

# Through Shadow & Light

Epistemology in the Shared Abject of Two Worlds

Cass Aleatory

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Part 0: The Imagination

## Theory Is Our Recorded Knowledge

**Everything that we know is important.** That's what she's always telling me. We live in a society that encourages us to hierarchize knowledge, to value wordy academic epistemology more than the information we come about in our day-to-day life. After meeting her, that's no longer what I believe—but I don't believe the opposite, either. She taught me that the most important knowledge for any person to have is whatever knowledge they connect to on the deepest level. Sometimes, it'll be confoundingly crafted essays from classical-philosophy-trained Frenchmen who are now dead. Other times, it'll just be something that someone says. A grandparent, a child, a streamer, an anime character. And that's okay. She promised me it'll be okay.

I wrote this manifesta to pass her lesson on to you: you can build your own epistemology, your own world of knowledge, out of whatever you choose. So long as you do so sincerely, the end result will serve you well. Unfortunately, this is a task that's easier said than done. We're taught to just find some school of thought that fits with whatever identities we hold and believe whatever it tells us. The dominant forces in society would much prefer we simply fall in line, because when we bring things from our world in, we introduce variables they can't control, which weakens their social power. She was one of those variables—she learned this lesson the hard way.

For some of us, to obey this demand for total conformity would be to tear ourselves in half. She's one such person. I wish I could tell you more about her, but I cannot; she's shy, and I gave her my word. So this will have to suffice: she's the girl

who inspired this manifesta, the girl I can't ever get out of my head. She taught me everything I know about how this world works, but I always took her for granted. I never said "thank you," or even "I'm sorry" when I hurt her. So maybe this manifesta can be my atonement. All she wants is a better world for those around her, and if I'm capable of actualizing that dream in any way, it'd be through my writing. And she'll be here to hold my hand the whole way. You can just call her "the girl."

To make up for the scarcity of details about her, allow me to provide an overabundance about myself. I use the pseudonym Cass Aleatory, but my real name is Cassidy Michael Ochowski. I'm a 23 year old white trans girl who uses she/her/hers or maybe any pronouns. I come from a stable, right-leaning, nuclear, military & police family in the suburbs. I'm demisexual, homoromantic, dyadic, neurotypical, and able-bodied. I've called myself Catholic my whole life, and I definitely believe in God. I'm a Marxist, socialist, and/or communist; none of those are precisely true, but none are untrue either. I've lived my entire life as a citizen of the Western superpower nation known today as the United States of America. Online, I call myself the Cassie Shogun, the Almighty Narukami Ogocho<sup>1</sup>—it's the title of the girl I consider my waifu,<sup>2</sup> Ei.<sup>3</sup> These things don't go together. Some of them are sources of privilege in society, some are sources of oppression, and others don't really map onto that spectrum at all. The only thing that all these facts about myself have in common is that I've claimed them for myself—they're the identities that I hold.

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<sup>1</sup> "Narukami Ogocho" basically translates to "retired Shogun of thunder."

<sup>2</sup> A fictional character whom one wants to date or marry.

<sup>3</sup> Also known as the Raiden Shogun. A character from Chinese developer miHoYo's 2020 game *Genshin Impact*.

How did reading through that list make you feel? Some people would dismiss it as excessive: why do my pronouns matter? Or my romantic orientation or my... anime crush? Others would claim that this isn't contextually relevant information in a manifesta—it's just a list of facts about myself. Still others would point out that in spite of its length, it's not an exhaustive accounting. Not so long ago, you read the first statement of my manifesta: "everything that we know is important." If you agreed with it then, were you thinking about the information I shared with you in that context? Or did you just process it into an empty truism that had already slipped from your mind?

This goes to show just how ingrained our ideological proclivities can be. We often become reliant on these socially-disseminated notions to determine what information is valuable. Indeed, they can be convenient. But in denying space for personal variance, they can also tear asunder the essence of who we are. That's how I realized the value of building my own world of knowledge. So, if you feel that the epistemological binaries—which command us to choose one thing or the other and embody that thing fully—have hurt your ability to engage with your intersectional identities, this manifesta was written for you. If you feel caught between worlds, are questioning anything about yourself, or just feel like a misfit, this manifesta was written for you. And if you finish reading and decide to think about knowledge in a new way, this manifesta is for you. When I say "we" or "our," I refer not just to her and me, but to you, too.

As a narrative designer, it's only natural for me to unleash the full power of my ideas through storytelling. What follows is my journey through knowledge. It's the story of two girls and two worlds, one of light and one of shadow, the great binary of my life.

Part I: The Past

## I Wanna Ruin Our Friendship

**Through Shadow, our society constructs gaps between identities.** This is the great lesson of my past that I'm still struggling to learn. It's a divisive practice, well-suited to the bleakness of the world in which we now find ourselves. It kinda sucks, huh? Oh yeah, my use of language. Let's clear this one up right away. If you expected me to be formal, what informed that assumption? I'll go first: when I used to approach a text with the expectation that it contained meaningful knowledge, I assumed that it must be stylistically formal solely on the merit of the ideas contained within. That idea would seem to fit with how society looks from within the shadow world. Put differently, the shadow world is the material reality that contemporary society wrought. It's the home of racism, disability injustice, heteropatriarchy, hypersexualization, transphobia, and capitalism. It's just the sort of place where academically begotten and pedantically worded knowledge is privileged above all else.

Now, I love some pedantically worded knowledge as much as the next girl, but I shall not adhere to such a writing style as if it were some great source of meaning in and of itself. Sometimes, I'll use it to make my points. Other times, I'll rely on the accessibility afforded by plain language instead. This is my subversive effort to undermine the repressive demands of the shadow world. I refuse to concede that the

most valuable language is that which succeeds in making itself a complete impediment to understanding.<sup>4</sup>

Anyone who believes such things probably hasn't read much Sojourner Truth. Her use of language wasn't just informal, it was what ivory tower types might call "incorrect." That tends to happen when you're denied a formal education on the basis of your race and gender. Yet this didn't stop Truth from becoming, in my opinion, one of the best theorists to ever have lived. Her brief speech *Ain't I a Woman* was a theoretical powerhouse stripped of all unnecessary bells and whistles. She made her point succinctly, politely, and so clearly that everyone in that audience knew what she was talking about, even if they wouldn't actually admit as much. A century before the term entered the established theoretical lexicon, Truth proved the very concept of intersectionality by cross-referencing two of her own nexuses of oppression: being Black and being a woman. In her words, "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place!"<sup>5</sup> She calls out the hypocrisy of the infantilization of women by pointing out that the Black women whom society leaves to fend for themselves are living proof that women are just as capable of men—but the way she does it, by detailing how she's been treated differently from white women, simultaneously calls out the hypocrisy of racism! It's a rhetorical masterstroke that sics misogyny and racism upon each other, leaving both busted and full of holes.

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Watterson. *Calvin & Hobbes*.

<sup>5</sup> Sojourner Truth. *Ain't I a Woman*.

Truth's work is a very early example of how we can fight back against one of the shadow world's most deadly tactics: splitting us apart from one another by attempting to set oppressed identities against each other to the detriment of them both. Aside from Truth, whose ingenious reversal of the scheme definitively proved that she saw what was going on, nobody really talked about this for a long time. Maybe they didn't know, maybe they were scared, or maybe they were too oppressed to be platformed. Now, there's a growing awareness of this subversive practice, with ideas like collective liberation and mutual aid being floated around with the specific intent to rebuild solidarity between oppressed communities.

Of course, society fights back. In some areas of the country, the Black Panthers used to offer a free community breakfast, no strings attached. The authorities quickly put a stop to this practice; it undermined people's reliance on their institutionalized, profit-driven programs like welfare by allowing those who experienced class oppression to rely on another oppressed group (Black people) instead.<sup>6</sup> Crushing nascent coalitions is a much more efficient business than waiting for them to organize enough to fight back in earnest. But crippling the harbingers of Marxist revolution and directly contributing to material oppression aren't the only consequences wrought by the walls dominant forces try to erect between oppressed groups.

There's something even more subtle going on: a form of epistemological domination through which the notion of division rather than unity has gradually seeped into the discourse surrounding oppressed groups. If my essay was the first time you've heard the words "collective liberation," you're far from alone—yet we've all heard of the

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<sup>6</sup> Steph Selvick. An untitled lecture they gave in the Fall of 2021.

splintered subdivisions from which it arose: gay issues, lesbian issues, trans issues, Black issues, veterans' issues, disability justice, et. al.. There are more material examples as well. In the Studio Killers' song *Jenny (I Wanna Ruin Our Friendship)*, we hear a rhetoric of queerness clearly defined by the concept of otherness. The song is overtly about a girl who has a crush on her friend Jenny, but the dynamic through which that character explores her feelings is far less straightforward.

The opening of the chorus has become so bound up with the song's identity that it's listed as a parenthetical alternate title on Spotify (likely to help listeners find the song if they only remembered its distinctive chorus). But what does it actually say? "I wanna ruin our friendship // We should be lovers instead."<sup>7</sup> Why do these things need to be mutually exclusive? Well, strictly speaking, they don't. But the song doesn't represent an ideal world, it represents the current social scene with all its norms and expectations. These lyrics speak to the fear that a confession of romantic interest could end an important friendship; Jenny could be queer, but she could just as easily be homophobic.

Because queerness has been historically relegated to the realm of the abject,<sup>8</sup> it remains split from the discourse surrounding other nexuses of oppression. Society couldn't create a lasting "don't ask, don't tell" policy for racial identity because its purpose would be undermined by the fact that many people are obviously, visibly, not white. Unfortunately, it also realized that this same hurdle wasn't present for LGBTQ+ people, who (save for some intersex folks) have no inherent physical indicator of their

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<sup>7</sup> Studio Killers. *Jenny*.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Jellerson. Queer Cinema lecture.

difference. The resultant inability to have a dialogue about queerness for so many years hobbled the LGBTQ+ community's ability to partner with other oppressed groups and communicate effectively about their needs. It also has more personal side effects, like making the confession of a gay crush a disproportionately huge make-or-break moment in any friendship.

Luckily, there are some happy endings. LGBTQ+ issues are breaking further and further into mainstream discourse, and queer people have built coalitions with many other oppressed groups. And yes, as shown in the music video, Jenny did turn out to both be queer and share the song character's feelings. Initially, Jenny's admirer fretted over "a few things that you don't know of"<sup>7</sup> and her inability to find a discourse that society had erased: "I don't know how to say this,"<sup>7</sup> but through being honest and vulnerable, she was able to bridge the divide and open the door for a more empowering future. These small acts of resistance are one way of pushing back against the rifts society opens between our identities and of performing the sort of work that will set collective liberation in motion.

Fortunately, we have an even grander model for what such a coming-together could look like within the LGBTQ+ community: Magnus Hirschfeld and his concept of sexual intermediaries. Society was terrified of this man, so much so that Nazis burned down the ultraprogressive institute he created and tried to erase him from history entirely. They almost succeeded—there's a reason that most people have no idea what a sexual intermediary is. Fortunately, theorists like J. Edgar Bauer have worked to preserve and synthesize the teachings of Magnus Hirschfeld. In his analysis of sex

history, *On the Nameless Love and Infinite Sexualities*, Bauer describes Hirschfeld's concept of sexual intermediaries like this: "A human being is neither man nor woman, but at the same time man and woman in unique and therefore irrepeatable proportions. In consequence, this basic thesis marks the end of the premise of complete sexual disjunction."<sup>9</sup> So, in non-academic terms, everyone is intersex.

Before you raise your eyebrow, consider how the LGBTQ+ community has come to view gender identity, gender expression, romantic orientation, and sexual orientation as spectra. Why should we look at sex assigned at birth any differently? The people we call "intersex" clearly prove that sex is indeed a spectrum, even from our earliest moments. This makes it the next frontier awaiting queer liberation from its socially-imposed binary form. The reason we haven't got to it yet should be starting to sound familiar by now: the shadow world keeps us apart. Intersex folks are marginalized even within the LGBTQ+ community, where society pressures queer and trans people to wrap themselves up entirely in the fight to prove that *their* nexus specifically (gender, sexuality, etc.) is a spectrum. Without a mind towards collective liberation, it's easy to lose intersex folks in the margins. But when we do stop and think, it becomes increasingly compelling to wonder if Hirschfeld *did* have a point. Why force a binary when a spectrum would better suit the incredibly diverse biology of the LGBTQ+ community, not to mention humankind as a whole?

