

# Who gets to play and who doesn't?

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## Abstract

An exploration of who gets to play and who doesn't, and the potential inherent within collective, feminist art practices in levelling the field of play (pun intended). When considering play through the lens of intersectional feminism, play becomes as contentious as work and care. And the importance of play as outlined by in art theory by Jacques Rancière, in connecting us with the full range of our humanity, makes the question of who gets to play and who doesn't, more urgent.

I propose to present a brief overview of play, work and care from a feminist perspective and how intersectional collective art practices can enable agency for those least able to access meaningful play.

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## 1.0 Introduction

When considering play through the lens of intersectional feminism, play becomes as contentious as work. And the importance of play as outlined in art theory, by Jacques Rancière, in emancipating us from our societally ascribed roles, makes the question of who gets to play and who doesn't, more urgent.

This brief overview of play and work from a feminist perspective looks at how intersectional, collective, art practices might enable agency for those least able to access meaningful play. Extrapolating from feminist interjections into Marxist labour analysis, and the late twentieth century interventions by artists like Mierle Laderman Ukeles who appropriated household labour as art, this paper offers a contribution to the rich practice of feminist discourse and critique of accepted art theory and philosophy.

Combining feminist critiques with lived experience of womxn artists from *A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn*, (Jones and Robinson, 2019) this paper attempts to highlight the multifaceted approaches womxn and others have and are taking in closing the gap in which womxn are excluded from contemporary labour discourse and contemporary art.

## 1.1 The Work/Play Paradigm



Figure 1: Work/Play Paradigm, Ruth Jones, 2020

In thinking about play we often consider it in binary terms; as one side of a coin, opposed perhaps to work or seriousness. Johan Huizinga clarifies that "...Play...lies outside the reasonableness of practical life; has nothing to do with necessity or utility, duty or truth." (Huizinga, 1970)

But, when considering necessity, utility, duty and truth, we could be forgiven for finding Marx and Engels analysis of labour to be in opposition to play, despite Huizinga's argument that play lacks a dualistic opposite:

"...the...premise of history is that human beings...must meet their basic subsistence needs...that the satisfaction of these needs leads to the production of new needs..." (Marx and Engels as quoted in Weeks, 2018, pp 122)

Satisfaction of basic subsistence needs leaves the working class no time for play in this paradigm. Indeed, this Platonian understanding of the proletariat as having time for "...nothing but their work..." is as Rancière describes it, "...a naturalized prohibition written into the very forms of sensory experience." (Rancière, 2009)

In *The origin of The Family*, 1884, Engels briefly alludes to the significance of womxn's unpaid labour in terms of social reproduction:

"According to the materialist conception the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This is...two-fold...On the one side, the production of the means of existence, articles of food and clothing...; on the other side, *the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species*. The social organisation under which we live is determined by both kinds of production; by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and the family on the other." (Emphasis my own) (Engels as quoted in Rowbotham, 2015, pp47)

In both of these instances: in work as described by Marx and Engels, those whose labour is unpaid, fall outside of the realm of the proletariat. Sheila Rowbotham highlights this in bald terms as being "...[b]ecause housework does not fit into the prevailing notions of work it mysteriously becomes not work at all. It is not counted."(Rowbotham, 2015); In play, as defined by Huizinga, as something that "...lies outside the reasonableness of practical life..." we again find an absence of recognition of the labour womxn perform.

If, as is declared by Rancière, the importance of play is paramount in emancipating the subject who takes part in it, how then, are those who fall outside of the work/play paradigm likely to access emancipation?



Figure 2:

## 1.2 What's at Stake

Examining how emancipation is accessible (to some), Rancière outlines politics as an arena in which the sensible is constantly redistributed – it renders visible that which was unseen before, turns noise into speech, and reasserts common spaces, repeatedly. (Rancière, 2006) This political, commonly held space contains, amongst other things, art, something Rancière concludes as crucial in its emancipatory qualities.

For Rancière, art work is important *not* as an object in itself but as a focal point for “free play”. Developing Friedrich Schiller’s conception of free play, Rancière suggests that free play allows the spectator to play with ideas, in this instance using the Greek statue, the Judo Ludovici, as the free appearance on which those ideas can be projected. In examining Schiller’s understanding of what is at stake within play and art: “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly man when he is playing.” (Schiller and Snell, 2004) we find that our humanity is contingent upon our access to play.

