the inter/discipline question also provokes conversations about the interventions that our authors are trying to make. **In short, it's a handout, but it's also a guideline to some good habits of mind.**

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- Make your discussion question(s) simple, straightforward and jargon-free.

- Proofread your questions so that you catch grammar and spelling mistakes.

- Make your questions open-ended, i.e. not answerable with fact or by direct and immediate reference to the text.

- Make sure your question doesn't rely on information the rest of the class doesn't have, OR give the class enough information and background to be able to engage the question. Make sure the question is answerable to start with, i.e., is not vague and does not rely on facts or assumptions not addressable within the confines of our class conversation.

- Make reference to the text with quotes or page numbers: direct the class to look at a relevant passage, read it together out loud, and drill down into the writing and sentence structure itself to get at the problem you are looking at. Sometimes I refer to this model of reading theory as Talmudic. What I am trying to say is that we need not reserve close-reading practices to literature, particularly if we are interested in the refractive effects of language itself.

In short, start to become a teacher. Learn how to organize information, to imagine how your own questions impact or reach other people's ears and eyes. Scaffold your question with the information people need to answer it; ground your question deeper into the text itself. When I receive the questions students hand in in the first week of class, they often come scribbled on paper at the last minute and those get handed back immediately. And while the grade for the assignment is 5% of the class, which students get just for handing both questions in, I give extensive and fairly intensive feedback. I want them to understand that the bar for writing good questions is as high or even higher than the bar for mastering the text itself, and I expect them to run through at least four or five drafts of each question until they get it right.

What I mean by "refractive" effects of language—in the last bullet point above—is twofold: I find the speculative work of theory to be as beautiful and as breathtaking as the speculative work of literature itself. The force of its difficulty, that is, in fact can focus

the attention of a committed group of readers through an individual word into the crystalline deconstructive effects of language and undo what we think we know about what we are reading. Consider, for instance, the breathtaking opening pages of José Muñoz's work *Disidentifications* in which he begins to outline his theory of this crucial technology of queer of color survival:

> I remember, for instance, seeing an amazingly queeny Truman Capote describe the work of fellow writer Jack Kerouac as not writing but, instead, typing. I am certain that my pre-out consciousness was completely terrified by the swishy spectacle of Capote's performance. But I also remember feeling a deep pleasure in hearing Capote make language, in "getting" the fantastic bitchiness of his quip. Like Gomez, I can locate that experience of suburban spectatorship as having a disidentificatory impact on me.

When I teach theory, as when I teach literature, my students and I do a great deal of reading out loud to each other. When I have them read the passage above, what I want them to pay attention to are the many aesthetic evaluations that shimmer within a seemingly descriptive and factual passage, one which Muñoz only a few pages later will himself unpack as having been reshaped and revised by his own memory. And yet, Muñoz's entire theory of disidentification is carried within these few short lines; his entire theory and also the world-sustaining joy and humor and love and affection that undergird them: "amazingly queeny"; "swishy spectacle"; "fantastic bitchiness"; "suburban spectatorship." This is a "deep pleasure" in the life of ideas, in the possibilities of living in and against and beyond the possibilities of a world that would prefer to make refuse out of every adjective-noun pairing in the text, from pathetic queen

to sterile suburbia. In short, the aesthetic work of theory is also a form of theorizing, a measure of its own epistemic work, part of the world, the ontologies it hopes to produce. But you only get the full effect of that work if you listen to theoretical language in its fullness: much as Muñoz allows his reconstructed memory of Capote's fantastic bitchiness to produce the future-present he described/called into being in his own work. *It's writing, not typing.*

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Back to business:

- A good discussion question reframes some of the problems of the text and then tries to get at internal logical problems and paradoxes or to think through the consequences, implications and applications of the theory.

- As such, questions about "experience" or "responses" or "feelings" tend not to be helpful questions—try to step back from personal responses and instead focus on the intellectual shape of the ideas and argument.

This is the really hard to teach part. It's another reason why I do so much rehearsing of good questions, and it has a lot to do with what it's like to teach in feminist, queer and minoritarian-based classrooms. Students come in with a lot of feelings. And of course as minoritarian teachers working in the age of the booming Student Affairs Industrial Complex, we are often expected to manage those feelings.