The idea of all people being sexual intermediaries is remarkable for another reason: taken in conjunction with the rest of Hirschfeld's work, it provides support for

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<sup>9</sup> J. Edgar Bauer. *On the Nameless Love and Infinite Sexualities*.

almost any queer identity one could stuff in the classic acronym. Questioning and queerness become natural; intersex folks can claim their rightful places in the dialogue; and trans people are finally validated to get the surgeries they want and pass on the ones they don't, all without being perceived as "unnatural" or "less trans." Such insults lose all their meaning when considered in the context of a biological sex spectrum with infinite space for variation. Whether you identify as transmasculine, transfeminine, non-binary, or agender, you're safe from being forced into a box that doesn't fit; your body would no longer be reductively perceived from birth as one of two binary options with societally-coerced and preordained gender equivalents.

Hirschfeld's work also does something I've *never* seen before in theory (partly because it's exceedingly rare and partly because I haven't yet sought out the marginalized authors who have produced this knowledge): it proposes a queer system that validates Two-Spirit identities. Marginalized once for being queer and again for being people of the First Nations, Two-Spirit folks have been split off from primary queer *and* First Nations discourses, their intersectional oppressions striving desperately to force them out of a theoretical landscape that's unprepared to understand them. Two-Spirit identity is not a monolith, and can reference individuals with any combination of queer sexuality, gender identity, romantic attraction, and gender expression. It also includes folks who identify with entirely separate, distinct genders that have existed in any number of the First Nations for centuries. Really, the only hard-and-fast requirement to claim Two-Spirit identity is that you need to be of one of the First

Nations. For this reason, some Two-Spirit individuals have made use of the concept of a “third sex.”

A third sex maps onto Hinduism, but precious little else, especially in the way of theory. This is because modern LGBTQ+ discourse is ill-equipped to discuss both biological sex on a spectrum like Hirschfeld did *and* the blurriness that can occur between gender, sex, and sexuality. *This* is because society has trained each facet of the community to focus only on its own issues to—you guessed it—prevent them from gaining more power by organizing together. Sensing a pattern yet? But once again, Hirschfeld comes to the rescue. Not only did he use the notion of a “third sex” as a simplified term for explaining intersexual variance in biological sex to dyadic cishets, but he fully embraced the blurring of gender/sex/sexuality lines in the queer community, cataloguing over a thousand unique forms of queer identity in his lifetime with a mind to prove that the true number was closer to infinity.<sup>10</sup>

This is a mind-boggling number, so much so that it almost seems meaningless before you stop and think about it. Imagine asking so many queer people so many questions about their identities that you come to need over a thousand categories to contain them all. Like I said, it’s an idea that very few are ready for. And one place that folks often unite in opposition to it is within organized religion. The divide between many religious communities and the LGBTQ+ community is one of the most pervasive, bitter, and well-known feuds between social subpopulations. In many ways, it’s the apex of the shadow world’s ability to sow discord.

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<sup>10</sup> Steph Selvick. An untitled lecture they gave in the Fall of 2021.

To examine it here with some measure of brevity, we'll need to set aside a few important and complicated points of inquiry. First, religion is not a monolith. Some religions take no issue with queerness in any form. I'm going to focus here on Abrahamic religion, which is to say any religion that regards the pentateuch as canon. Furthermore, I'm going to focus on my lived experience with Roman Catholicism, so any quotes I pull will be referenced as Biblical. However, the arguments I intend to make will be transferable to the same stories and old laws under any other name as well. The other point I'd be remiss to ignore is whether or not religion truly fits the pattern of an oppressed group being turned against an oppressed group. Few would deny antisemitism and Islamophobia are still alive, but Christians like myself are only oppressed minorities in some areas of the world. This point is well-received, so allow me to reframe this situation as one anti-establishment group being turned upon another.

Anti-establishmentarianism is in the DNA of all Abrahamic religions, since all of them trace an arc by which they grew from a single family (found or biological) in the shadow of an unfriendly world that killed or enslaved them simply because their beliefs were different. That's not to say all these religions' hands are clean of such blood themselves, but they do each have an origin as an oppressed people. The radicality of Jesus Christ is one of the most poignant reminders of this. We can only guess at Christ's economic views; Christ was neither capitalist nor communist. But socially, He left little room for interpretation. He gave his disciples commands that contradicted the time's dominant teachings and frequently dined with tax collectors and sex workers, two of

the most imminent socially ostracized groups of the time. To me, it would seem only logical that if Christ's first coming had been today instead, He'd wish to minister to those that *today's* society has rejected. He'd be preaching unconditional love in gay bars and impoverished refugee camps in dangerous border cities.

So why does everyone from the middle class to the billionaires instead assume that they're the ones who'd be receiving the lion's share of Christ's attention? Is it about belief? God has never "given up" on non-believers, and Christ explicitly instructed the early church to include everyone, even if they weren't coming from Judaism. Is it to be in recognition of the extra "work" they've put into living "Godly" lives? The parable of the workers in the vineyard would seem to suggest differently. I think it's about "worthiness," a socially-developed sense of superiority. "People like us are 'God's people,' so God will come over and sit at our table, right? Then there are those 'other people' who aren't like us. That must mean they're doing something wrong."

Indeed, religion has a bad reputation of hunting for flaws. To the example of the tax collectors and sex workers, too many would respond "Christ spent the most time with them because they're in the most need of saving, because their lives are furthest from what He preaches. The same would hold true for LGBTQ+ people today." My response is a little different. I say Christ picked these people not because *God* had turned God's back on them, but because *society* had turned its back on them.

Christianity holds that we're *all* sinners, all requiring Christ for salvation and helpless in His absence. But unlike Christ, who sought to unify, the shadow world divides. It forces people apart, begs us to impose hierarchies upon each other to glorify ourselves, and

tells us that to be different is to sin. I believe that the people Christ focused on saving *were* more broken, but not in the eyes of God. They were broken and ignored in the collective eye of society. Instead of working in community to help them, society worked in community to hold them down. Considering this inequity, it's no surprise that Christ saw fit to go out of His way to help them regain the self-love, self-worth, and inherent sense of human dignity that help one grow closer to the Holy Spirit—yet that society had seen fit to strip away.

The potential for religion to uplift the LGBTQ+ community is so tantalizingly close. Yet before it can be realized, the argument that queer lives are far from God's commandments must be laid to rest. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is frequently cited to prove this point. Yet the Bible doesn't paint these cities as anything like the progressive bastions of homosexual equality they're erroneously equated to. Rather, they're described as under the rule of a sex-crazed mob that desired to sexually assault anyone it could get its hands on, regardless of gender. There are no examples of loving queer relationships in these cities, only a repugnant culture of sexual exploitation. Considering the context we're given, we can only assume that it's this exploitation, not the concept of homosexuality or queerness, that God sought to punish when God annihilated these places.

A little context adds a lot of insight to just about every other Bible passage that queerphobic people cite. While Sodom and Gomorrah—along with the near-identical Judges story in which a Levite's concubine is sexually assaulted and killed—are uniquely useful cases in that one can find qualifying context within the text that shifts its didactic

messaging from queerness to assault. However, there's textual and/or paratextual exploration to be done around every other supposed "anti-queer" passage, too. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 state that "man must not lie with man." Why was this edict given? Perhaps it had something to do with Israeli social anxieties concerning "their health, continuing family lineages, and retaining the distinctiveness of Israel as a nation [since other nearby civilizations were more open to queerness]."<sup>11</sup> If anything, this would seem to suggest that God's commandments were intended to remain sensitive to the perceptions and concerns (founded or unfounded) of the times, not to impose rigid standards that should be thoughtlessly applied everywhere until the end of time. If God gave us something so powerful as a human mind, you'd think God would expect us to use it.

Similarly, the New Testament references to homosexual activity don't exactly play into homophobes' assumptions either. Two (found in Corinthians and Timothy) list such activity in lists of vices, giving some translations—and people—an opening to claim a blanket condemnation. Of course, they remain in blissful ignorance of the sociohistorical context of this condemnation; at the time, the sexual abuse of young men by older men was a well-documented social issue.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the intended meaning still *could* be more general, but once again, the core of the matter seems rooted in assault. And the similar warning in St. Paul's letter to the Romans? As part of a broader sermon warning against the selfish greed prevalent among St. Paul's target audience, it seems to indict lust, not homosexuality. The problem with the relationships St. Paul admonished wasn't their queerness, but their frequent imbalances of power and lust that turned sexual

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<sup>11</sup> The Human Rights Campaign Foundation. "What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?"

connection into something exploitive instead of something mutual, consensual, and loving.<sup>11</sup>

As for the next one... actually, that's it. Those six misinterpreted passages are the only ones of their kind, the root of all this trouble. And the case against trans people is even thinner. A single Bible passage in Deuteronomy claims that one should not wear garments of the opposite sex. There's no consensus as to why exactly this was written, but we do know that it wasn't supposed to be the absolutist statement so many assume today; cross-dressing within Jewish rituals wasn't impacted by this edict. Unlike many cultures of its time, Israeli culture was founded on binaries, so perhaps it's this mixing of gendered signals that was read as "not of God's nation" back in the day. But once again, that social moment has passed, leaving us with space for interpretation—or for unfair extrapolation. But the embrace of the Ethiopian enoch in the New Testament leaves little room for doubt that gender-diverse people were supposed to be equals in the church. Modern trans people aren't enochs, but both of these labels *are* "third sex" or sexually intermediary classifications that represent the space beyond binary gender. Strange how we've minimized the fact that such people were welcomed into Christ's new church with open arms, and even trusted to evangelize nations.

When God created man and woman, God created a spectrum. Just as God created dawn and dusk alongside day and night, or estuaries and swamps alongside land and sea, God made a beautifully diverse spectrum that spans the divide between man and woman. If modern Abrahamic religious institutions were to comprehend that the entire middle chunk of God's creation has been assaulted, and they've been turned

against it by the human audacity and vice of the shadow world, so much would change so quickly. The dominant repressive institutions would lose their power over society. And thus, if the only way to stop such change is to speak for God, then they won't hesitate to do so. I don't claim to speak for God here; this analysis is *theory* after all, my own educated speculation. But I sincerely believe it's closer to the truth than hateful lies will ever be.

So the next time someone looks at me and says that they don't believe God makes mistakes, I'll tell them that I agree. I'll ask why, in a world full of people born with non-normative bodies that they modify to survive, or even just for their own comfort, trans people must be a "mistake." No, the mistake is assuming that what you see as strange or unnatural is strange or unnatural to God. Just as God intentionally created all the remarkable diversity of the human race, so too did God intentionally create trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people. The reason we suffer in this world is the same reason people with disabilities suffer here: not because we're inadequate or inferior, but because the world chooses not to take care of us, to claim the right to judge our value based on who we are or how we present ourselves and dispose of us accordingly. In failing to leave the judgment to God, they attempt to usurp the authority of God, making their teachings into the very sort of mortal idol they claim so vehemently to renounce.

**Through Light, our existence deconstructs the divide.** If the shadow world's goal is to widen the theoretical and activist chasm between oppressed identities, then the

light world's goal is to do the work of God by bridging those gaps. The light world is the polar opposite of the shadow world; if you identify with one or more terms like radical feminist, punk, communist, anarchist, antifa, woke, antiracist, or social activist, you probably live in (and get most of your beliefs and epistemology from) this world. In the shadow world, the theorists I cited worked in opposition to the construction of identity divides. However, in the light world, I'll try to tell an even more radical story. I don't mean to say the theorists I cite here will be further to the political left than those I cited previously, but rather to imply that here, I don't have to play defense. Instead of picking apart the shadow world's argument, I'll be able to focus on illuminating a generative project: the creation of a wider effort across several theoretical schools to systematically dismantle obstacles to intersectionality.

So, let's start with a little guessing game. When do you suppose Hirschfeld crafted the ideas that Bauer paraphrased so aptly in the shadow world? He included so many identities that it feels futuristic, but unfortunately we have yet to prove any concept of non-linear time. So, maybe this year, 2022? Alas, Bauer's analysis dates all the way back to 2005. That seems pretty early, but it's as good of a next guess as any, right? Unfortunately, we're not even close. The answer is 1919. Hirschfeld's work and ideas are wildly progressive even today, but they were penned over a century ago. So besides the problem with erasure, why haven't we been able to properly implement any of his remarkable work?

Perhaps bell hooks can lend us some insight. In *Theory as Liberatory Practice*, she explains the following:

Work by women of color and marginalized groups of white women..., especially if written in a manner that renders it accessible to a broad reading public, is often de-legitimized in academic settings, even if that work enables and promotes feminist practice.<sup>12</sup>

In light of this, two things quickly become clear. The first is where I got my ideas about accessible knowledge being delegitimized, and the second is that our “problem with erasure” must be viewed as one symptom of the wider evils that hooks describes. It’d be easy to view this as another shadow world attempt to isolate vulnerable groups and stifle dialogue about intersectionality (which it is), but instead, let’s read it as an opportunity for resistance.