Here again, the question of who gets to play and who doesn’t, becomes necessary. And further to this question is *how* to constitute womxn and ‘others’ as subjects that can not only be inserted into an understanding of the proletariat, but how they can hold their incontrovertible value as humans, so that access to emancipation through art is possible.

## 2.0 Constituting Womxn

Constituting womxn has been the concern of feminist discourse for decades and can be problematic in that womxn come to be defined by the systems that create them: “...the category of “women”...is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought.” (Butler, 2006)

The arguments for womxn’s constitution rightly go to the essence of what commonalities exist that can unify such a broad group:

“There is nothing about being “female” that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as “being” female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism.” (Haraway, 1998)– pg155)



Figure 3: Excerpts from *A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn*, Jones and Robinson, 2019

In finding ways to untangle the specific oppressions womxn face to better address them, Katie Kings explains how feminists have fallen into the trap of “...taxonomizing the women’s movement to make (their) own tendencies appear to be the telos of the whole...” (King as quoted in Haraway, 1998, pp 156)

As a way of navigating the shifting oppressions that womxn and ‘others’ face, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s term “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1991) permits a way for us to understand the complexities of oppression that womxn’s identities are subject to, and that have a direct impact upon their ability to access, amongst other things, play.

Initially used to highlight the gap in which neither feminism nor anti-racism addressed the specific oppressions black women experienced, intersectionality gives us a clear guideline to interpret the numerous barriers that many womxn face. (Crenshaw, 1991) Intersectionality can be expanded to include many protected characteristics such as race, class, gender identification, sexuality, age, and disability (both physical and mental).

Perhaps as Haraway suggests there is, “...little that naturally binds womxn..”, however, Lola Olufemi offers us what she terms an “imperfect” alternative to the dissolution of a womxn-led collectivism that seems unavoidable: that the term “...’Woman’ is a strategic coalition, an umbrella under which we gather in order to make political demands...[that can]...be mobilised in service of those who, given another option, would identify themselves in other ways.” (Olufemi, 2020)

This critical awareness of the arguments for the constitution of “womxn” as a subject demonstrates the difficulties in so doing. Using this contextual information as a mental caveat to the second wave feminist concerns that failed to advocate outside of gender, we can still use their determination to have womxn’s labour recognised as such to offer us a concrete starting point with which to analyse the capacity womxn have to access play.

In the 1970’s Mariarosa Dalla Costa argued against orthodox Marxist belief that “...insist(ed)... that women’s domestic labour was outside the realm of social production, and hence beyond the reach of Marxist economic analysis...” stating “...domestic labour is productive labour and as such, essential to the production of surplus value.” (Dalla Costa as cited in Weeks, 2018, pp75)

This single system theory only supports the notion of capitalist oppression. In the 1980's Heidi Hartman added a second axis of oppression by positing that both patriarchy and capitalism asserted differing oppressions upon womxn. (Hartman as cited in Weeks, 2018, pp78)

This slow-moving development by white, middle-class feminists led to an expanded Marxist discussion of labour around class for womxn, which can ultimately be used to probe what counts as work to determine what barriers womxn might face in accessing art. As Olufemi states, "The conditions of our lives: the need to work, the expectation of domestic, manual and emotional labour, mean that there is rarely time or space for artistic reflection." (Olufemi, 2020)