But, and I want to take out a billboard that says this: managing feelings, particularly as it relates to various forms of injury IS NOT THE JOB OF THE TEACHER. As I tell my students over and over:

your intuitions and feelings are what will lead you to original insight but they are not a substitute for thinking and working hard. Rather, they are the end of the psychic thread that you begin to pull at as you develop the ability to summarize and analyze the structures of thought, habits of mind, and analytic forms that undergird critical theory. What it feels like may make a bridge between you and theory and the world around us, but in my classroom we are largely going to model thinking about the last part of the tripartite clause. We are going to move from theory to the world, *and not back to you*.

That movement, from individual intuition or feeling, or even memory to analytic or critical intervention in larger structural issues is the movement that I try to model again and again. Asserting that movement as a critical practice makes clear the limits of my willingness to explore or manage individual feeling in the class, or in office hours. After all, as I also tell my students, the point of feminism was not to exacerbate our focus on the individual but rather to shift to structural and systemic thinking. Less me; more us. Less me-search, more research. Truthfully, once I was able to clarify this as a pedagogical practice, it revolutionized my classroom. I'm grateful to my students for picking up this volley with grace and ease and brilliance. Sometimes they even toss it back to me, when I really need it.

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This brings me to another point about some old patterns of feminist thought:

- Often we are tempted to ask the "what about" question: e.g., what about the people who are excluded from this theory? Although not an unreasonable question, asked in this manner this is not really a sophisticated question because it doesn't open up conversation. The only answer to "what about" is: they aren't there. More productive is to ask: how do the exclusions at the heart of this work facilitate certain conclusions, problems or paradigms, what are these paradigms and what happens when we consider this theory in a broader context? What would this theory look like if re-written from a different point in history, different assumptions about political economy, etc.?

Back to the sometimes-bad habits of feminist teaching, or at least the worst and most reductive reading of feminist pedagogy here. When I was an undergrad, I was taught feminist theory on the progress model, in which each successive wave of feminism addressed and undid the exclusions of the previous one. Bad mommies!

While this methodology was important for tracing some chronologies of left, anticolonial and feminist thought, as many writers have noted, it modeled a perhaps-naïve view of a progressively improving model of feminist and queer politics, as well as a kind of negative pedagogical approach. The problem is that "what about the x's" is not a good question; it is a complaint. Asking how a piece of writing get reworked to include the x's, and what are the consequences of this exclusion and inclusion, is *much* more interesting and productive.

This brings me to another exercise I do in class which is to actually write out the model that I learned as an undergrad across the top of a blackboard (Wollstonecraft then Friedan then National Organization of Women then Radical feminism then Women of Color feminism etc etc, an obviously reductive and flawed genealogy) and then underneath to chart out other revolutionary timelines like third world nationalism; the civil rights movement; black internationalism and pan-Africanism; the American gay and lesbian movement back to Mattachine and through Stonewall; the

labor movement; abolitionism; and anything else I can fit in. Once we start to chart these multiple genealogies we also begin to see how the figures that, for instance, feminism co-opts as its own in fact moved laterally across multiple movements, bringing models of organizing and knowledge production to each intersection. It's a kind of amazing exercise, particularly when we pool all of our knowledge because it really makes clear the overwhelmingly rich and global resources for left thinking that are both there to be accessed and also suppressed and forgotten as origins for our current thinking.

Another way to address this problem, by the way, is to make the narrative arc of the syllabus circle around to conclude with writing that happened decades ago. This year we are concluding with Hortense Spillers' masterpiece work of writing "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" because I want students to see that the narrative of apparent progress embedded in the teaching of feminist theory often rests on some very strategic forgetting, usually of the work of women of color, in particular black women. Ultimately the "what about" question is often answered with some blunt historical facts: X was speaking all along, over here, where other people were listening, stealing and forgetting to footnote. (Which is to say, dear reader, have *you* cited a woman of color today?)

For instance: does it matter that Spillers wrote "Mama's Baby" three years before Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* was published? *Yes, it matters very much.* What is there to say about the fact that Spillers is mentioned only once, in a footnote, in Butler's groundbreaking book? What is produced by the force of that exclusion? What if we rewrite Butler's theory

from within the work that Spillers does to re-narrate gender as an always-already raced American grammar book. What other ideas about matter, performativity, abjection and regulatory normativity might be produced? (Answer: read Spiller's essay, in which almost the entire gist of critical theory—particularly on race and sexuality —for the next thirty years is predicted.)