If hooks is telling us that “one of the many uses of theory in academic locations is in the production of an intellectual class hierarchy,”<sup>12</sup> then our problem is one of structure. This is the way our academic institution has been set up, and if we want to fix it, we’re going to need to pick it apart and root out each of the fundamentally harmful binaries on which it’s constructed before anything new we build would become meaningful. If we just campaigned for, say, a wider acceptance of Black vernacular in academia, then we can potentially fit some marginalized work and new authors into the same old system. But what if we attacked the binary opposition of “academic” vs. “non-academic” writing instead? We could fix the devaluing of Black vernacular and a dozen other issues in one fell swoop.

There’s a model that can provide us with guidance on how to do precisely that. Ironically, that model is located in a confoundingly crafted essay from a

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<sup>12</sup> bell hooks. *Theory as Liberatory Practice*.

classical-philosophy-trained Frenchman who is now dead. However, I'm not bringing Jacques Derrida in simply to satisfy a storyteller's compulsion to provide narrative payoff for my funny line from earlier. Derrida is widely considered to be the father of his own school of theory, commonly known as deconstructionism. And a little deconstruction is just what we're going to need to lay bare the numerous flaws of the academic binary. In his words, "deconstruction involves an indispensable phase of *reversal*."<sup>13</sup> So we're not just going to parse through what constitutes "academic" writing piece-by-piece; we're going to flip the system on its head. What might happen if we privilege the knowledge from sources on the "non-academic" side of this binary? For one, we'd get fresh ideas from intersectionality oppressed people, strategies that could help further explicate the merits of the media they've worked in and gathered knowledge from. I'd know, seeing as I've tried to do this work in the emerging medium of games from a gay and trans point of view. As this influence became active in the academic epistemology-at-large, it would normalize the acceptance of "non-academic" work as theoretically useful. Well, maybe. Convincing *ourselves* to value "non-academic" work is one thing, but convincing the entire theoretical community is a far greater challenge, especially when many theorists don't even agree that there's a problem with how academia evaluates the merit of work. Still, we can set an example that constitutes a concrete step in the right direction.

And who says we have to stop there? In his very next sentence, Derrida pushes us to go even further: "To remain content with reversal is of course to operate within

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Outwork*: "Preface" to *Dissemination*.

the immanence of the system to be destroyed... to go further... [is to] take an attitude of neutralizing indifference with respect to the classical oppositions."<sup>13</sup> It's a valid point. A reversed binary is still a binary, and as the shadow world taught us, binaries inherently divide and hold back; they cannot unify in the name of mutually beneficial change. If we do want to escape the system's shadow, we need to break from its methodology. So, we need to change our goal. We're not after a change to the binary that would simply reverse whose work is privileged. Rather, we must look at the reversal of the binary as a means to a truly deconstructive end. Upsetting established binaries does have a destabilizing effect, but if left unexploited, the end result would just be a mirror image of what we had before.

So, let's exploit it. Let's take the liminal moment of destabilization that deconstructionist reversal gives us and use it to smash the system at its weakest hour. Let's attack not just the privileging of "academic" work over "non-academic" work, but the very practice that this opposition relies upon to operate: that of hierarchizing the value of knowledge. If we can clear out this intermediary practice, we'll make room for a new spectrum, fulfilling Derrida's mandate that we neutralize indifference by forcing each individual theorist to reevaluate their feelings in the midst of a rapidly-changing epistemological landscape. Conveniently, this also solves the aforementioned problem of effectively spreading our deconstructionist ideas throughout the wider theoretical community.

Can we as individuals really enact all this ourselves? If we try, I think we can. More astounding movements have risen up from nothing to find success. For me, the

more pressing question is how far must we go? We moved from reacting to problems to deconstructing the oppositions they rely upon, and then again from that to excising the assumptions that empower those oppositions. So the next step would be to examine the tools we use to examine those assumptions. That means deconstructing deconstructionism itself; it's the Marxist idea of proactively fighting the corruptive influence of binaries and their spawn (ex. capitalism) through perpetual revolution, even against one's own movement.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, though deconstructionism can take us beyond binaries, it *was* born of them, meaning that its work can never be done until it inevitably falls under its own scalpel.

Derrida was well aware of this, and he completed as much of that work as he could in his own writing. But he came from a world of even more ossified binaries than we see today, a time when even less deconstruction had been done. If we keep performing deconstructive work, then each subsequent generation can grow up to be better at it than the one that came before it, since they'll be taught to produce knowledge without that one extra handful of theoretical oppositional binaries that their predecessors managed to fully deconstruct. It's a slow process, but I do believe it's the only way to set ourselves on a permanent trajectory towards collective liberation.

I already see a younger generation who's less inhibited by binary notions and identities than I'll ever manage to be, despite my desperate efforts to overcome the binaries I was taught during the most impressionable phases of my development. Maybe the generation that came before me would be impressed by my deft engagement with the "fringes" of identity binaries, exemplified in my tendency to

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<sup>14</sup> Janine Tobeck. Film Theory lecture.

reference Two-Spirit, intersex, asexual, and aromantic issues in my work. After all, doing this does require that I dislodge myself from the sex binary that society is very much still stuck on. But then I go on Twitter and am reminded that there are some things that not even I dare confront. Yet the seemingly fearless 13–18 year olds I've met in the communities of my favorite Twitch streamers rebel against binaries that still terrify me without a shadow of hesitation.

There was so much I consciously left out of my introduction, not to mention all the nexuses of diversity that I don't even know about. For example, I declined to mention that I'm monogamous. And yet I predict that in five years, the mandated binary structure of romantic relationships will be challenged in public spaces and disintegrated within queer spaces. The writing's already on the wall; polyamory is discussed with increasing frequency in all manner of queer spaces. In the past year, I learned what a metamour was and discovered the prominence of constellation relationships in localized LGBTQ+ communities.<sup>15</sup> Yet I haven't been able to fully surmount this binary or even make myself readily think of "monogamous" when I consider my identity. And that's not the end of it; within ten years, we'll be talking about DID and OSDD systems. I know enough to call myself a singlet when asked, but I know I'm not prepared to answer questions about what constitutes a "disorder" or how the presence of alters affects the underlying assumptions that underpin the physical and mental binaries we use to define personhood. I will stand my ground and confront these questions, but I have no doubt that my efforts will be rapidly eclipsed by those who internalized fewer of these so-called "fundamental binaries" than I.

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<sup>15</sup> Steph Selvick. An untitled lecture they gave in the Fall of 2021.

To be clear, that's a good thing. Our efforts to spare the next generation the destructive ideas we were raised with are meaningless if we then try to speak over their voices, drowning out the new with the old. Besides, sharing the microphone with those who have different lived experiences than our own is just good feminist practice; one can define a "we" like I did for this manifesta, but there is no universal experience, feminist or otherwise. Each of us represents a subset of "everyone," and our subsets are each at their strongest when in dialogue with other subsets. That's part of what makes social media such a powerful activist tool. In spite of algorithmic bias, marginalized voices have a wider platform than they do in the outside world. Perhaps that's why so much of the next-generation activism I see happens on Twitter, TikTok, and Twitch instead of in the streets. This isn't an inherently bad change, either. I've watched as young people have created a culture where it's socially mandated to platform marginalized voices at key moments. Accounts with a larger following can retweet, share, or otherwise direct their followers to people who can respond to injustices or milestones with their own lived experience.

Of course, there are downsides. Many of the people doing this incredible work are still very, very young. I don't say this to detract from their intelligence or from the quality of the work they do, but rather to point out that despite their acute sense for social justice, they still act their age at times. Performative activism runs rampant in these spaces, and people criticize each other for tweeting about (not X) on International (X) Day, offering "bad apologies" for past mistakes, and forgetting, even momentarily, about what privileges they do have. Spurred on by the relative anonymity of the

internet, it's a brutal and unforgiving place where "cancel culture" has become normalized and activists turn on another remorselessly instead of remaining united in opposition to the common foe. In short, most of them could really stand to read some adrienne marie brown. In her piece *We Will Not Cancel Us*, brown tells her readers, "I have received so many messages and testimonials from people in sectors of movement that feel... saddened by the quickness with which we turn against each other."<sup>16</sup>

It's easy to lash out at someone on the internet when they inadvertently undermine your cause or betray your trust. But we so seldom stop and consider how endemic this behavior is. I wonder how many brown means when she says "so many." I can think of 12 examples off the top of my head, and I'm not particularly active on social media. Continuing, brown mentions that her readers are "troubled by our apparent collective excitement when we attack each other."<sup>16</sup> Once again, I've seen it. Activist spaces force us to revel in the injustices around us, and when someone screws up, we're presented with an appealing scapegoat. Cruel systems are so difficult to uproot, and it's so exhausting to crush ourselves against them over and over again. But one of our own is a much more attainable target who'd let us win a satisfying victory. So instead of supporting each other through our mistakes, we eagerly eviscerate our supposed comrades whenever we feel we could possibly be justified in scoring that endorphin rush from a lopsided battle and the resultant easy win.

But what if we didn't? What if we instead took brown's advice on conflict resolution, striving for transformative justice instead of a systemic and bestial sacrifice of our weakened members? We'd stand on the precipice of an entire new moment in

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<sup>16</sup> adrienne marie brown. *We Will Not Cancel Us: and Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*.

the revolution, one geared towards finally attaining the light world's promise of bridging the gaps between us instead of widening them. But this will take time and continued advocacy, and we'll need to wait for the next generation to keep growing up; while I can say with pride that there are 13 year olds out there who know more about some of this activist stuff than I do, I haven't yet met one who knows deconstructionist theory. Rather, it's still my generation that's learning the theories. It's my generation that'll have to hold the line for a little bit longer, deconstructing deconstructionism so that children can remain children for a few more years. It's only fair, considering the work they'll one day be expected to shoulder.

This means that if I'm looking for the newest but most ready, least binary-ridden deconstructionist to cite in the final moments of this sentiment, I should turn to none other than Cass Aleatory. To avoid sounding hopelessly elitist, Aleatory will stop referring to herself in third person after this sentence. In my essay *Capitalism's Girl*, I examine my relationship with privilege and oppression as closely as I can, trying to parse through my realizations that this isn't the binary that it seems to be. I state that:

Right now, patriarchal capitalism is our master—it's the master of all the West and most of the rest of the world, too. To fight it, we need to find tools and people outside this dominant narrative, those that bear witness to the consequences of a true lack of privilege, a lack greater than I'll ever experience.<sup>17</sup>

In this passage, I articulate that I'm incapable of performing all the deconstruction needed to bridge society's numerous divides—but I've already established that here,

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<sup>17</sup> Cass Aleatory. *Capitalism's Girl*.

too. The more important part of this idea for our purposes is that lack of privilege makes one a more capable analyst—and deconstructionist. The more oppression someone's experienced, the greater an understanding of the intricacies of the system of oppression they can develop. This attempted marriage of intersectionality to deconstructionism is my unique contribution to our moment. It may prove timeless, or it could lose all relevance in a few years. But for me, it's far more than a postulation. It's my personal way of acknowledging the need to deconstruct deconstructionism, to remind myself that it too stands on binaries that warrant examination.

This doesn't exactly solve the final problem I referenced, since it doesn't actually *eliminate* deconstructionism's oppositions—it just points towards the next “generation” of analysts who'll be able to get closer to that goal than I ever could. And since that's the best option available to me at the moment, that means I've pursued this trail to the end and truly done what it is I can do to fight back against the binaries that divide us.

And that brings us to the modern day. It brings me to a greater understanding of so many of the narratives that have made a lasting impression on me. It brings me to the moment I met her. I can trace that moment back to *Legacy of Ashes*, a story I wrote years ago. It's fitting that it was a story, considering that it's through experiencing the narrative of our lives that we develop and challenge our beliefs and theories about the world. I asked her if she thought less of me for the mistakes I made, the decisions I regret. I told her I feel like everyone in the world can see right through me and intuitively grasp my failings. She said she has that fear, too.

Part II: The Present

## Don't Look At Me Like That

**Through Shadow, our society devours difference.** It's time to return to the shadow world, this time with an increased reliance on my lived experience. Why switch my approach now? Allow me to refer you to the work of Charlotte Bunch for an answer. In *Not by Degrees*, she states that "while feminist theory begins with the immediate need to end women's oppression, it is also a way of viewing the world."<sup>18</sup> Now that I've addressed the need for and the state of this contemporary struggle, the next step in telling my feminist story is to explain how I see the world and my own situation in light of this need. My insecurities and congealed regret over the past will weave their way into the story, but that will only increase its authenticity, not weaken its rhetorical potential.