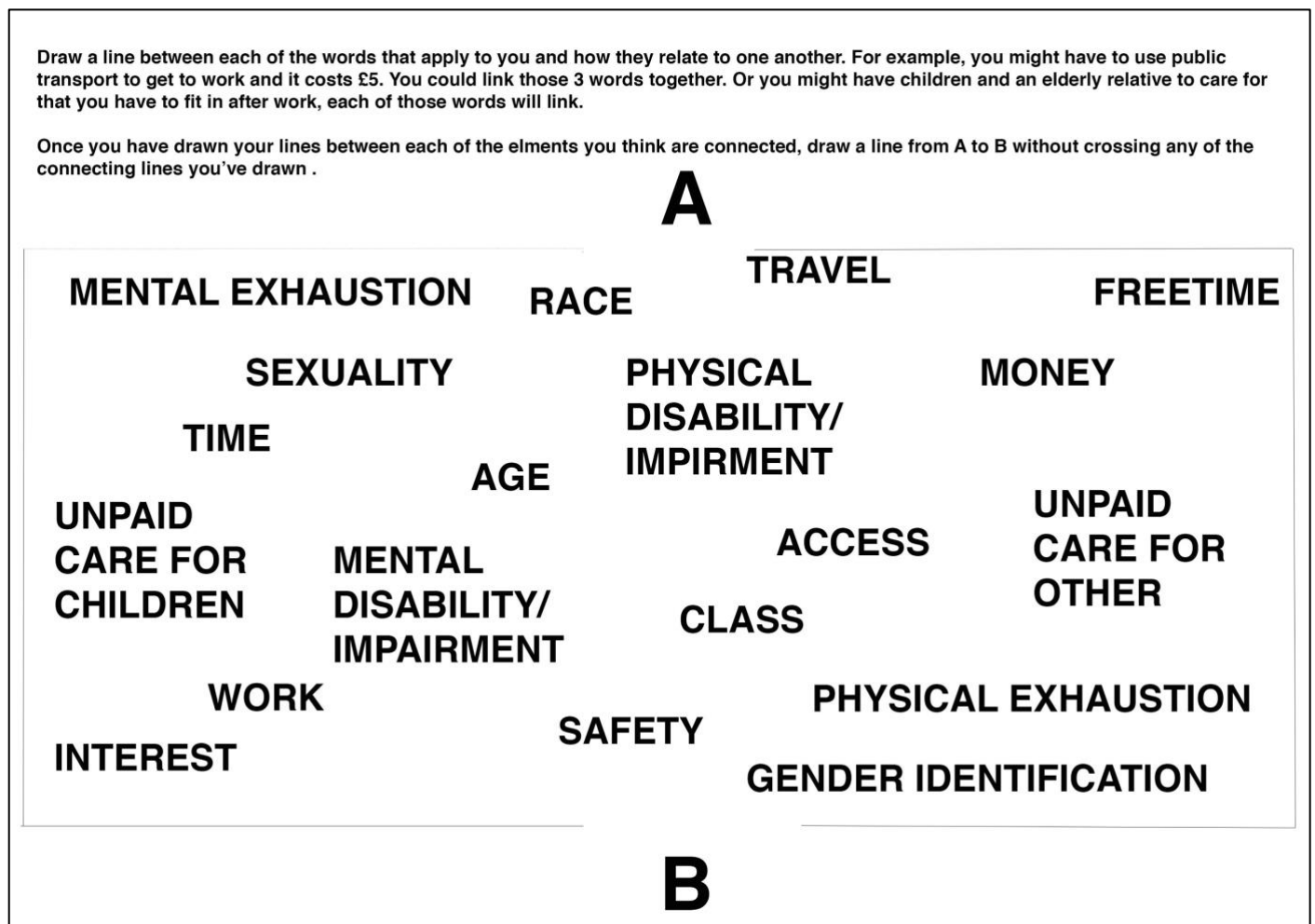


Figure 4: Intersectional Barriers, Ruth Jones, 2020

Using figure 4 can help to visualise how different responsibilities and intersections of oppression can prevent a person from being able access art spaces like galleries. If you imagine A as a person's starting point and B as the art gallery, how each of the phrases link for that person will create a bespoke series of barriers that will prevent them from accessing gallery spaces. The more points are linked for them, the more barriers are created. Those with the most barriers are least likely to engage with art in gallery settings. Those with the least barriers are more likely to engage with art in gallery settings.

The refusal to acknowledge the value inherent within certain forms of labour (conducted on the whole by womxn whose identities straddle numerous intersects) leaves womxn limited access to "common" spaces – museums and galleries among them. Recognising the limits of Rancière's emancipatory theory of art through the filter of feminist critiques of Marxism, allows us to find space to both constitute womxn as subjects *and* identify how access to art might be improved.



