
Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies

Collectivity: Part 2

Special Issue edited by the *Camera Obscura* collective

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Collectivity: Part 2

the *Camera Obscura* collective

In honor of the journal's fortieth anniversary, this special issue of *Camera Obscura*—the second of a two-part series—considers theories and practices of collectivity. Collectives often emerge in periods of crisis in response to new social, economic, and technological conditions. *Camera Obscura's* feminist editorial collective has functioned in this way since its beginnings in the 1970s, a time when many forms of cooperative action proliferated. In this period, collectives formed around issues of gender, race, and politics, with many organizing around forms of media production. In the last ten to fifteen years, a growing constellation of collectives, many international, has emerged, configuring artists and activists in new political and cultural formations. These collectives are a response to developments like the growing impact of digital media and mobile technologies; new paradigms of relational aesthetics; new configurations of labor and precarity; and the rise of neoliberal policy, which has worked to erode the public sphere and shared resources in favor of the idea of individual responsibility. In contrast, the theory and practice of collectivity emphasize participation, consensus, and working toward common goals. However, as anyone who has been part of a collective knows, these formations are never free of difficulty and disagreement—

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difficulties that relate to communication as well as to the very dynamics of gender, sexuality, class, race, and multinationalism that demand collective responses. This special issue explores these potentials and challenges through pieces—both full-length analyses and short-form reflections—that address such topics as collaboration in photography, cinema, and video; utopias and dystopias; history and memory; modes of singleness and of togetherness; technology, embodiment, and intimacy; and feminist and queer collective practices in media and activism in various times and places.

***Valencia: The Movie/s:* A New Collectivity**

Liz Clarke and S. Topiary Landberg

Valencia: The Movie/s (US, 2013) is an omnibus film adaption of Michelle Tea's queer coming-of-age memoir, *Valencia* (2000), about her experiences in San Francisco's Mission District during the mid-1990s.¹ The film presents an unconventional form of collective filmmaking, transposing Tea's personal recollections of the flourishing punk-dyke subculture of a specific time and place into a polyvocal and expansive reimaging. In the multiauthored film project, the original vision of community and culture that Tea's *Valencia* celebrates is translated into a new form, bridging time and space as well as gender positions and identities. This expansion of the memoir is particularly poignant, given the current state of Valencia Street in the Mission District, where so many traces of the world of Tea's book have been wiped away by gentrification. Perhaps most challenging, the collectively produced form of *Valencia: The Movie/s* provides both nostalgic and antinostalgic representations of the world of the book: it displays a nostalgic ethos in its romantic longing for a past San Francisco that no longer exists as well as presents an antinostalgic sensibility that attempts to supplant or in some way revise and undo any sense

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of nostalgia and romanticism for such a past. In other words, the world of the film is expanded beyond the individual narrative through the multiplicity of experiences represented by the various directors.

The film's dialectical, discordant polyvocality presents many productive tensions and contradictions in its exuberant, contemporary, and fractured vision of subculture. In choosing twenty-one different filmmakers to adapt her book, Tea sought to include those who represented a range of ages, filmmaking backgrounds, cultural experiences, geographic locations, and gender identities. In this way, the multiplicity of aesthetic treatments, the diversity of the casts (as each chapter uses a completely different set of actors), and the distinctions in film locations allow for a celebration of difference as much as of commonality. While the film represents the various chapters in the life of Michelle as a single character, the diverse forms of production across the chapters create both a forward and backward look at this subculture, yielding a different sort of collectivity (one that is a kind of difference within collectivity and a collection of differences) by resisting heteronormative temporality. Here, our use of the word *subculture* rather than, for example, *community* derives from Jack Halberstam's distinction between the two and their relation to time. Halberstam argues that the term *subculture* "suggest[s] transient, extrafamilial, and oppositional modes of affiliation."² In Halberstam's conception, *community* is understood as a conservative construct, whereby "quests for community are always nostalgic attempts to return to some fantasized moment of union and unity [that] reveals the conservative stakes in community for all kinds of political projects" (154). Halberstam argues that queer temporalities "disrupt normative narratives of time," especially that of the transition to adulthood (152). In Halberstam's examination of subcultures, the concepts of past, present, and future are erased through a reimagining of time that does not progress toward adulthood. Similarly, Elizabeth Freeman suggests a theory of queer time that departs from a reliance on the concepts of "waves" and "generations," which tend to evoke normative constructions of familial relations.³ In *Valencia*:

The Movie/s, normative constructions of temporality are undermined in multiple ways. Specifically, by juxtaposing film chapters with varying relationships to nostalgic fidelity or infidelity, some of which carefully reconstruct their scenes with loving attention to 1990s period details while others disrupt understandings of the past as removed from the present, *Valencia: The Movie/s* provides an experience of queer time. This queer temporality challenges viewers' assumptions about linear progression, character coherence, and gender identity as well as normative distinctions between the past and present, self and other, and inclusion and exclusion. In constructing the adaptation of her book in this way, the filmmakers create a contemporary expansion of Tea's original vision of the radical nineties punk-dyke subculture to include transgender, drag queen, gay male, and gender-queer adaptations of the original cisgender female book characters. Although *Valencia: The Movie/s* is ostensibly about a specific dyke culture during a specific time (1994–95) and place (Valencia Street and the surrounding Mission District), the film's multiplicities expand a sense of belonging to this subculture and bring the audience into a variety of different presents and geographic and stylistic locations, therefore creating new connections.

Tea's memoir is a raucous portrait of her romantic adventures during the heyday of what could be referred to as "the dyke nineties" of San Francisco's Mission District, a time when the area around Valencia and Sixteenth Streets was a center for many radical dykes and queers who lived and worked in the predominantly Mexican and Central American neighborhood and helped to shape the character of this inexpensive, easily accessible inner-city neighborhood for decades. Central to this lively 1990s dyke culture was a weekly all-girl poetry open mic night called "Sister Spit" (which Tea cohosted), as well as a dyke-run coffeehouse known as Red Dora's Bearded Lady Cafe and weekly dance clubs called Junk! and Muff-Dive, which are all described in Tea's book. The rampant gentrification and economic transformations that have rocked San Francisco since the mid-1990s owing to the two tech booms have caused the displacement of these and many other women-, queer-,

and artist-run venues, along with a huge percentage of the Mission's queer and low-income residents. The facts and tragedies related to these wide-scale cultural displacements from the Mission, among many other inner-city neighborhoods in San Francisco, have been widely documented and reported on in the news media.⁴ Yet in an article written in 2013 critiquing a current wave of queer nostalgia for the 1990s, Tea reminds us that a certain lesbian feminist culture that used to call Valencia Street its home was gone before she arrived on the scene in 1993.⁵ In this article, Tea suggests that gentrification was a reality of San Francisco life before the tech booms and that nostalgic longing for an ever-elusive heyday is in itself unproductive.⁶

In the context of a dispersed community (with the term *community* here acknowledging differences rather than disavowing them), Halberstam's concept of the queer temporality of subcultures offers a way to understand the creation of *Valencia: The Movie/s*. The film's multidirected compilation structure—in which a plethora of visions and aesthetic approaches include both romantic, nostalgic representations of the past and disavowals of nostalgic representations, both celebrations of commonalities and exposures of disruptions—expands the queer-punk subculture that once inhabited Valencia Street. The omnibus approach behind the film's production, and the experience of viewing the individual shorts that make up the film in aggregate, can also be understood as an antinostalgic, proheterogeneity strategy in itself, in that it refuses to provide a singular notion of how 1990s San Francisco looked or who best represents the characters of Tea's book. Thus, the inclusion of multiple directors from across the US and across generational lines expands the understanding of who can be considered to be included in the subculture that the film represents. At the same time, even as the film celebrates the 1990s in its content, *Valencia: The Movie/s* demonstrates an effort to keep this subculture artistically active in the context of the present day, at a moment when Valencia Street can no longer be considered a locus for the punk-queer people who are the film's subject.

Valencia: The Movie/s was produced by Tea's nonprofit liter-

ary organization, Radar Productions, in collaboration with filmmaker/coproducer Hilary “Clement” Goldberg, and together they assembled a kind of loose yet dissociated collective. In this way, the film was shaped by the contemporary social and economic realities of geographic dispersal as well as the economic limitations of its nonprofit producer. Tea and Radar Productions approached many of the filmmakers, in a sense commissioning various directors to adapt particular chapters; in some cases, though, filmmakers asked to take part, and they chose their own chapters. The film therefore came together almost like a zine project. This mode of collectivity also can be understood as shaped by social media and facilitated through a sense of virtual community. For instance, Facebook and blog posts published on the Radar Productions website facilitated the approach to constructing and producing the film as a whole, as well as to crowdfunding and publicizing individual chapters. The ability to stay in contact using online media and facilitate a sense of belonging to the subculture, as well as to expand that community despite a lack of physical contact or centralized production facilities, is key to understanding the type of collectivity developed in the film. The staying power and expansion of this subculture is particularly noteworthy, given the large-scale dislocation and exodus of many of the participants in the original punk-dyke subculture from the Mission. Thus, despite the diversity of the various chapter directors’ physical locations and social identifications, the development, funding, production, and publicity processes created a unified and growing sense of enthusiasm for the project as a coherent whole.