We've all taken different journeys through this world, and as the Past teaches us, those individual experiences are just as important as more "academic" theory. In many ways, my journey has fit society's expectations. After high school, I went off to a four-year university. As a student who did well enough in school, I never seriously considered any other options. When my interests shifted to include feminism, I approached it institutionally—I signed up for some courses with UW-Whitewater's Women's & Gender Studies department and learned about the "need to end women's oppression." However, wholly thanks to my excellent instructors, I also learned the more

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<sup>18</sup> Charlotte Bunch. *Not by Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education*.

subversive part of Bunch's statement, the one that's not typically learned "not by degrees." As a film studies scholar who's been trained for years to wield theories as lenses through which I can examine media, the idea of using feminist theory as "a way of viewing the world" made a certain amount of intuitive sense to me. But that doesn't mean I fully understood it.

Lenses can be picked up and put down. If feminism doesn't bear out in my analysis of a certain film, I can just as easily reach for queer studies or Marxism. But to truly view the world with feminism, one can't approach it as something you only bring out when you encounter something that you deem "worthy of a closer look." You need to learn to see the world with feminist eyes instead, to reach a point where you can write a 16-page diss track on the very existence of oppositional binaries because you truly *understand* how they always seem to end up working (or not) in society. That's what I'm learning now: to see the feminism and intersectionality in each of the little stories I live day-to-day, and to never stop seeing it so that I can understand not just a single piece of media or social occurrence, but the broader maneuverings of society.

This knowledge is important to me because it allows me to see past societal narratives designed by institutionalists who have a vested interest in quashing differences of opinion. That's something else the shadow world tends to do: it eats up all our differences and unique experiences, concealing the paths to success that allow one to march to the beat of a different drum than capitalism's. It's an ironic counterbalance to the shadow world's coexisting desire to divide oppressed groups. Evidently, unity is suddenly okay once we get down to the level of the individual,

because it's individuals who carry out capitalism's two favorite acts: purchasing and working. Even when organizations "do" these things, it's always individuals who are pulling the levers. This is, of course, self-serving in the extreme, and it's one of the reasons that capitalism now makes my skin crawl. Whether by pushing groups apart or uniting people under a common consumerist narrative, capitalism always seems to have a mind to fight intersectional diversity. And why wouldn't it when conformity is efficiency and efficiency is profit?

That's not the world I want to live in, but to imagine different futures, I need to master Bunch's art of seeing the world through feminism. The handy thing about feminism is that it's inherently subversive and anti-institutionalist, at least when done correctly. It helps me to see divergent paths for myself and others and to remind those I care about most that it's okay to be different. There isn't one road to success, happiness, or even intelligence. There's just an insidious attempt by capitalism to consume the other possibilities for the sake of fueling future consumption, both theoretical and material.

The good news is that we can hit back—by failing. If that notion bears a negative connotation for you, ask yourself why. Isn't "failure" just a label society uses to try and punish those who deviate from its scripts? What better way is there to conceal subversive paths to success than to deride those who go off the beaten trail in search of them? But we don't need to feel shame when society tells us that we've failed. In fact, folks like Jack Halberstam go so far as to suggest we take pride in such failure. Drawing on the work of beloved queer theory icons like José Esteban Muñoz,

Halberstam proposes a queer art of failure that shifts the goal away from social conformity to capitalist and heteronormative criteria of “success,” encouraging us to “fail early, fail often” instead. He explains that we don’t have to associate failure with being sad or having diminished worth: “other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique.”<sup>19</sup> I don’t know about you, but all that stuff sounds pretty good to me.

Indeed, as Bunch’s model would suggest, Halberstam’s style of “failure” tends to open doors to alternate corridors of success. An easy example to cite would be that of Lil Nas X, who’s both achieved renown and mastered his craft in spite of society’s repeated attempts to brand him a failure. Such cases serve as radical reminders that despite its often-intimidating blathering, society doesn’t *actually* get to pick who succeeds and who fails. All it can do is throw its influence around, attempting to use buzzwords like “failure” to oppress those who refuse to meet its cisheteronormative standards. Standing up to it can be a terrifying endeavor, especially at first. But I’ve come to believe unequivocally that it’s worth the struggle.

I learned this lesson from one of the smartest people my age I know. Their name doesn’t matter in this context, so I’ll refer to them by their role: Guardian. I met Guardian mostly by chance on Twitch. He neither enjoyed nor achieved what she was looking for in school, so vae dropped out of college.<sup>20</sup> At the time, I was worried for hir, seeing as he would suddenly be relying on Twitch, a notoriously fickle platform, to earn

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<sup>19</sup> Jack Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure*.

<sup>20</sup> Guardian is European, so the “college” they dropped out of is what North Americans would call “high school.”

a living. But time went on, and through hard work, raw determination, and a genuine passion that they never had for school, Guardian grew and grew. Eventually, xe and I had a fight—I swore by institutionalist methodologies at the time, and I went too far and tried to convince them to do things my way. I said things I regret to this day, and I lost a friend. But looking back on what I know now, I’m struck by just how much smarter Guardian is than me. She grasped instinctively that which took me a brutal trip through the system to wrap my head around: there’s no one road to success.<sup>21</sup> Guardian doesn’t have any degrees, has probably never read Charlotte Bunch or Jack Halberstam, and plays video games for a living—yet he’s now risen to the upper echelons of the content creator scene and is continuing to grow to this day. By doing what worked for them and being unafraid to engage in queer failure, ze truly did find success “not by degrees.”

Don’t worry, I haven’t reverted back to capitalist assumptions. When I say “success,” I don’t mean financial wealth or even fame and popularity. Rather, I mean joy and fulfillment. True, I can’t be sure that Guardian has attained these things, since I don’t know what goes on inside his head. But when I see a picture of her on social media from time to time, I can’t help but think xe looks happier than they used to before. The part that troubles me is my own inability to move on. Not every two people are compatible as friends. We definitely had almost opposite styles of communication. But there was something about this story that’s held my attention all this time. Almost a year later, I still feel like there’s something about how our friendship ended that I don’t understand.

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<sup>21</sup> Guardian. I can provide no further citation because this is a subjective lesson that I learned.

Perhaps what gets me is that I see that story paralleled in the very media that vae produced. Minecraft Twitch streamers like Guardian will often form “SMPs,” or survival<sup>22</sup> multiplayer Minecraft servers. But the term “SMP” has come to specifically denote a survival multiplayer world that revolves around often loosely-scripted improv storytelling more so than original Minecraft mechanics. Different streamers play different characters, each with their own lore that ties back into the overarching plot. I chose to call Guardian “Guardian” because they were the *de facto* community protector on their first SMP, the BearSMP (named for its founding creator, Bearbubb). Revolving around its motto “Friends are okay,” the BearSMP told the story of a grumpy old Bear who lived alone and the community that gradually sprung up around him. Bear had never really gotten over the death of his wife, but the prospect of an accepting, loving community in which he felt needed slowly won him over.

That’s basically just a melodramatic accounting of the effect that Guardian’s Twitch community had on me. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I was at my lowest, almost nothing could give me the energy to keep going—besides my friend John, who returned out of the blue to give streaming another shot during the pandemic. But after a remarkable 100 straight days of streams, John went on another break of indeterminate length, leaving me missing a sense of purpose and belonging once more. But I’d met Guardian in John’s streams, so I decided to give their community a shot next. It worked out so well, and for the first time since the spring of freshman year, I felt like I had real friends and a real sense of community. But like the

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<sup>22</sup> Survival is the best-known Minecraft game mode. In this mode, players are left to explore an open world full of many natural and unnatural perils with minimal guiding objectives.

BearSMP, it didn't last. The BearSMP had been a hit in the wider Minecraft community, and many of its creators eventually began to run out of steam, replacing it with bigger and better things. Guardian was one such creator, but I never faulted them for that; I was too busy trying to reckon with our then-growing conflict. Soon after we'd gone our separate ways, the BearSMP also announced its formal closure. Two members released finales. The first one featured a previously "happy" character driven mad by insecurities so pervasive that they manifested as dissociative episodes. This finale featured Guardian's final appearance on the SMP. Whether she really returned or was just a dissociative delusion, I don't know. But when he told that other character "you're not my priority," I was shaken to the core.

That's when I realized the fundamental mistake I'd made. I'd been so happy in that community that it had been only natural to make it my priority. But it was unfair to just naturally expect another person to reciprocate. Without realizing I was doing it, I'd started to expect Guardian to love me more than he loved himself. To fall can be a quiet thing, and I didn't realize what had happened until it was too late. I long desired a do-over in that relationship, a chance to appreciate my new anti-institutionalist beliefs together with someone who was instrumental in helping me become who I am today. But that's not usually how the world works.

Instead, all I can do is learn from this story. The other BearSMP finale was released by Bear himself. It ends with the disturbing revelation that Bear's character has tried to move on from the loss of his wife dozens of times, yet he always ends up right back where he started. He's obsessed with second chances, with trying to recreate a

transient moment of perfection from the past instead of living for what's next. So, in writing this, I hope to lay this past to rest. To make peace with both the mistakes I made and the circumstances that were beyond my control, and to not let it concern me any longer. This section is supposed to be the Present, but until I can learn to let go of my regrets and accept human difference as something to be respected, not consumed, it'll remain stuck in the past. So farewell, Guardian. I'll always wish you well. And I'll remember the lessons I learned during this stage of my life, too.

Besides those lessons I've already articulated, there's one more takeaway to be examined: the power of live media and games as developmental tools. The BearSMP wasn't written about me, yet I was able to see a reflection of myself in it. I know it's done the same for many other people. SMPs and other live-improv stories told through games queer the usual dynamics of audiovisual media. They're like TV shows in many ways, except the line between character and actor is blurred; when viewers know the actors as the same streamers they've seen who knows how many times before, it becomes easier than ever to insert them—and oneself—into the stories they tell, as I've done here. In some ways, character and actor become a spectrum, improvised roleplay allows real emotions to guide a fictional story, and audiovisual storytelling is put into the hands of individual creators instead of the establishment. Livestreamed stories, free and created by people we feel like we know, provide an anti-capitalist alternative to the television industry and its gatekeeping. On Twitch, any story can be told, and the stories that get told aren't the most profitable—they're the ones that matter the most in

the moment to the people who're telling them. Used in the right way, Twitch becomes the queer television of the proletariat.

Knowing this, I resolve anew to take up the fight myself, using narratives and lived experiences as whetstones on which to hone my feminist sight. And as I learned from the BearSMP, sometimes the things most in need of examination are those that come from within. Until now, I've largely treated feminism as exempt from the corrosive influence of the shadow world, but that isn't the case. Incomplete and distorted forms of feminism can quash the diversity within our movement just as effectively as capitalism can directly. Yes, we all know that not all women are the same, but do we actually reflect that in who we seat at our decision-making tables?

No. The answer is no. To be fair though, the extent of the problem does vary with one's theoretical school. Capitalism is a brutal fastball hurled by the pitcher of Team Heteropatriarchy. Using feminist theory is like taking a giant swing at that ball. Depending on who's wielding the bat and who taught them how to hit, they could knock it out of the park, or they could miss the mark entirely. Alternatively, we could use queer theory. This is like bunting the ball, letting it "tink" off the bat instead of trying to launch it halfway to the 1900's. It's a fresh approach with a more consistent result, since it's backed by a more diverse knowledge of how the sport works, and it has a good chance of catching the pitcher off guard. Then, there's trans theory. This is like dropping the bat and swinging at the ball with a five-foot long petrified ocean fish. At this point, we've got so much subversive, outsider knowledge that we're not even playing by the rules anymore. If that sounds like a bad thing, think back to Jack

Halberstam's queer failure and consider that in this allegory, the rules in question represent societal norms and expectations set by the heteropatriarchy. A subversive approach is deconstructionist, Marxist, and will definitely catch the opposing team by surprise.

Writing this allegory to illustrate what a transformative effect changing one's source knowledge can have has made me even more acutely aware that I desire to make this change myself—and that trans theory is an excellent tool to utilize. As Susan Stryker reminds me, "Transgender studies, though desubjugating previously marginalized forms of knowledge about gendered subjectivity and sexed embodiment, promises just such a critical invention."<sup>23</sup> And as a trans person, I'm uniquely well qualified to wield trans theory alongside my feminism in the interest of achieving the radical interventions I desire. That being said, I cannot give up my individuality in doing so. I'm one trans girl, not the embodiment of trans people, and I must remember that I cannot speak for any sort of collective without far overstepping my bounds.

In part due to its exemplary relationship with intersectional diversity, this awareness isn't a unique insight on my part, but rather an established notion within trans theory. In *Doing Justice to Someone*, Judith Butler even goes so far as to suggest that acknowledging those moments when judgment might be better deferred to others is an essential part of treating others justly. In their words: "And it might be useful, important, even just, to consider a few matters before we decide, before we ascertain whether it is, in fact, ours to decide."<sup>24</sup> They caution us to take the time to think about

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<sup>23</sup> Susan Stryker. *(De)Subjugated Knowledges*.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler. *Doing Justice to Someone*.

intersectionality not just before we make a decision, but before we even claim that that decision is ours to make. Going forward, I'll strive to always remember who I am, who I am not, and who society tries to force me to be before I make—or defer—the next major decision that will inevitably come my way.