Figure 5: Excerpts from *A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn*, Jones and Robinson, 2019

Conducting research for *A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn*, Damien Robinson and I spoke with womxn artists working in Southend-on-Sea in Essex. Reference to the barriers that prevented the artists (a group with a vested interest in accessing the arts) from accessing art and art spaces indicated that intersecting oppressions and gendered responsibilities played a large role.

One of the recurring themes for the women who took part was the intersection between age and class, and more specifically about the imposter syndrome and sense of guilt they felt in pursuing something they knew they enjoyed, given the range of responsibilities they held.

The issues they faced from family and friends left them convinced that they were wasting time and should be doing something more useful, and that art was not something that was economically viable, nor should it be.



Figure 6: Excerpts from *A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn*, Jones and Robinson, 2019

I find this particularly interesting in the context of unpaid labour and the perception of *who* should be making art and *why*, given the commodity value of art, but not the value of the labour put into making that art. How we value art and the practice of it, is bound up in both neoliberal capitalism and class.

On this matter Rancière raises a question about "... the relationship between the 'ordinariness' of work and artistic 'exceptionality'" declaring that:

"It is necessary to abandon the lazy and absurd schema that contrasts the aesthetic cult of art for art's sake with the rising power of industrial labour...Whatever might be the specific type of economic circuits they lie within, artistic practices are not 'exceptions' to other practices." (Rancière, 2006)

## 2.1 Maintenance Art and Night Cleaners

Leveraging the radical, socialist, feminist slogan "The personal is political", feminist artists created forms of emancipatory art (with varying degrees of success).

In the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* Mierle Laderman Ukeles "Duchampian gesture of appropriation," in which she "...recode[d] all her activities as art..." (Reckitt, 2015, pp 133) was as a direct result of motherhood and an inability to find time to make art.

Ukeles decision to appropriate the unpaid labour of cleaning and maintenance as art, in what Helena Reckitt terms a rejection of "...the habitual distinctions between avant-garde progress and the cyclical processes of affective labour..." creates a way of taking us out of the unpaid labour and work/play paradigm. By switching unpaid labour into art, she creates a space for that labour to be seen as work. (Reckitt, 2015, pp 133)

"Pointing to the cleaning and care that sustained artistic and left-wing culture – and anticipating the Wages for Housework campaign that began the following year – the 'Manifesto' called out, 'The souball of every revolution', namely, 'who's going to take out the trash on Monday morning?'" (Reckitt, 2015, pp 133)

The Berwick Street Film Collective were asked to create a campaign film for a grassroots organisation attempting to unionise previously unrepresented immigrant and working-class, night-cleaning women. (Wilson, 2015)

As Siona Wilson clarifies, the project sought to:

"...challenge a deeper set of exclusions within the organised left. The night-cleaners' struggle met the demands of an emerging women's movement that was grounded in New Left thinking wherein a gendered politics of class intersects with the complexities of post-colonial Britain."(Wilson, 2015)

Controversially, the film was received poorly by feminist activists at the time, but is now considered by Wilson as an example of how:

"...sexual difference determines the mutually dependent relationship between paid employment and nonpaid domestic work and how the women's capacity as political agents is seriously constrained by this situation....."

That it is indicative "...of the limitations to conventional union activism in dealing with the women's wage-labour issues and point[s] toward the necessity for a radically different approach to political change."(Wilson, 2015). Pg 47).

*Nightcleaners* is an example of the risks involved in using art in an instance when activism is the necessary medium. The stakes were too high for the women that they wanted to reach, the time those women had to play with “free appearances” was too limited. It is unsurprising that this film appealed to the middle-class audience at Edinburgh Film Festival over its intended audience of working-class, immigrant women.

How then can collectivisation do better to help women access the resources to allow free play to take place?

### **2.3 A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn**

Whilst most womxn would be wary of declaring a fool-proof method to address this, I do think that *an* answer lies in complexity.

In each of the attempts at constituting womxn (and by extension to provide them with emancipation through art) comes a point for us to consider: the complexity of interlinking systems and their impact on the complex identities that womxn bestride cannot be interpreted or unpacked without accounting for those complexities. Complexity, then, is not something that we should attempt to eradicate. As Haraway states, “Irony is about...the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary.” (Haraway, 1998)

A unified approach suggests that one speaks for all, when this simply isn’t the case. The most privileged among us cannot speak outside of our lived experience. When making art, appropriating another person’s experiences without having lived it, will not resonate with the people you are trying to reach, as has been seen in *Nightcleaners*.