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More business:

- It's not the worst idea to make sure you have some thoughts about how to answer your questions before sending them on to your colleagues. However, sometimes you are just really stumped and need to work through this question with your classmates. That's okay too.

- Which brings me to: it is often smart and productive to write a preamble to a question. That preamble might be a short intellectual history of your questions, it might contextualize the text you are working with, it might scaffold the question you want to ask by referring to other texts or many points in the same text. Don't make this preamble so long that no-one can excavate the original question, however. Also….

- If you can answer your question while you are writing it, you probably need to just state your point of view and move on to another, related, question.

Questions that are really buried opinions are narcissistic and unproductive. State your opinion, leave it on the table to be debated, picked up and critiqued by your colleagues, and then develop a

question out of that opinion. In short, build a bridge between you and your readers and interlocutors; invite them into your thinking, your discipline, your own presumptions. Be a good host:

- Sometimes the question you write is simply the jumping-off point for more developed questions on the part of the class. That is fine! The point is to catalyze inquiry, not perform mastery: good pedagogy means letting go of your ego-investments in your own ideas.

Okay this goes for teachers too. Often our students are so bright that they rewrite everything you think you are doing, the class goes off the rails, the world is horrible, there's too much affect running between us to ignore, the real point of what we are reading takes us into the world in ways we weren't able to predict and all rules get rewritten. Sometimes you just go with it. I have been moved to (suppressed) tears by moments in my classroom when we came to an intellectual precipice together, and we really felt what it was like to be in the crisis of this world at this time and those moments came when I threw out everything I thought I knew about what I was doing. And then we were able to make some new ideas together.

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Which brings me to ego:

- Sometimes you are stuck with an instinct, a hunch, a nagging feeling and a half-formed question and you simply can't move forward without thinking about it out loud. Bring those seemingly half-formed thoughts to the class: we will figure the direction or shape of your question together.

- Finally: when you don't get it, you don't get it. Ask for help from the professor or your classmates, and feel free and supported in bringing your "I Don't Get It" questions to class. We will all profit from these acts of intellectual humility and generosity.

This is key: a successful classroom happens when every member, including the teacher, abandons ego and terrified performances of mastery and instead can show up and say: I don't get it. And I think the job of the professor—and in particular the teacher of theory—is to get the class to that point. In particular I really love it when students answer a question in class only halfway, leaving sentences and ideas percolating on the table to be picked up by others. I have half of an idea; this thought is still fermenting; do you guys understand this passage? *I don't get it*.