**Through light, our existence devours ignorance.** If the world of shadow reminds me of the perils of defining myself within a society designed to perpetuate conflict by obfuscating the necessity of difference, then the world of light reminds me of the joy in knowing that there's one part of my representation that will always allow me to fight back: my ability to take up space, physically and epistemically, in society. Of course, society can try to conceal the space I take up or aim to persuade me that minimizing that space myself would be in my best interest. But short of killing me and making use of the fact that Catholics are typically cremated, it can't actually prevent me from taking up space somewhere at all times. And more often than not, that somewhere is public.

The argument over passing is an obvious example that plays out constantly in my life. For some trans people, passing is the goal. It's a carrot that society dangles in front of us: we'll accept you more if you hide yourself as best you can, if you don't use the space you take up to subvert our system. So obviously we should do the opposite, right? Follow in the footsteps of Sky Cubacub and strive for radical visibility? Maybe. That depends on the realities of each person's existence. Some may need to pass for safety's sake, to get a job and sustenance, to convince family and friends that their gender identity is legitimate, to alleviate dysphoria, or for one of dozens of other valid

reasons. Asking those people to prioritize taking up space subversively over their own well-being is not fair. Then again, encouraging those who do have the capacity and inclination to flaunt their transness certainly contributes to a generative form of queer resistance.

Just ask Sandy Stone. In response to an *ad hominem* attack in some transphobe's paper *The Trans[sic] Empire*, she wrote a truly ingenious piece entitled *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*. I won't take issue with Stone's use of the outdated substring within "posttranssexual" for a few reasons. First, she's trans herself and can use the slur if she has a mind to. But second, she actually acknowledges the problems with the term! While she settles on "posttranssexual" instead of "transgender," she realizes just as much as anyone today that the old terminology is reductive and oppressive. In so many ways, this paper is her encouraging her readers to be more!

There's no need to take my word for it, though. Let's hear from Ms. Stone directly: "The essence of transsexualism is the act of passing. A transsexual who passes is obeying the Derridean imperative: 'Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres.'"<sup>25</sup> Sorry Derrida, but you're wrong this time. Note that Stone refers to the essence of transsexualism specifically, not of posttranssexualism or being trans(gender). Yes, I'm using the word transsexual too now, because it's essential to understanding Stone's statement. If one thought of the words transsexual and transgender as denotively interchangeable, then not only would Stone be using outdated language, but

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<sup>25</sup> Sandy Stone. *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*.

she'd be making a transmedicalist<sup>26</sup> claim. But as we'll see, Stone's doing the opposite. For her, the term transsexual is harmful *because* of its transmedicalist association with passing. So when Stone and I use the term "transsexual," we're doing so very intentionally, to reference an oppressive, idealized vision of a trans person created by society in a clumsy attempt to assimilate us so that our struggles get lost in the broader discourse.

Back over to you, Stone: "To attempt to occupy a place as speaking subject within the traditional gender frame is to become complicit in the discourse which one wishes to deconstruct. Rather, we can seize upon the textual violence inscribed in the transsexual body and turn it into a reconstructive force."<sup>25</sup> Now you can probably see what she's on about. The old passing-obsessed transsexual culture failed to improve life for the trans people within it strictly because it demanded its members fit themselves into the dominant discourse that it was supposed to be opposing: a binary interpretation of sex and gender that Magnus Hirschfeld disproved a century ago. Stone reminds us that we can fight back against this expectation. A *demand* to pass constitutes textual and verbal violence, forcing trans people to behave a certain way to be discursively and epistemically recognized. But we don't need to acquiesce; we can say "screw that" and seize control of our besieged narrative instead.

So, let's hear from Stone one more time, at the moment she shares her vision for a trans future, a blueprint for *how* we could go about seizing that control over our story.

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<sup>26</sup> An explanatory comma? *Fine, I guess.* A "transmedicalist," also known by the less flattering term "Truscum," is someone who believes that only binary trans people are valid, and that one isn't really trans unless one has physical dysphoria and a desire to medically transition and pass. So, they're the trans community's very own bunch of exclusionary elitists!

She suggests that we view trans people “not as a class or problematic ‘third gender,’ but rather as a genre—a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored.”<sup>25</sup> Genre really is the perfect metaphor for gender and even Hirschfeldian sex. Texts in a genre all share a background that unifies them as a community, but each one is a unique variation on the norms and expectations of that community. In genres, this sort of variance is regarded as healthy, seeing as it prevents the genre from becoming stale and irrelevant.

And so it should work for trans people. Forget the heteronormative assumption that all trans people are by necessity binary allosexual straight folks with a non-fluid gender expression that matches their gender identity. Just like anyone else, trans people can be straight or gay. They can be bisexual, pansexual, and aspec and/or arospec.<sup>27</sup> They can be genderfluid, gender non-conforming, and cross-dressers (that is to say, enjoying the practice of dressing as the gender that society tells them matches their sex assigned at birth—or some other gender with which they don’t necessarily identify). And they sure as heck can be non-binary in any way they want: demigirls, demiboys, demiandrogynes, those who identify with nongenders and xenogenders, and those who identify as bigender, pangender, agender, or any number of other possibilities are all variations on the genre of transness that deserve to be embraced. And if that equates to so much gender variance that the genre of transness begins to become unintelligible to society in its current stasis—well, that sounds like society’s problem, now doesn’t it?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “Aspec” is a shorter version of “on the asexual spectrum.” Likewise, “arospes” is an abbreviation of “on the aromantic spectrum.”

<sup>28</sup> LOL society, sucks to be you~

Thus, Stone's notion of the posttranssexual merges effortlessly into the definition of "transgender" or "trans" that the most progressive trans theorists hold today: an umbrella term intent on capturing all the variance within the genre and uplifting the individual experiences that comprise a diverse whole instead of trying to force them into a conformist mold like the term "transsexual" did. In other words, Stone's writings forecasted the future of the trans community with startling accuracy, foretelling the rise of a more modern and inclusive vision of transness—just under a slightly different name. As she predicted, the term "transsexual" ultimately fell out of favor in large part because of the implicit baggage and assumptions it carried. Realizing that the term itself fit the genre of repression better than the genre of liberatory language, the community evolved to transcend it. And now that we've done so, the possibilities for a better future are limitless.

Changing language is the first step towards changing beliefs, after all. We can only understand and disseminate what we have the words to express, and reciprocally, introducing expansive new terminology throws open the gates to new frontiers of gender construction. Judith Butler expresses this aptly in their hit piece *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*. In this theoretical masterwork, they speak to the social construction of gender, the queer assemblage of a unique copy out of the actions we take each day. This stands in stark contrast to the limiting gender and sexual binary that terms like "transsexual" were created to fit. In fact, Butler goes so far as to contend that all gender is merely a copy of a copy to which there's no true original. Binary masculinity, binary femininity, heterosexuality—none of them are the defaults

that society would claim them to be.<sup>29</sup> Like any other performance of gender, they're merely the result of people copying a nebulous ideal; their prevalence in modern society is an indication that this ideal has been pushed on us from birth, not that it carries any sort of inherent superiority.

Considering this, it's little surprise that Butler also calls us to live out our unique and authentic variations on the genre of gender. When they say that "...coherent gender, achieved through an apparent repetition of the same, produces as its *effect* the illusion of a prior and volitional subject,"<sup>29</sup> they mean that what we'd call "intelligible gender" is really just the repetition of actions that our society has come to perceive as gendered. Thus, there are no limits to the unique genders we can construct for ourselves by manipulating these social perceptions of intelligible gender through our actions. We can mix and match from the scripts of masculinity and femininity, or draw from neither, copying entirely different models day in and day out until we've actualized our own unique space. After all, this is where the gender binary came from: "it is this excess [of repetition] which erupts within the intervals of those repeated gestures and acts that construct the apparent uniformity of heterosexual positionalities, indeed which compels the repetition itself."<sup>29</sup> In an attempt to ensure its own future, binary gender will continue to reproduce itself by disseminating its norms throughout society. However, there's no reason we need to buy into this attempt; we can contribute to either its reproduction or its modification however we deem fit.

So, for those who can, I say embrace Stone's and Butler's ideas. Be unapologetically you, and don't be afraid to express your gender in all its glory and

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<sup>29</sup> Judith Butler. *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*.

variance from society's expectations. Be radically, unapologetically visible. But the Marxist in me demands I acknowledge people's material realities one last time in this dialogue, so do remember that ultimately, this must be an individual decision made with one's own well-being in mind. If you don't have the financial resources or wouldn't be safe being visible in your current location, don't put yourself in danger just to follow the directives of Stone, Butler, or myself. If those of us who have enough power to enact this safely and sustainably do our parts, you'll be safe to join in soon enough.

Now, let's zoom in for a moment. Stone's work did more than just get me to acknowledge the power inherent in my own existence; it demanded I think critically about how I've made that existence even more subversive, sometimes subconsciously. I've always been a *Star Wars* fan, so the combination of a *Star Wars* reference with trans theory drew me instantly to Stone's manifesto. Her work remains progressive to this day, but I realized that I already do some of what she alludes to. I've already committed to the fight against equating gender identity with gender expression and sexual and romantic orientation; in addition to the obvious heteronormativity it perpetuates, it also offends my sensibilities as a gay trans girl who still wears her old androgynous and masc-leaning clothes. Additionally, Stone's work left me determined to fight the gatekeeping and purity tests enforced by transmedicalists, even though I'm not their typical target.<sup>30</sup> The theme of collective liberation is strong with this manifesta,<sup>31</sup> and it would be quite uncouth of me to stop referencing it now.

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<sup>30</sup> That would be non-binary or fluid neopronoun users who exercise any form of gender creativity.

<sup>31</sup> Yes, it's a *Star Wars* reference.

And so, just by acknowledging and examining my existence, I'm already able to push back on my own ignorance. And as Stone details, my existence is a challenge to the ignorance of others as well. A clear precedent for such a challenge can be found in the work of Jasbir K. Puar. In his *Queer Times, Queer Assemblages*, he claims that "through affect and ontology, the turbaned Sikh terrorist in particular, I argue, as a queer assemblage, is reshaping the terrain of South Asian queer diasporas."<sup>32</sup> Yes, he's claiming that terrorists—and suicide bombers in particular—are inherently queer. If that notion strikes you as ridiculous or even offensive, fear not; Puar is playing the provocateur, trying to show Western queer theorists how ridiculous some of the theory they uphold as universally true seems when examined in the context of non-Western culture. His hyperbolically academic use of language and pedantic syntactical structures can likewise be read as a commentary on the Western world's tendency to glorify work because of its opacity and unattainability rather than its content—the same tendency I've discussed all throughout this manifesta.

But make no mistake, this isn't some sort of gag article, and Puar isn't just here to challenge Western queer theory. His fundamental thesis, when applied to actual queer people instead of terrorists, isn't just viable, it's bloody ingenious. Let's take a quick look at the justification he provides for the notion that all terrorists are queer:

I rearticulate a terrorist body, in this case the suicide bomber, as a queer assemblage that resists queerness-as-sexual-identity (or anti-identity)—in other words, intersectional and identitarian paradigms—in favor of spatial, temporal, and corporeal convergences, implosions, and rearrangements.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Jasbir K. Puar. *Queer Times, Queer Assemblages*.

So yeah, those big words are still there, and that whole thing is one huge—yet somehow, grammatically correct—sentence.<sup>33</sup> But look past all that. What's Puar actually saying? Queerness goes beyond identifying as or against a sexual identity; it can instead be viewed more broadly as an umbrella for anyone whose existence challenges or remixes our expectations about time, space, and bodies.

Even at face value, there's obvious truth to that; even I don't use queerness to refer exclusively to sexuality. When I say "queer," I usually mean the whole LGBTQ+ community: anyone with a variation in sexuality or romantic attraction or sex or gender identity or gender expression. Yes, there's a leap from that to including terrorists, but try thinking of them as a hypothetical illustration of Puar's point. What if we stopped focusing so much on LGBTQ+ vernacular and instead considered what it truly is to be queer? Puar claims that the essence of queerness is the ability to take up space and time in ways and in bodies that are considered highly abnormal to dyadic, cisgender, heteropatriarchal discourse. That's why terrorists would qualify in Puar's eyes: when a person explodes, their body takes up space and interacts with other subjects in ways that go well beyond the capacity of most of us—especially Westerners—to understand. You can read this socially or scientifically; not only do few of us understand why someone might want to blow themselves up, we largely don't understand how exactly technology facilitates that—most people can't articulate how bombs actually function.