Another notable aspect of this loose form of collectivity was the absence of any aesthetic stipulations for the chapters. Just as all filmmakers were responsible for raising their own funds for production, they were also entirely without constraint in defining their own creative approaches to the chapters. Some of the filmmakers, such as Aubree Bernier-Clarke, who had read the book as a queer youth growing up in Kentucky, had little physical experience of the time or place represented in Tea’s account. Other filmmakers, such as Silas Howard, Samuel Topiary, Peter Anthony, and Cary Cronen-



Figure 2. Iris (Rayna Matthews), left, and Michelle (Annie Danger), right, at the Dyke March from chapter 4 of *Valencia: The Movie/s*, directed by Lares Feliciano. Danger, as Michelle, wears a button that reads “Trans Womyn Belong Here.”

wett, were friends of Tea and part of the original community about which the memoir was written, and they have pseudonymous cameos in the book. Some of the filmmakers, such as Anthony, Dia Felix, and Bug Davidson, cast some or all of the characters as cis men or trans men, and the chapter by Jerry Lee imagines the characters as drag queens. While the lesbian feminist ethos of the 1970s and 1980s often created and coalesced around women-only spaces, the growing influence of transgender politics since the 1990s, along with the recent increase in the number of transitioning, genderqueer, and trans men who consider themselves to be a part of this dyke subculture, reflects a significant change in who identifies as members—not necessarily as a dyke or female—of this community. Many of the filmmakers’ choices to cast genderqueer or even cis men in the roles of dyke characters reflect changes in the gender-identity politics of this subculture from its mid-1990s context to today.

The multiple aesthetic approaches—ranging from more traditional narrative film treatments (such as in the chapters by Bernier-Clark, Howard, Alexa Inkeles, and Lares Feliciano) to experimental forms, which include claymation (Goldberg), video animation (Greg Youmans and Chris Vargas), experimental docu-

mentary (Topiary), queer porn (Courtney Trouble and Cronewett), campy drag (Lee), video art (Cheryl Dunye), and dreamy nonlinear treatments (Jill Soloway, Sara St. Martin Lynne, and Michelle Lawler)—suggest the inability to attach to just one particular vision of Tea's rendering of the past. The antinostalgic compilation form is an inclusive approach to the adaptation of *Valencia* that creates provocative contrasts between the book's form as a memoir written in the first person and the polyvocality of the omnibus film approach, suggesting a kaleidoscopic and expansive way of representing the relationship between the individual and the collective. The singularity of Tea's writerly voice is echoed in many of the film chapters that employ voice-over narrations of text adapted from the book. Yet even before the film chapters begin, the opening animated credit sequence by Amanda Verway introduces and emphasizes the fact that the character Michelle is performed by radically different-looking actors across the chapters. The inherent discontinuity and disorientation that result from this fractured treatment of character serve to destabilize any individual approach to Tea's work, suggesting instead that it is the collective of the different treatments in which the meaning of this adaptation resides.

Finally, in including a diverse array of actors, historical and contemporary periods, aesthetics, and production locations (with some of the chapters filmed in locations obviously outside San Francisco, such as in Sharon Barnes's chapter, which takes place in the Bushwick District of Brooklyn, New York), the film expresses a queer representation of subculture, extending beyond its original time period and geography. This aspect of the film is especially significant, given the realities of the recent hypergentrification of San Francisco, which has caused the mass eviction of the queer population identified with Valencia Street and the Mission District. The title of the film—which aligns this queer subculture with Valencia Street—is particularly poignant to many at a time when Valencia Street has become synonymous with high-end boutiques and the displacement of the queers who are the subject of the film. In fact, one of the reasons why the punk-queer subculture has so strongly identified with the street is due in no small measure to the popu-

larity and impact of Tea's original book. At the same time, the creation of the collaborative film and the use of the title *Valencia: The Movie/s* are forms of resistance to this displacement and gentrification, marking the collective investment in the text and in the neighborhood both as a historical reality and as imagined fantasy. The film is a memorialization of the past at the same time that it brings the subculture into the present, thus resisting the erasure of Valencia as subculture.