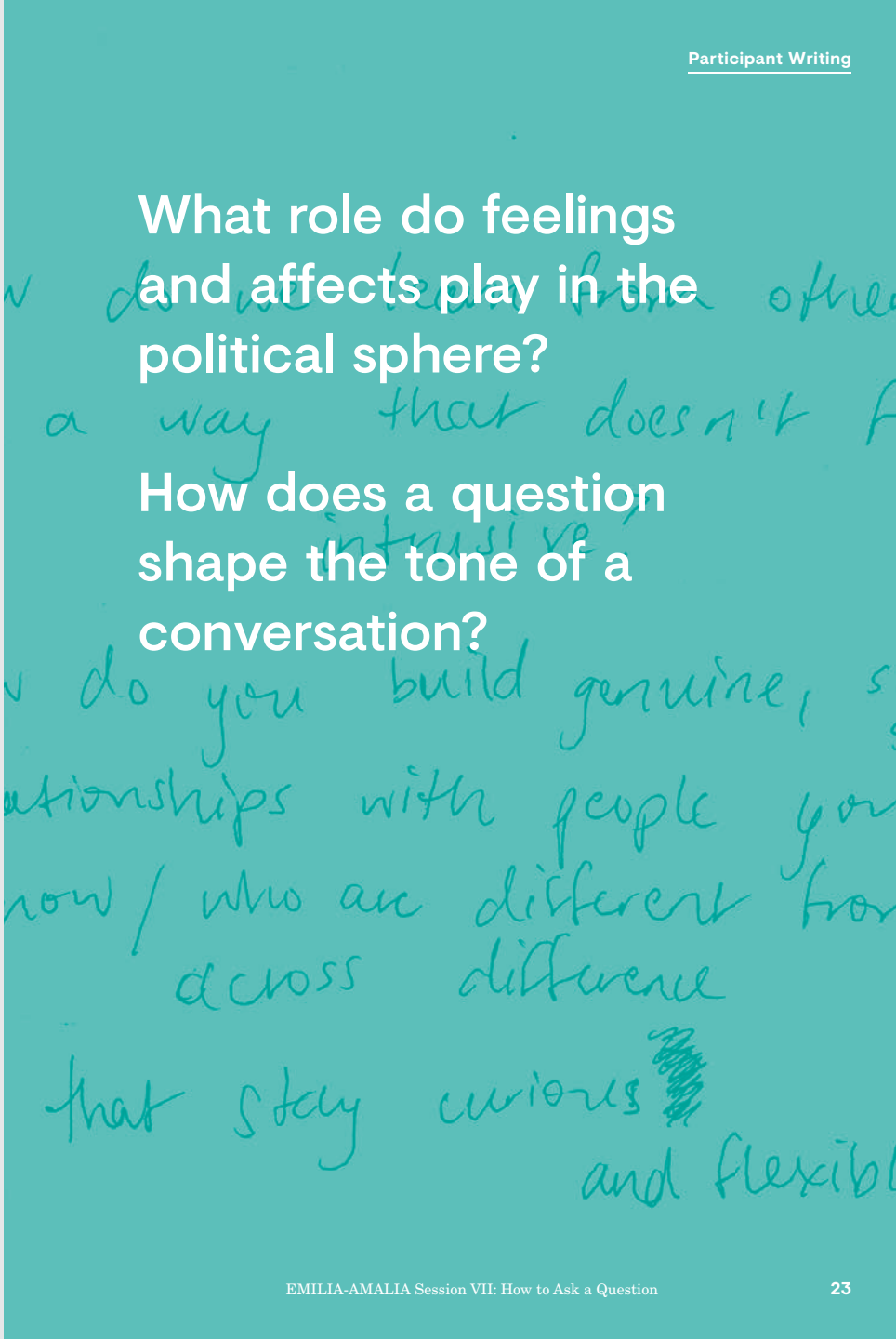
A good question, in short, is an honest question, one that, like good theory, dances on the edge of what is knowable, what it is possible to speculate on, what is available to our immediate grasp of what we are reading, or what it is possible to say. A good question, that is, like good theory, might be quite unlovely to read, particularly in its earliest iterations. And sometimes it fails or has to be abandoned.

But we don't come together to perform what we already know how to do. We come together to be unlovely and take ourselves apart, in order to mutually construct even more difficult ideas. It's not supposed to be easy. The labor is what makes it beautiful.

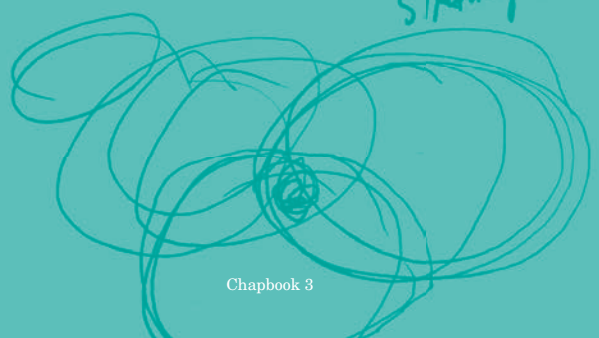
Written in love and collaborative practice with the students of Pomona College GWS 180 for the last decade.

Writing Activity

What can we ask of feminism?



Would loosening feminism's essential tie to gender cast it as tool rather than identification?