And so it is with queerness. Cishets are always obsessing over the "why": why would they do this to themselves, what would make a "normal" person want this? This is the wrong question, especially considering queerness isn't a choice. Puar's focus on

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<sup>33</sup> Yes, I'm aware that my pointing this out is somewhat akin to the pot calling the kettle black.

queer space and queer time provides a much more productive discourse that includes answers to the questions that folks, queer and cishet alike, are *really* trying to get at when they ask themselves and others these existential questions about queerness. The non-normative use of space and bodies is common across many identities within the LGBTQ+ community, and as Stone teaches, that ability to take up space in queer ways is an excellent strategy for forcing society to acknowledge queerness—whether it wants to or not. Puar is thus doing the important work of reminding us that we have this power, and that we could use it to craft arguments that would shake up the cishet narrative just as adroitly as Puar shakes up the Western queer narrative.

There's one last theorist I adore whose work speaks to the inherent subversive potential contained in queer bodies. Their name is Chloe Moriondo, and they're the young songwriter behind *I Eat Boys*. This song is literally about a character who locks boys in their basement and eats them. Its opening line sets the tone for the entire song: "Don't look at me like that, eyes on the pavement."<sup>34</sup> Precisely because they take up space in a novel way, queer bodies have always drawn attention—often unwanted attention—from those who perceive them. Yet this isn't necessarily an angry song. One might assume from the title that it's heavy metal, hard rock, or some kind of punk, but it's really just an indie acoustic song that Moriondo sings as gently as they might one of the romantic songs typical within the genre.

This creates a fascinating effect: when they deliver that first line, they sound perhaps a little sad—but a better word to describe the emotion they express might be

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<sup>34</sup> Chloe Moriondo. *I Eat Boys*.

“resigned.” While the song’s character doesn’t seem happy that this is the way the world works, they’ve certainly accepted it, allowing them to sing a very dark song with a nonchalance that those without some queer experience might find just as disconcerting as they do the similarly unfamiliar ways in which queer bodies take up space outside of music.

Of course, there’s the titular line and its successors to be considered, too:

“Cause I eat boys // Yeah, I get them gory // You can’t control me // `Cause I wrote this story.”<sup>34</sup> At first, hearing the title line might make one think that this is a remarkably *heterosexual* song; it’s a feminine-sounding voice singing about boys, after all. But the next line reveals that, in a twist reminiscent of Jonathan Glazer’s 2013 film *Under the Skin*, Moriondo’s character *literally* consumes male bodies. This is a perversion of the socially-accepted heterosexual relationship, the same sort of perversion that queer romance constitutes in the eyes of queerphobes. Yet the song’s character embraces this subversive queering of that which their oppressors deem sacred, declaring—in the same matter-of-fact tone in which they relay the song’s graphic details—that they can’t be controlled; this is *their* story. It’s a defiant challenge of just the sort that Stone, Butler, and Puar so readily issue. Their narratives might be disturbing or scary, especially to non-queer people, but there’s nothing the cishets can do; this is the space we take up as queer people, the space in which we write the stories we want to tell and attempt to protect them from social policing. Songs like this demonstrate that even the *tools* we use to claim that space are unapologetically queer. This can cause a healthy amount of

fear in queerphobic cishets—the same sort of fear that the LGBTQ+ community used so effectively in the days of Stonewall and Compton.

What's more, after listening to this song hundreds of times since I discovered it in early September of 2021, it calms me down like nothing else can. I've learned to be reassured by the darkness it expresses because that darkness is where I live my life; after countless years of the widespread villainization of queers, we've learned to subvert the insult and be empowered by it. I'm proud to be a member of the Trans Empire, and more than ready to strike back alongside Stone. Forget the Rebel Alliance, I identify with Darth Vader—devoid of visible markers of bodily gender, widely perceived as a monster, and possessing the power to uproot the foundations of cishet society that we've internalized as "good." Well, if that's what "good" looks like, then I'm definitely evil. And Force or no Force, I'll happily choke the life out of that idyllic world that makes no space for people like me. My presence and existence is undeniable in any space, and I'm ready to use it to devour the ignorance around me before my own existence is devoured by the lies of the cisheteropatriarchial discourse.

`Cause I eat epistemologies

Yeah, I get them gory

They can't control me

`Cause I wrote this story

Yeah, I eat epistemologies and I get them bloody

They'll never notice I stayed home to study

Part III: The Future

## Going Home

**Through Shadow, our society is always changing.** Change can be good; after all, there's no progress without change. But change can move in both directions, and the tumultuous, ever-changing nature of society makes it ever harder to do what I set out to do at the very beginning of this manifesta: describe a way that I can reconcile my experiences in the shadow and the light, my privilege and my oppression, my disparate and sometimes contradictory identities. So long as the world is ever changing around me, I'm forced to acknowledge that there can be no right answer, no procedure I can outline that'll work for everyone who shares this struggle. But that doesn't mean I'll be giving up. Predicting the Future is far harder than reflecting on the Past or talking about the Present, but I can at least share the trajectory I'm on, not as a blueprint for success but as closure for the narrative I've begun. Maybe, it'll inspire someone else to find their own story, just like she inspired me to find mine.

Since I'm surrounded by a cacophony of different voices demanding I listen to their accounting of what my future should look like, my first step is always to figure out what possible future I actually want—and which principles I should use to guide me as I seek out like-minded others. I put this work off for a long time, figuring that as a good Catholic, it would be better to die and give up hope for *any* future than to come out as trans and gay. But now, I've taken the chance, overcome the cognitive dissonance, and let myself have what I wanted instead of inflicting the ultimate punishment upon myself

simply for being what I'd been taught was bad. Unfortunately, my mental health is still far from returning to stability, meaning this work has become more urgent than ever; I need to make sure I never run out of excuses to keep going and visions that point out why I shouldn't just blame myself for my problems.

Sometimes, this search feels shockingly brutal, as if I'm dragging myself through a hopeless existence simply for the sake of doing so. But I promised her that I'd keep going, so I have. And I've found some truly powerful visions to guide me. Magnus Hirschfeld provided one, and Sandy Stone provided another. A third comes from Dean Spade. As the author of *What's Wrong with Trans Rights?* and an accomplished activist and scholar, they have a remarkably clear-sighted view of society. In his work, Spade mentions "the obvious failures of the most popular contemporary law reform strategies to address harms trans people are facing."<sup>35</sup> That alone caught my attention, serving as a much-needed reminder that the law was failing me, not the other way around. In a world where we've seen such rapid advances in trans rights in recent years, it's easy to figure that since social change is finally pushing hard in the right direction, it's on us if we're still not happy. But Spade knows better. They continue:

If we shift our framework from trans rights to critical trans resistance, we find ourselves with new analysis of the harms that people who defy gender norms face, and new ideas for how we might dismantle systems that produce and enforce gender norms.<sup>35</sup>

So really, the problem with the assumption I made above is that I was focusing on trans rights. Don't get me wrong, both Dean Spade and I agree that trans rights are great.

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<sup>35</sup> Dean Spade. *What's Wrong with Trans Rights?*

But they need to serve as a means of social change instead of as its goal. If we let it, society will simply “change” by finding some way to integrate us into its existing structures of power, like Stone forewarned. It’s change, but it’s not change that will do much to help us; instead, it just gives those with institutional power something they can throw in our faces to present us to the masses as ungrateful and impossible to please.

But why should we ever bother being grateful for equality when we could have equity instead? We don’t want to be assimilated into the system that was so cruel to us, we want to eliminate that system and build something better together with our intersectional allies. I know of no one who has expressed this more eloquently than Audre Lorde. In a set of remarks known as *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, she says that:

For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered.

It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, society is great at telling us that women are “merely” nurturers. We could fight that stereotype in the name of uniformity and absolute equality. Or we could subvert it, using it to empower us and testify to the potential of collective liberation, forcing it to undo the oppression it wrought in the past and contribute instead to the creation of an equitable world. Why settle for apologies when we could demand reparations?

I’m not talking about financial reparations, but rather epistemological ones. If society uses binaries to oppress us, we can’t fight back by inverting them; this is what

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<sup>36</sup> Audre Lorde. *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*.

Lorde means with the title of her piece. Instead, we need to create a new epistemology altogether, to derail the current track of social change by rewriting the narrative. In other words, don't fight back by claiming that "men don't know anything and women are the smart ones and they definitely aren't more nurturing." Instead, fight back by attacking the fundamental undervaluing of the act of nurturing. Learn to see it not as a natural argument for the reduction of women to motherhood, but rather as a tool of resistance that we can use to support one another, build intersectional alliances, and sustain our movements. Our patriarchal masters' tools are oppression, control, and infantilization, so ours must be uplifting one another, providing validation, and making room for difference.

Doing this would not only alter the trajectory of revolution, it would put us behind the wheel of that trajectory, opening the way for those with intersectional oppressed identities to leverage their experience and subvert the process of social change, shifting it from a tool of the shadow world to a tool of the light world. It's a radical exercise in giving control back to those from whom it has been forcibly wrested, and it would definitely give us a queer and trans future worth striving—and living—for. I've already seen it carried out on the microcosmic level, and it's provided me with some of the only real happiness I've known for a long, long time.

It entered my life in the form of a community that my friend Emma Mei-Li has built over a network of social media platforms. I think one of the reasons Emma's been as successful as she has is that she's possessed of both academic knowledge and intersectional identities of oppression; she's a woman, bi or pansexual, and Asian. She

always encourages her community to talk about mental health and is candid about sharing her own. She's talked about how gender, sexuality, and race have played a role in her life and in her own struggles navigating identity<sup>37</sup>—live on the internet. It's hard to be that vulnerable, but it's paid off. People love her precisely because of her openness; it makes them feel like they too can share their experiences with mental health, race, gender, sexuality, and more. Her community is what activists might call a highly effective safe space. I know that's what I'd call it.

But in terms of catalyzing social change, Emma does more than just incubate a community where those lucky enough to stumble upon it can feel safe. She uses the platform it gives her to support activist efforts. While the corporations spent Pride Month 2021 changing their logos and selling stuff with rainbows on it, Emma was using the surge in attention she received as a queer streamer to raise thousands of dollars for groups attempting to institute social change in her principle areas of focus. She partnered with Gay Gaming Professionals, diversity-focused esports team Dignitas, and others to raise money for charitable endeavors such as Rise Above the Disorder (RAD), a group dedicated to providing free mental health services to those who can't afford them.

And this is where the community she built really paid off. She was such an effective fundraiser because the people she'd helped feel seen and loved loved her in return. They came together as a coalition to support these causes in the same way a family supports one another when a member is in need. Indeed, the family is an apt

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<sup>37</sup> Emma Mei-Li. No further citation is available since a disgruntled former moderator purged her entire archive of streams. Funny how epistemological violence against those with intersecting oppressed identities finds its way even into contemporary real-life narratives like this one.

analogy for Emma's community; not only does she sometimes refer to herself as the "Mama Hippo" of the community, but she fosters the same supportive environment that families provide (for those who aren't kicked out of them). In short, she's managed to queer the concept of family, redesigning its fundamental framework to be inclusive of queer people (and those of other marginalized groups). It's a perfect example of subverting heteronormative concepts for the sake of giving those who've been denied a family a place to call home.

In doing this work, Emma is actually continuing a rich heritage of queer parents who have sought to construct such familial spaces. Theorists like Marlon M. Bailey have long worked to chronicle the phenomenon of found-family queer communities, which can trace their histories all the way back to the late-20<sup>th</sup> century Ballroom scene that we see depicted on shows like FX's *Pose* (2018–2021), if not further. Perhaps this queer kinship structure has persisted so long because the sense of family it creates is so undeniably authentic; Bailey tells us that "although the ties that bind members together in the Ballroom community are not biological, kin ties are, nonetheless, viewed, undertaken, and experienced as real."<sup>38</sup> Likewise, the people who participate in social media communities like Emma's usually don't bear any biological connection. Rather, they're a set of people who feel a shared sense of belonging in that space, a sense of belonging that's reinforced both by their participation in the space's events and activities and by the acceptance they're given as members of that space.

Thus, like the many similar ones that surround and interact with it, Emma's community is simply a network of people who feel a strong enough sense of belonging

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<sup>38</sup> Marlon M. Bailey. *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*.

to perform the work required to build and maintain their connection to the collective. These communities tend to be more low-key and nebulous than their Ballroom forebears, but that structure that upholds them? That's direct inheritance. Bailey even suggests that it's the defining marker of a queer family: "Unlike Ballroom members' blood families, emphasis is placed on the labor involved in developing and maintaining relationships that add meaning to the house."<sup>38</sup> So, to quote Gidrea Lightsky, the founder of another such community, "it's the family you choose, not the one your parents stuck you with." Choosing isn't a single decision, but rather a continuous commitment that requires emotional labor. However, queer people who undertake this commitment are rewarded with a loving community that puts reciprocal effort into them—something that they're guaranteed nowhere else in society.