The adaptation of *Valencia* from a personal narrative to a compilation film changes but does not disrupt identification with the central character of Michelle. Instead, the multiple iterations of Michelle serve to highlight a theme that exists outside the narrative but within the film's mode of production: the collective belonging in the queer subculture that once existed in the Mission District now transcends place, gender, or any one specific experience. In adapting the narrative from the very personal form of the memoir to a collaborative project in which a multitude of directors film separate chapters, Radar Productions, Tea, and Goldberg have created new meanings through an old text. These meanings reflect contemporary concerns as much as they mark a historical moment. Both nostalgia for the 1990s and the deconstruction and reconstruction of a particular history exist within the film at once. Specific chapters re-create the period with attention to detail, while the film as a whole reenvision history through its multiple perspectives and aesthetic styles.

The collaborative production of *Valencia: The Movie/s* creates a new significance for Michelle's story. The multiplicity of perspectives is a theme unto itself, one that considers and adapts to an expanded diaspora of the 1990s Mission-based queer artists and allows for new forms of active, artistic communities that can bridge gender identities, generations, and geography. The cohesive nature of the omnibus film, which represents many identities at the same time as it represents one person's story, serves as a call to inspire further experiments in productive, DIY collective practices. Tea's memoir captures the flourishing yet fleeting cultural moment of the Mission dyke scene of the mid-1990s, but *Valencia: The Movie/s*

suggests that a subculture can live beyond a particular neighborhood, opening itself to present and future possibilities even as it celebrates that past moment.

Notes

The authors would like to thank Lynne Joyrich for her valuable feedback and wisdom throughout this project and for research support provided in part by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1. *Valencia: The Movie/s* was produced by Hilary “Clement” Goldberg and Michelle Tea. It is directed by (listed according to the order of their chapters in the final film) Aubree Bernier-Clarke, Lares Feliciano, Clement Hilary Goldberg, Sara St. Martin Lynne and Michelle Lawler, Dia Felix, Silas Howard, Alexa Inkeles, Jerry Lee, Peter Anthony, Sharon Barnes, Cary Cronenwett, Courtney Trouble, Cheryl Dunye, Bug Davidson, Samuel Topiary, Olivia Parriott, Chris Vargas and Greg Youmans, and Jill Soloway. At the time of writing, the film is available to view on-demand at vimeo.com/ondemand/valencia (accessed 7 July 2016).
2. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 154.
3. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 64.
4. For two sources, among many, see *Anti-eviction Mapping Project: Documenting the Dispossession of SF Bay Area Residents*, Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, www.antievictionmap.squarespace.com/ (accessed 21 June 2015); and *San Francisco’s Eviction Crisis 2015: A Report by SFADC*, SF Anti-Displacement Coalition: Keeping San Francisco Affordable for All of Us, 21 April 2015, antidisplacementcoalitionsf.com/2015/04/21/sfadc-report-san-franciscos-eviction-crisis-2015.
5. Michelle Tea, “SF Has an Evil Twin,” *Bold Italic*, 30 April 2013, www.thebolditalic.com/articles/3095-san-francisco-has-an-evil-twin-

6. There are many complexities to the story of inner-city gentrification in San Francisco. A number of urban studies scholars have written at length about how the influx of artists and gay residents to inexpensive, inner-city immigrant neighborhoods is often itself considered to be an indicator of a first wave of urban gentrification processes. See Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982). We do not mean to imply that the queers of the punk nineties Mission District were not themselves implicated in the story of gentrification and in the transformation of what had been a predominantly Latino neighborhood. We would also like to acknowledge that the Mission District of the 1990s was a place rife with palpable cultural, racial, economic, and class tensions that predate the first influx of tech industry workers and the current realities of hypergentrification that are evident on Valencia Street today.

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Camera Obscura provides a forum for scholarship and debate on feminism, culture, and media studies. The journal encourages contributions in areas such as the conjunctions of gender, race, class, and sexuality with audiovisual culture; new histories and theories of film, television, video, and digital media; and politically engaged approaches to a range of media practices.

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Camera Obscura seeks substantial essays (approximately 6,500–9,000 words, including endnotes and references) that engage with current academic and popular debates in feminism, culture, and media studies. We encourage potential contributors to browse recent issues of the journal for examples of the types of scholarship we currently seek.

Camera Obscura is also interested in short pieces (750–2,500 words) on current media practices, practitioners, resources, events, or issues for the section “In Practice: Feminism/Culture/Media.” The editors encourage authors to use the short format to experiment with form in a critical context. The section includes solicited contributions and open submissions, with the intention of enriching dialogue between feminist media scholarship and the practices—production, distribution, exhibition, organizing, curating, archiving, research, and so on—that sustain it.

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Cover: *Ceremony of Us*, 1969. Choreographed and performed by Anna Halprin, San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, and Studio Watts School for the Arts. Courtesy of Anna Halprin