The common failing of Marxism and of white feminism, was to ignore the othered; to ignore womxn’s experience of labour: “The non-recognition of women’s labour in the home leaves them with no sense of value as a group at all...so while women can morally assert their worth, and resist the reduction of their value to the lowest estimate of commodity exchange...this remains merely defensive...” (Rowbotham, 2015)

The common failing of white feminism is a focus on the single issue of gender, whereas Audre Lourde states of the oppression of black womxn, “...there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives.” (Lorde, 2007)

With this in mind, the process of producing *A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn* was a collective, collaborative and intersectional one. The artists we worked with, and the format the resulting publication has taken, are mindful of the hierarchies inherent within the systems that have shaped our experiences as womxn and artists.

52 doubled-sided cards bear the experiences and thoughts of these womxn combined with previous artworks by Damien Robinson and myself. These works represent the locality of Southend and visualise the unpaid labour womxn undertake. Not intended to be read in any order, the cards offer possible mantras, questions, solutions and statements that can be recombined to start conversations or trace connections: “There’s no ONE way to read this, just like there’s no ONE way that womxn and femmes experience the cultural landscape of Southend and beyond.” (Jones and Robinson, 2019)

In the collaborative and complex spirit of feminism and art, the images that follow offer possible entry points that womxn can take to access emancipation through art.