This queering of the concept of family finds further theoretical backing in the work of Lee Edelman. A longtime advocate of the idea that the traditional family structure doesn't serve queer people, Edelman wrote a well-known piece on the matter called *The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and The Death Drive*. Like Puar, he wasn't adverse to playing the provocateur; when he first presented this piece at an academic conference, he caused quite the stir, even getting himself booed on numerous occasions. And this conference wasn't one on feminism or general theory that would've been full of cishets; Edelman was booed by other queer people at a conference on queer theory! But despite the radicality of his ideas, he provides piercing insight into yet another way that purportedly pro-queer social change has fallen short. In his words:

Hence, whatever refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends.<sup>39</sup>

For anyone who's not a fan of single-sentence block quotes with complicated syntactic structures, I'll rephrase his point in plain language: our political institutions glorify children (whom Edelman refers to collectively by referencing the abstract idea of "the Child"). Society sees the production of children as a key part of upholding its social order, since without children, there'd be no future and society would eventually die out. If we're all dead, nothing has meaning. Therefore, since gay and lesbian relationships cannot typically produce children,<sup>40</sup> they're a threat to society as we know it.

Honestly, this is a pretty accurate accounting of how political institutions perceive queers. The "menace to society" argument and the common religious claim that non-procreative sex is immoral aren't ends unto themselves, but rather ways that society tries to coerce queer people into heterosexual relationships where they will produce children and guarantee the future. It all just comes back to a fundamental fear of nihilism and death, both of individuals and of societies. Even the entire economic system of capitalism relies on the reproduction of its workforce to be sustainable.

According to Louis Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*:

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<sup>39</sup> Lee Edelman. *The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and The Death Drive*.

<sup>40</sup> Edelman was definitely missing the trans and intersex point of view in this piece.

Everyone (including the bourgeois economists whose work is national accounting, or the modern 'macro-economic' 'theoreticians') now recognizes, because Marx compellingly proved it in *Capital* Volume 2, that no production is possible which does not allow for the reproduction of the material conditions of production: the reproduction of the means of production.<sup>41</sup>

Put a little differently, Althusser is really just saying that to be a viable economic system,<sup>42</sup> capitalism can't just produce capital; it must also produce the tools it needs to keep itself going. Reproducing capitalism ensures that capitalism can keep producing capital. And one of those essential capitalist tools is, of course, workers.

Althusser articulates that "the reproduction of labour-power takes place essentially outside the firm."<sup>41</sup> But it has to take place somewhere—that's where society comes into play. The Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) that Althusser discusses through much of the rest of his piece are simply tools to ensure that this reproduction is able to continue: "I shall say: for the most part, [the reproduction of the relations of production] is secured by the exercise of state power in the state apparatuses, on the one hand the Repressive State Apparatus, on the other the Ideological State Apparatuses."<sup>41</sup> Thus, it's through a combination of repression and ideological dominance that capitalism ensures the people society deposits into the labor force have been correctly conditioned to be willing participants in a system that isn't in their own best interest. Cutting the system off at its source—the

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<sup>41</sup> Louis Althusser. *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*.

<sup>42</sup> Well, you know what I mean.

children—thus manifests itself as an effective way to push back against the influence of the RSA and the ISAs.

As much as this makes logical sense, it's still a hard pill to swallow. Many gay and lesbian couples *do* want to be parents, so Edelman's insistence that children are the natural enemy of queer people (he literally ends his essay by saying "fuck the children") can feel quite invalidating. In this way, it's akin to how Stone encourages trans people not to pass for the sake of liberation. Would these ideas be effective? Most certainly. They just don't account for the fact that passing, children, or any number of other things that happen to reinforce the current cisheteronormative structure can be validating, important, or desirable to members of the LGBTQ+ community.

It makes for quite the sticky situation, one that I won't try to explore fully here; that could be another manifesta on its own. But I will say this: Edelman's death drive, his proposal that we stop worrying about the "end" and the futures of children who haven't yet been conceived and worry instead about those who are being oppressed in the here and now, is a valuable concept. This isn't because it's well-suited for everybody, but rather because it proposes a new direction for social change, one which centers queer people. One can want to pursue that direction and still love children; those things aren't mutually exclusive. The death drive is only one possible solution to this conundrum, highlighted here because it just so happens to come packaged with Edelman's expert articulation of the problem.

Well, maybe there's one other purpose it's serving here. A controversial proposal like Edelman's necessarily makes queer people think critically about their priorities in a

changing society, encouraging them to better hash out their thoughts about the problem at hand in the interest of either accepting or refuting a concept that they likely have strong feelings about one way or another. When confronted with Edelman's theory, maybe someone greatly attached to the notion of children finds themselves pushed to postulate an alternate means of disrupting the capitalist system. Trawling through the long history of queer and feminist texts will inevitably turn up some viable options.

For example, Gayle Rubin contends that "the formation of gender identity is an example of production in the realm of the sexual system."<sup>43</sup> Such a belief would suggest that we could disrupt the reproduction of the capitalist system by interrupting the process by which children are interpolated into the binary gendered subjects capitalism relies upon (perhaps due to its heavy inheritance from repressive sex/gender systems, as Rubin claims). If "at the most general level, the social organization of sex rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality,"<sup>43</sup> raising children progressively—as opposed to not at all—is the best way to subvert and queer the dominant social orders that currently repress the LGBTQ+ community.

The key isn't to find the one "perfect" solution, it's to think critically about the problem. As humans, our priorities are always changing. No one knows exactly what they want and then wants that exact thing forever—especially if they have a web of contradictory identities all demanding their attention. Thus, a necessary prerequisite of effectively steering social change is recognizing the change that happens within us and remaining committed to adapting our theories and approach as we go.

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<sup>43</sup> Gayle Rubin. *The Traffic in Women*.

**Through Light, our existence is always changing.** Have you noticed it yet? That the point of this manifesta is to provide a roadmap to escape binaries, and yet it's constructed around a binary between a "shadow world" and a "light world"?<sup>44</sup> If you have, then you've probably noticed something else, too—that this binary has gotten more and more complicated as my manifesta has grown longer. Just like my identity, this manifesta is built on layered sets of contradictions. Light vs. shadow, yes, but below that, binaries vs. deconstruction, structure vs. meaning. In this context, what potency do those binaries have? After reading my interpretation of Derridean deconstruction, do you see this manifesta as just another example of a binary that's been slowly deconstructing itself as well as it can with my own inborn binary biases at the helm? You don't have to, but I certainly do. I think she does, too.

The abject space between my two worlds has been shrinking. Perhaps you noticed that each shadow world sentiment has been about society while each light world sentiment has been about our existences? Just like all the disparate facets of my identity, these are readily viewed as opposites, enemies, good and evil. Yet as we move from the past to the future, this becomes less and less the case. Look back at the shadow and light statements in this section. The only difference between them now is whether they reference "society" or "our existence"—the space between them has slowly closed to the point where to perceive any difference between them, we must examine the difference between "society" and "our existence"; in other words, we must execute deconstruction one last time to understand why the shadow and light worlds are separate entities instead of just taking their oppositional duality for granted.

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<sup>44</sup> Ashley Barnes-Gilbert. Some conversation I had with her that resists citation.

That's what this section is going to do now. The proof that the light world of radical ideas and intersectional theories has caused my existence to remain in a perpetual state of change is elusive, but it can be found by finishing my story and following an illustrative example: the change in my perception of the light and shadow worlds from binary to gray space over the course of time and the manifesta itself. It's ridiculously reflexive, I know—but it's the way she settled this for herself, once and for all. Believe it or not, I've been holding many of the theorists I understand best in reserve this whole time. But my story contains no questions of greater magnitude than this, so no more holding back. I promised her that this all ends now.

The Fullbright Company is best known for its 3D exploration/puzzle game *Gone Home*. I might be the only person who considers this game company a theorist, but playing *Gone Home* for the first time hit me with all the force of the best theory across any other form of media. It's a game played from the point of view of Kaitlin Greenbriar, a girl who comes back from college to visit her family at their new house for the first time. However, there's nobody there when she arrives. I knew nothing about the game, and at first I found it distinctly creepy. But as I explored the house, things changed quickly. Safe from the ambient storm outside, the house began to feel quite cozy with its warm lights and decorations. Exploring that space first-person in a girl's body, not knowing what was around the next corner, was an experience like none I'd ever had before. I played it several times in a row, enough to get every achievement on Steam, but since then I haven't been able to come back to it; just thinking about how I'll never get to have that first experience again is enough to crush my soul.

To be clear, that's because of the potency of the game's narrative. As I explored that virtual space, I found letters, articles, and mementos that allowed me to piece together more and more of what the family's life had been in the time I was gone. I learned secrets no one ever intended for me to know. I learned about my mother's crush on a gentleman she worked with and my father's unexpected discovery that his old science-fiction book had become a cult classic. I learned that my parents weren't here because they'd left on a last-minute couple's trip. It felt like I was a part of that family, the daughter I never got to grow up as, exploring a fantastical world of what could have been if I'd won the chromosomal coin flip. But there was one more member of that family, a younger sibling. Not a brother like mine, but a sister named Samantha, who usually went by "Sam." It was Sam's story that the game focused on and Sam's story that spoke to me most of all. I began to discover her hidden audio diaries, filling a space otherwise devoid of life with her expressive voice, often teetering on the edge of heartbreak as she narrated her story: her struggle to make friends. Meeting Lonnie, a girl she thought was cool. Managing to befriend Lonnie and starting to hang out with her in the same near-mystical space I was now exploring for the first time.

"They were *friends*," I laughed to myself as I continued my search for answers. Of course I saw a gay romance arc where there wasn't likely to be one; if a game came this close to expressing an idealized version of my own past, why wouldn't I just go ahead and project my heart-aching desire for girls' love into it, too? Then, I cracked the combo on Sam's footlocker, saw Lonnie's picture taped to the inside door, and heard the mix of joy and awe in Sam's voice as she narrated their first kiss. For a moment, I was

stunned into mental silence, yet also truly at peace, overwhelmed by the giddy happiness of the secondhand memory. But then it passed, and I had to turn my attention to the world around me once more.

I can read narrative cues as well as any other game designer, and I could already tell which was the last room in the house I'd gain access to: the attic where Sam developed her pictures, the one place where the lights had been left on. The eerie red room glow that shone down from the attic trapdoor like Heaven's fallen grace left me with an unambiguous gut feeling that I'd find Sam in that room. My heart broke, for I knew I should be afraid for her—I knew how stories tend to treat their queer characters. The heartache I heard in Sam's voice was all too likely to foreshadow her inability to turn a liminal, idealized relationship into something she could hang onto, and the spectre of queerness I felt I'd manifested through raw longing would yet prove to be ephemeral, a reality I could create but not protect, a wish that'd only ever exist as an illusion of hope, a vision that'd hurt me more in its shattering than it possibly could've if I hadn't ever conceived of it.

Even as I felt more and more in command of this new space, my despair continued to mount as Sam narrated how the happiness she'd finally found was lost to the desire of the other; Lonnie had planned to join the military since youth, but Sam hadn't entered into the relationship prepared for this eventual, inevitable parting. Lonnie was sad too, but that didn't stop her from walking away. The story caught up to my fears, and soon there was only that one last space to explore; I'd found another audio diary in which Sam confirmed she'd gone to the attic to "sleep." The implied

symbolism might as well have been a cudgel. I was certain that my instincts and narrative mastery had served me well. The end felt so obvious now, so devoid of hope. But there was no more putting it off; I'd found the attic key, and the only thing left to do was to lay Sam's story to rest.

I shoved the door open and climbed into the attic. Sam's sleeping bag lay empty in a nook in front of me. The main drag of the space was only a single 90° corner away. I stepped forward, aware of the final vacuous unknown on my right but not yet wanting to face it. I took a breath and turned around. I saw... nothing. The space was empty; no one was in the house at all. But there *was* a full print diary sitting on a desk. And when I picked it up, the camera zoomed in, entering the cinematic outro as Sam narrated, one last time, how her girlfriend had gotten halfway to the airport and hadn't been able to do it. How she'd called to tell Sam that she was coming back for her, and that they'd leave together. And then, at the end of it all, Sam left a message for me, the sister she was supposed to be home to greet: "Don't come and find me. Just know that right now, I am where I need to be."