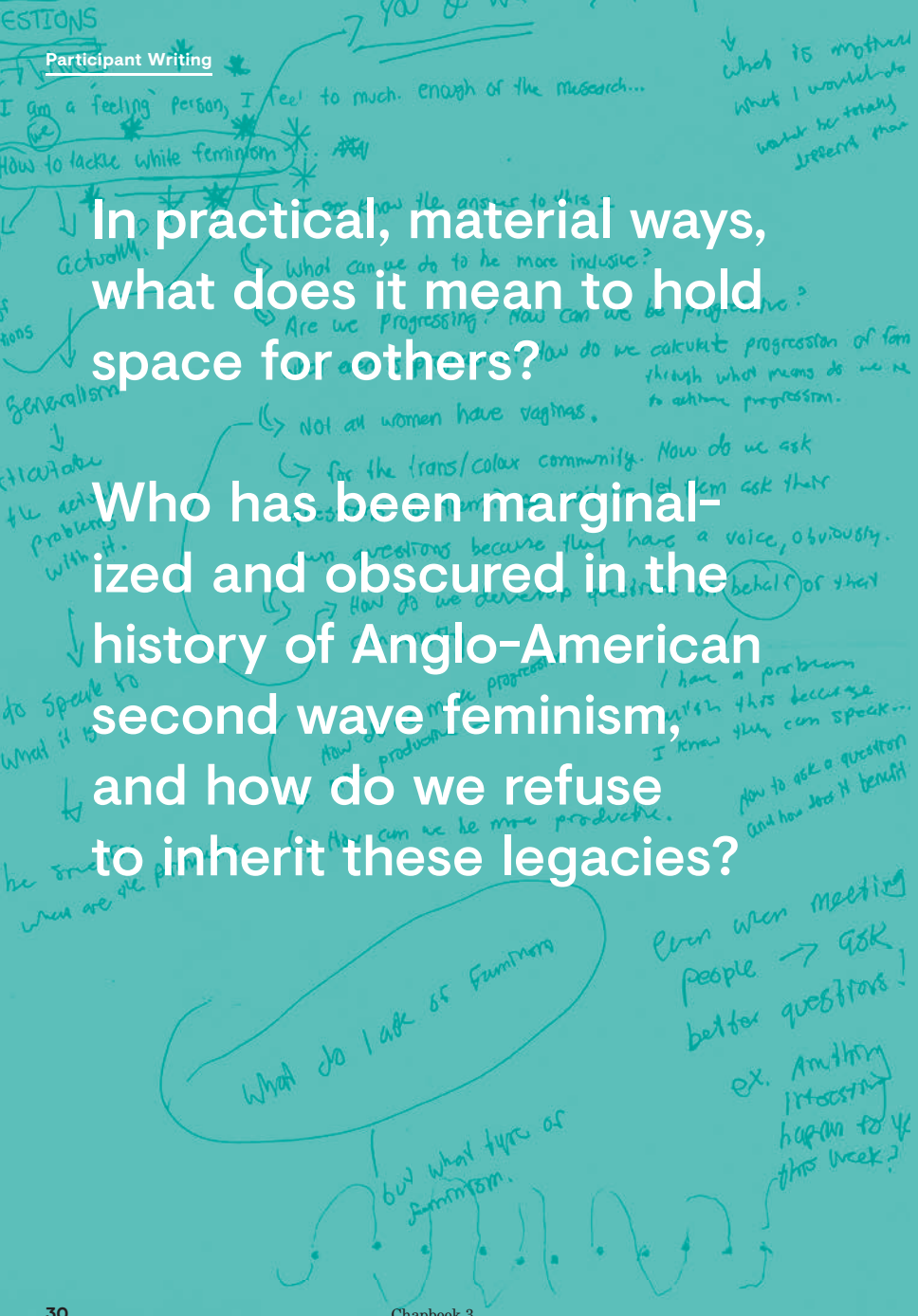
How do we build alliances to be able to learn from our elders?

What does it look like to put labour into questioning? How can we instrumentalize?

How can lived experience —that is, an account of how one's being-in-the-world is affected by, and situated within, social, political and economic structures—be valued as knowledge-producing within feminist theory and praxis?

When asking “what do we want from feminism,” I wonder, where does “wanting” direct us?