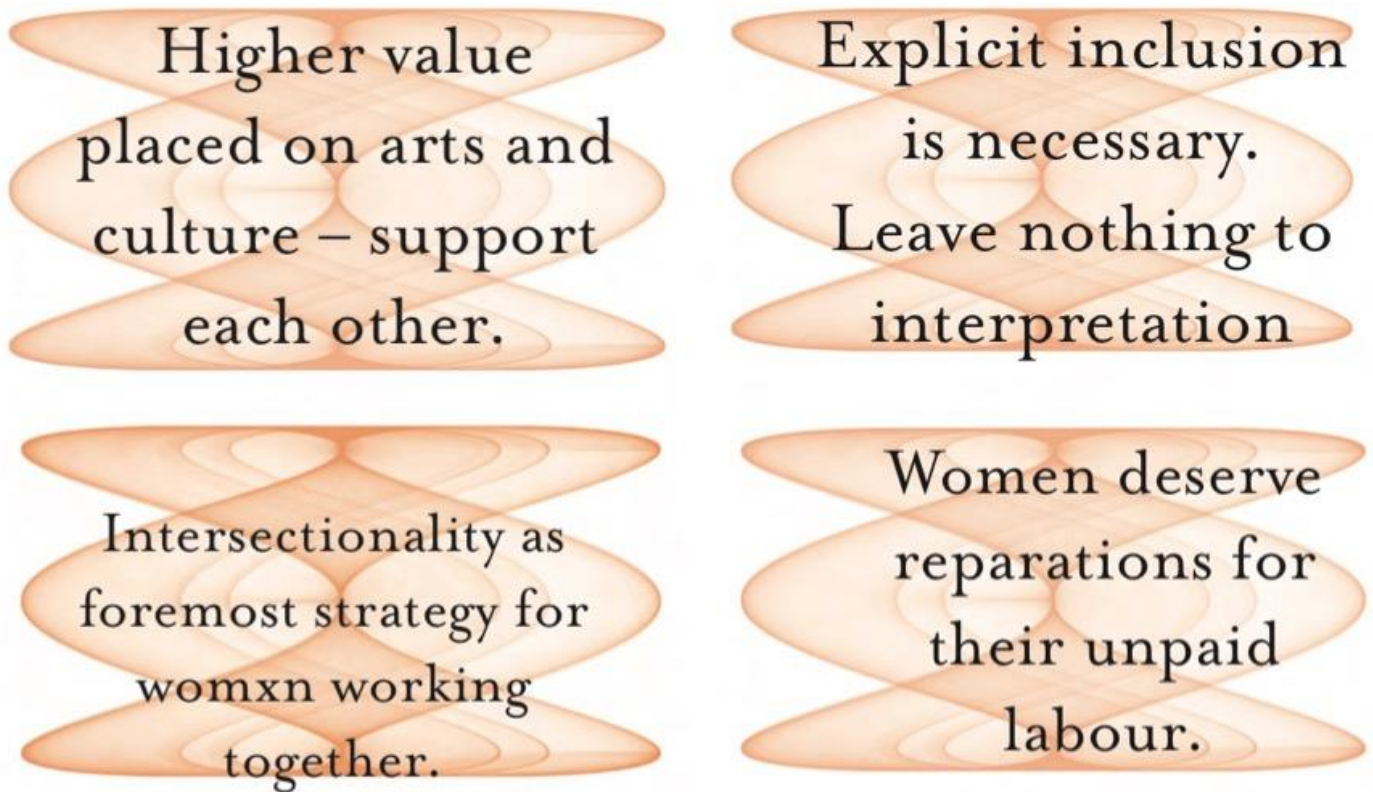


Figure 7: Excerpts from *A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn*, Jones and Robinson, 2019

### 3.0 Conclusion

My intention in this paper was to demonstrate the numerous issues inherent within something as seemingly innocuous as play. Apparently simple ideas with grandiose, universal applications often contain within them a careful sidestep of the complexities that make them inapposite to all by those who declare them: the Marxist labour analysis' refusal to acknowledge the unpaid labour of womxn; white, middle-class womxn's refusal to acknowledge specific oppressions related to race in the feminist movements; bestowing emancipatory qualities upon inaccessible elitist cultural outputs in art theory.

Huizinga's assertion that "...play exists outside of the reasonableness of practical life..." (Huizinga, 1970) is an assertion that excludes those who *must exist within* the reasonableness of practical life. Those who exist there are frequently womxn. But as we have seen, those who might be defined under the category of "woman", are not a unified collection of people. These assertions about the reasonableness of practical life seem simple and universally applicable. But if the category of woman is not simple, how then can womxn's access to play, to that which lies outside the reasonableness of practical life, be simple?

So, who gets to play and who doesn't?

The answer isn't so much an oppositional answer as it is a sliding scale. Those who don't get to play are usually the ones whose identities exist on numerous axes of oppression.

Sweeping declarations of a humanity contingent upon play by art theorists whose access is not limited by their complex intersection of oppressions and calls upon the time required to access that art, leave womxn and the othered in a precarious position.

Some womxn have circumnavigated this problem by declaring all unpaid, reproductive labour as art. Others have collectivised, sometimes unsuccessfully. Improving access to art and

emancipation sits at a strange intersection for womxn. It relies upon an uneasy balance in collective practice: a fluid approach to the complexity of activism and art production, access to opportunities and collaboration. Frequently having to make what has not been conceived by existing institutions. But also remaining self-critical to ensure that all members benefit from what is being undertaken.

By including my recent research with an intersectional group of womxn I have hoped to demonstrate that more voices give us more options for ways forward. Collective approaches that are critically intersectional can offer alternate approaches to accessing the arts in ways that allow for and encourage complexity.

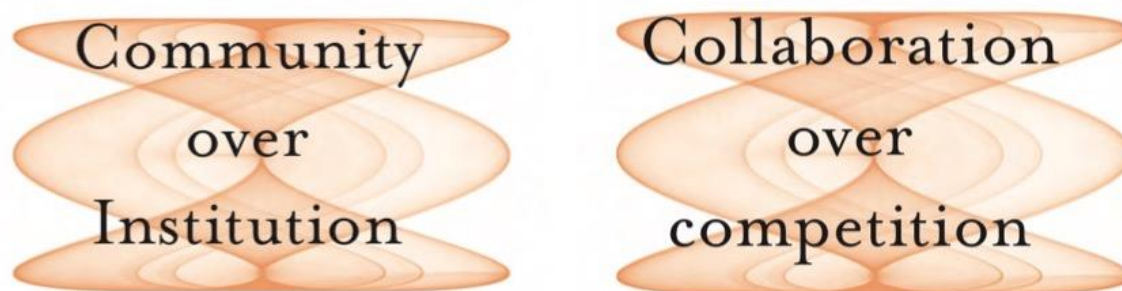


Figure 8: Excerpts from *A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn*, Jones and Robinson, 2019

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