Whose story did I just tell? Sam's, Kaitlin's, or mine? It's not a rhetorical question this time; I have no satisfactory answer. All I know for sure is that *Gone Home* made me *feel* so intensely because it blurred the lines between the three of us so perfectly. It really was my own story. When I came out, I had no idea what I'd be walking into. It was a large, vacuous life, just as much the California dream as Sam's family's woodland mansion in Oregon. All the space I could want to be myself, but devoid of my relationships like I'd known them before. I could be the girl I wanted to be there, but

it'd mean risking the connections and life that had been everything to me. I was left to piece together from offhand comments and scattered primary sources what people thought of me now, whether home was still truly home in spite of all the change. And as I inhabited this new space, I began to gain hope that maybe, against all odds, I could have the life I wanted, one where the potential for family and romance and being happy in one's body that most people take for granted might finally be attainable for me.

Yet all the while, I could never quite shake the sense that it was all an illusion, that my own transness was a game I played with myself because it made me happy in that moment. That one day, I'd be finished exploring this novel experience and I'd have only one thing left to see: the lifeless body of my dreams, signifying the end of a story that I made but a little longer than it was ever meant to be. I was so sure that I knew everything about the world, that I'd discerned the only possible ending. I was wrong. Instead, the culmination of my exploration was the knowledge that I could go wherever I need to go and be whomever I need to be. My dreams will always be out there somewhere. She'll always be out there somewhere.

This changed the very foundations of my existence. It showed me that the light and shadow worlds I'd thought were on a collision course wouldn't crush me if they did come together. I'd been afraid, and that fear had held me back from engaging fully with either world. What I never told myself is that it's okay to be afraid—but it's also okay to be wrong. I thought I knew everything about how stories work, how the world is constructed. I thought it was just another video game I was playing. That blinded me to

the possibility that there was already an intersection between the worlds of shadow and light. So really, I never lived in an abject between worlds; I lived in an overlap that I was unable to recognize as such. Really, there's only one big world. It's a tapestry of a thousand spectra woven into the round planetary shape we know so well, and there are a lot of wars on it. But moving through shadow or light doesn't prevent me from accessing everything on the other end of the world; I just need to find my own queer way of navigating through discursive space.

Fortunately, there are nearly infinite ways of solving this problem. The fuliginous<sup>45</sup> expanse of contemporary discourse may seem intimidatingly vast and unilluminated from a queer point of view, but this only means that we as queer people get to set our own trajectory through it. In *Gone Home*, Sam did this through Riot Grrrl culture. The entire game is in many ways a salute to the queer inflection point that was the 1990's, a moment when theory and activism eclipsed one another's orbit to offer fascinating new possibilities for subversive epistemology to flow through the edges of the pop culture discourse that was shaping the hearts and minds of the generation's young women—and no doubt folks of other genders, too. Like so many other parts of Sam's story, her interest in Riot Grrrl first appeared in the background of the game world in the form of ancillary options for the emergent story; one can find and play cassettes featuring the music of Heavens to Betsy and Bratmobile in the game world. Doing so isn't necessary to progress the game's main plot, so at first this feature might be mistakenly perceived as merely an amusing gimmick.

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<sup>45</sup> It means "tenebrous." You're welcome.

But even though temporarily piercing the tenebrous silence of the house with the irrepressible punk energy of authentic Riot Grrrl bands won't get you any closer to accomplishing *Gone Home's* gameplay goals, it does make a vital contribution to the living story of the game: it centers the exchange of radical ideas, represented in the game world through their medium of transfer, in the game's symbolic discourse. Being able to hold and use the cassettes one finds amongst Sam's belongings gives the messages they represent—and the implications of those messages in her life—greater tangibility. It's another beautiful example of how the interactivity inherent in the medium of games opens up new possibilities for story, world building, and the creation of meaning.

After all, so much of the power of Riot Grrrl came from one's ability to hold and pass knowledge in forms intelligible to the time's youth. Players likely have their own perceptions of Riot Grrrl, but I wonder what Kaitlin herself thinks as she experiences this countercultural moment. From the limited background we get, she seems perhaps a little too preppy to have been exposed to such things before. Yet I can't shake the idea that the same negative space that allows players to project into her like I did leaves her radically open to such new ideas, observing them passively and aiming to comprehend rather than to pass judgment. I'd like to think that she instinctively "understands" what the audience knows about Riot Grrrl—that she sees the connections between the ideas it embodies and Sam's life. Kaitlin recognizes how Sam learned to pass on her *own* knowledge and experience through cassettes—they're the medium of her audio diaries, after all. And when she finds the zine lab in the basement, Kaitlin intuitively how making

zines with Lonnie allowed Sam to express herself and affirm her radical knowledge in hitherto unknown ways.

Thus, it should come as little surprise that the manner in which Kaitlin bore witness to Sam's ideological journey sticks with me as one of the most potent stories the game tells. Sam was probably never fully aware of her epistemological trajectory. But from Kaitlin's point of view, it becomes so easy to see how meeting and dating Lonnie turned Sam first into a consumer of knowledge and then into a producer of knowledge. At first, Sam just played games with Lonnie at the arcade. Then, she started listening to Riot Grrrl music and reading zines with Lonnie. Then, she started listening to the girlpunk music that Lonnie created with her own band. Then, she started publishing zines alongside Lonnie. Finally, she started producing audio diary cassettes of her own. Lonnie wasn't just Sam's girlfriend, she was her mentor, her guide and impetus to explore a new world where she learned not only to curate the discourse she surrounded herself with, but to contribute to it as well. That's what I want to do, too. That's what I'm trying to do here, with the girl as *my* guide and mentor. Just like Sam, I'm a little scared; this is a whole new world to me. But it's a nascent world that I can build myself, and I know more than anything that I want to be here.

In this new leg of my journey, I've found myself intuitively turning to Donna Haraway. She wrote a piece entitled *A Cyborg Manifesto* that taught me how to navigate a hybrid world of light and shadow—and how to solve the now-unknown dissonance that I previously attributed to being caught between two worlds. One of her core claims is this: "So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent

fusions, and dangerous possibilities, which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work."<sup>46</sup> Transgressed boundaries and potent fusions—that sounds like cyborgs, alright. We can cross the boundary between person and machine in the classical sense, but there are many other boundaries that can be crossed in a nearly identical fashion. And yes, this includes the “boundary” between light and shadow.

Even looking past my body, which itself crosses gendered boundaries, I’m now searching for my own potent fusions in the realm of knowledge. Haraway taught me that I could construct a cyborg existence for myself, but I don’t intend to stop at identifying with Darth Vader. I want to forge not just a cyborg identity, but a cyborg epistemology. This is a project I’ve begun work on but have not come close to finishing. My realization that it’s even possible to build a cyborg out of components from both light and shadow is but months old, and actually doing that work could very well take a lifetime. However, I do have a prototype—and you’re reading it right now. In addition to simply showing the result of my work, this cyborg is also designed to show the process, so that it may one day reproduce others of its kind. That process involves both the gradual deconstruction of the shadow/light binary in the realm of my own perception and the accompanying reconstruction of a new system that models itself after the cyborg, not the binary; the “both and,” not the “either or.”

The importance of this distinction can be clearly articulated by examining another notion of an idealized epistemological world: the Marxist utopia. Mike Wayne points out the cultural divide between even ideologically-aligned characterizations of utopia: “There is, then, a class relationship to be negotiated between the progressive

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<sup>46</sup> Donna Haraway. *A Cyborg Manifesto*.

intellectual and the 'more fragmentary and affective utopian' elements within popular culture."<sup>47</sup> So, pop culture artifacts like *Gone Home* can have immense value as both means of envisioning utopia and conduits of presenting that vision to the masses. However, such things cannot create meaningful progress towards a subjective utopic space without utilizing the theoretical lenses provided by heavy hitters like Karl Marx and Donna Haraway. The class relationship Wayne wants to negotiate then is the disconnect between upper-level intellectual theory and the everyday experience embodied in popular culture.

Fortunately, Wayne doesn't just point out the problem; he proceeds to set about performing the work that needs to be done to solve it. He explains:

[Though one can argue that] utopianism in popular culture is very much a matter of feelings, sentiments and sensibilities[,] and... the [intellectual political] Left's emphasis on rationalism and the 'battle of ideas' has blocked a more productive engagement with the affective dimensions of popular culture[,]... is [this] not also a binary opposition that itself needs deconstructing in the process of reconciling these torn halves? Are the masses to be uniformly characterised as governed by their hearts (and conversely intellectuals by their heads)? Can we fully separate the cognitive and the affective?<sup>47</sup>

So, if I were to have been satisfied with the "either or" instead of the "both and," I would've been leaving undone the work of deconstructing each binary I come across. The divide between shadow and light doesn't map perfectly onto that between "high" and "low" culture, pedanticism and colloquialism, or any of the other dualities that both

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<sup>47</sup> Mike Wayne. *Utopianism and Film*.

Wayne and I remain acutely aware of throughout our respective writings. However, as I hope I've intrinsically proved throughout this manifesta, these divides are basically functional analogs of one another. If shadow and light do indeed represent society and the individual, and I as an individual am intent on using academic theory to define and characterize popular culture artifacts that are of society for the purpose of incorporating them into my own theoretical utopia, then there's no room at all for dividing lines or uniform characterizations. The very essence of my project is evidence that the cognitive and the affective are inherently interconnected, and that to interpret one invariably affects how one interprets the other. "Both and" isn't just a choice I'm making, it's the requisite DNA of the process I'm choosing to undertake. To truly reconcile shadow and light, to find my epistemological utopia, I *must* bring together the theory and the practice, the academic and the everyday.

To provide some final insight into this project, I'm going to reference one last source, ending my great theoretical project at the place of its conception: Teresa de Lauretis' *The Technology of Gender*, the piece that first sparked my interest in feminist theory years ago. It's narratively fitting that De Lauretis' work now serves as the skeleton upon which I'm currently assembling my Haraway-esque cyborg epistemology out of all the people and ideas, "theoretical" or not, who happen to land in the nexus of overlap between light and shadow that *Gone Home* taught me I inhabit. And this act of using video games and other technology to assemble an epistemological platform that supports my gender identity is perfectly natural, according to De Lauretis.

More specifically, she declares that “the construction of gender also goes on, if less obviously, in the academy, in the intellectual community, in avant-garde artistic practices and radical theories, even, and indeed especially, in feminism.”<sup>48</sup> I almost feel like I don’t need to explain that one. My gender and epistemology are both reflections of who I am, and they’re linked together inextricably. Sure enough, I’ve built both of them up in academia, especially in feminism.

So, that’s the answer to the question. That’s how I built my world of knowledge. I used the disparate parts of my identity not as warriors to pit against each other in opposition, but rather as primary sources to cross-reference with what I encountered in both the light and the shadows. I claimed the parts that I connected with so that I could graft them onto my cyborg subworld, shaping and reshaping my eternal project to build an intellectual safe space in the overlap between light and shadow—a space in which I’ll finally be safe from avernal binaries and free to flourish. That in turn feeds my identities, forcing me to reflect on parts of myself like my transness and asking me to keep constructing my gender identity even as I build up my broader epistemology.

There’s one essential part of this procedure that deserves more attention here: the construction of this manifesta. If we look to De Lauretis one last time, she’d be all too ready to confirm that “the representation of gender is its construction—and in the simplest sense it can be said that all of Western Art and high culture is the engraving of the history of that construction.”<sup>48</sup> By representing to you my gender and the path I took to define and build it, I’ve furthered the process of bringing it into being. I’ve

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<sup>48</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. *The Technology of Gender*.

recorded it all in one place, relived the journey I took to discover it, and went back in time to remember why it was so essential that I undertook such a journey at all.

This was supposed to be 15 pages, tops. But sometimes, a story needs to be told, and the girl living it has minimal control over how it gets expressed. It's the illusion of choice—maybe life is a video game after all. But there's always a price to be paid in telling such stories. My body's exhausted, pushed past limits I already had to redefine ten times in three months. I look back to the times I first tried to tell my story through the lens of resilience and shake my head, wondering if I'd've kept going if I'd known things would get 100 times harder than that which felt apocalyptic to me just five years ago. Taking that story with this one, it's amazing to see how much I've grown—and at what a terrible cost. That story's grammar is perfect, and as my eyes struggle to stay open as I fight on, well past the edge of exhaustion, to lay this one to rest, I know I can no longer compete. There'll be dozens of mistakes I never catch, just the sort of word substitutions that used to embarrass me the most. But I don't care about that anymore, because in the process of rebuilding my gender and epistemology, I've learned to care instead about the girl whose health and body I destroyed to create her masterwork. I'm so sorry, Cassie, my love.

## Part IV: The Memory

# The World I Built

**Through Shadow, through Light.** It's all come together now. The battle is won, and I'm still here. She—Cassidy—is still here. The only remaining order of business is bibliographical, so you'll find many of those who contributed to the building of my own world of knowledge credited below. Compiling all their names would be impossible this far into my journey, but I've at least managed to catalog those whose insights are preserved within this manifesta:

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