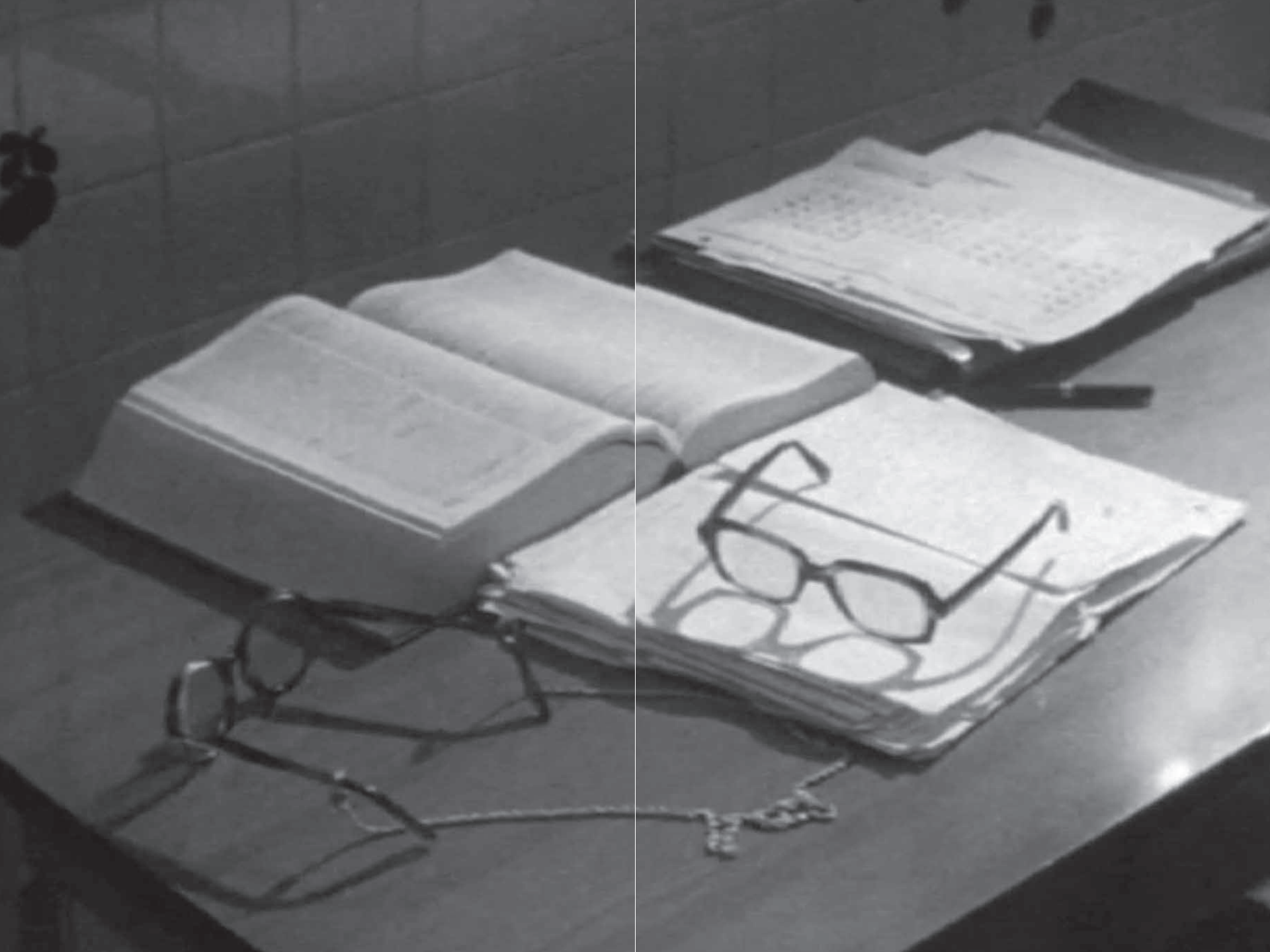
What does it mean to take up space on the page, online, in public forums by asking questions?



In practical, material ways, what does it mean to hold space for others?

Who has been marginalized and obscured in the history of Anglo-American second wave feminism, and how do we refuse to inherit these legacies?

Who are these questions for?



p.32–33 Film still from *Scuola Senza Fine* (School Without End), Adriana Monti, Italy, 1983, 40 mins. Screened on 26 September 2016 at the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto as part of EMILIA-AMALIA Session IV: Education/Pedagogy. Image used with permission of Adriana Monti.

As part of EMILIA-AMALIA's five-session arc on "How to Ask a Question," three writers were invited to respond to the group's meetings and discussions. Here, artist and filmmaker Michèle Pearson Clarke reflects on Session VII: How to Ask a Question, held at Gallery 44 on 8 February 2017.

I'm Not Here to Be Who I Already Am

Michèle Pearson Clarke

Michèle Pearson Clarke is a Trinidadian-Canadian artist who works in photography, film, video and installation. Using archival, performative and process-oriented strategies, her work explores the personal and political possibilities afforded by considering experiences of emotions related to longing and loss. Based in Toronto, she holds an MSW from the University of Toronto and an MFA in Documentary Media Studies from Ryerson University, and is currently the Photo Laureate for the City of Toronto.

You always notice when you are the only Black person in the room. Whether it is by design or by accident or by oversight, you might not want to notice, but you always do.

Does anybody else notice? Why are there no other Black people here? Am I a Black person in a white space, or just the only person who is not white in this space?

Being able to ask a good question is a feminist muscle worth flexing, because surely if we think differently, then we will act differently. Before taking up this space, we were encouraged to read Kyla Wazana Tompkins's essay, "We Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know," a generous and thought-provoking text comprising 20 notes on how to ask a good question about theory. A theory is an idea that you may or may not

understand, and a good question can expand or collapse the world that has been built around you. A person can be an idea that you may or may not understand, and maybe the hard truth is there is no question good enough to get you altogether across history and time and space.

How many women in this room would be willing to invest this much labour into understanding a person rather than a theory?

Much is being asked of feminism these days, yet our task of composing a question for public consideration seemed to snag on the edges of permission and of performance and of privilege. Committing words to paper might be dangerous in the wrong company, and the right company guarantees nothing either. But when

you are taught that you have to be twice as good to get half as much, you write two questions when everyone else writes none; later, you wish you could remember that refusal is forever an option.

Did she really just say that?
Is anyone else going to say something?

Not everything that thinks it's experimental is actually so, although that should not stop us from trying. There was much to admire in this exploratory attempt to think and to write collectively and in public—especially with considerable ambiguity and uncertainty crowding the room. Asking questions of ideas and asking questions of one another is an investment in feminist world-making, with all the risk and reward we could want. Still, doubt breeds insecurity, and despite your

admiration, you wonder if you will ever find the words you do not yet have. Questions beget questions, and you wonder if you were watching whiteness interrogate itself with you in the room, even as it remained just silent enough to keep us all acceptably uncomfortable.

Can we want differently together?
Do we need to want together at all?

Relationality between women makes the intersectional feminist world go 'round, and our contradictory realities are too numerous to count. A feminist space constructed by white women can be for all women; unless it cannot, and maybe it is too painful to tell the difference. You know that your love and your respect for these white women made them no less white, and you know that you do not have an answer for that question.

Colophon

EMILIA-AMALIA meets on the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original owners and custodians of the land.

EMILIA-AMALIA is initiated by Cecilia Berkovic, Yaniya Lee, Annie MacDonell, Gabrielle Moser, Zinnia Naqvi, Leila Timmins, cheyanne turions and Shellie Zhang.

EMILIA-AMALIA would like to thank Gallery 44 for hosting sessions; Trinity Square Video for lending space; and the Ontario Arts Council and the Art Gallery of Ontario for financial support. Special thanks to Sean O'Neill for inviting us to be residents at the AGO; Adriana Monti for giving us permission to use stills from her film; Helena Reckitt and the Feminist Duration Reading Group in London for their inspiration, mentorship and friendship; Kyla Wazana Tompkins and Michèle Pearson Clarke for their rigour and insight; session participants Magdalena Suksi, Daniella Sanader, Genevieve Flavelle, Camille Rojas, Sarah Bodri, Danielle Taschereau Mamers, Jana Vigor, Michèle Pearson Clarke, and Bridget Moser; and lastly to all of the additional participants who have come to sessions over the past years who shared their thoughts, writing and time with us.

A portion of the proceeds from the sales of the chapbooks will be donated to Black Lives Matter Toronto's Freedom School. freedomschool.ca

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AGO
Art Gallery of Ontario

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

This series of five chapbooks is a partial record of the conversations, texts, images and output the EMILIA-AMALIA working group sessions have generated and engaged with since 2016.