



toast

The exhibition that you are about to enter

***toast***

contains coarse language  
that guests may find unfit for young audiences  
or triggering for queer, trans, and  
gender nonconforming folks.

I hope that we can lean into our reactions or that you might find  
moments of safety within this exhibition.

Please, come in and try to make yourself comfortable.

*Toast* the exhibition took place April 1 - April 23, 2016 at Arts + Literature Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin. *Toast* lived as a party, performance, multi-channel video loop, installation, and almost entirely intangible social project that continues to unfold. Thank you to the friends and strangers who created this work with me and who continue to process it after we seek to bury it, like a seed, waiting for its forever-life to reveal itself to us.

To craft a single documentary narrative or chronology would not be faithful to the process of *Toast*. Instead, I offer a collage pasted together with the sweat of emotional labor, hemmed with mouthfuls of hair, overseen by a cross-stitch Jesus.



### *the party*

I hosted the party on a Tuesday. Fragile plates of cheeses and berries teetered on the old trunk I use for everything. Crates of Charles Shaw waited in a corner. Except for a long folding table covered with Jolynne's tablecloth, the room was set up as though I lived there. Futon, lamps, dresser complete with changes of clothes, candles, plants, rugs, cheap ukulele, ukulele stand handmade by Kim, folksy chickens inherited from my grandmother, old college books on sex. Little things like art rock from Marcelle, an old photo of my mother, and scarves half-knit filled the in-between spaces of the gallery, although the room would really fill out with personal baggage after the show's opening.

You should know from the start that my memory is that note you forgot in your pocket before throwing it in the wash, crumbling around the edges, los-

ing key information, returning to a pulp. I've never been able to keep my story straight, so to speak, and often rely on friends to sort out the details of my own life for me. Because of this, I leave small reminders for myself to keep track of things both personal and business related. *100 million sunflower seeds. Wake up in a closet. 786543126. Hours MSAC. Figure out toothbrush goosebumps.* What was I supposed to remember? I kept scattered notes to help recall all that had happened throughout *Toast*. These fragmented reminders show up in text messages to myself, stacks of Post-Its on my desk, margins of my day planner, and long debriefs tacked up in my studio. As I would for any other endeavor, I've used these scratchy texts to tape together a deficient but wholly true archive of the show.

*March 22, 2016. Black dress, cardigan, tights, socks.* See also: *Press release. Bulb. Water, lemon, pitcher, cups for water. You are safe. Scripts, food, desk, table, cutting board.* I recall a sort of hurry-up-and-wait day, grocery shopping, preparing a release form for participants of the recording party, pacing the gallery-turned-apartment. A few people had reversed their RSVPs in the day before the party and I was thrown into a state of uncertainty that led to both anxiety and exhaustion; I took a nap in the gallery to calm myself. Max and Simone of Midwest Story Lab arrived an hour or so before the rest of the guests and I told them, "We'll see who shows up," as a sort of emotional insurance policy.

The formality of drink-serving was a welcome distraction for me in the early moments of the low-lit party. After most of the confirmed guests had arrived (and even a few friends-of-friends who I wasn't expecting!) I made an announcement about how the recording would work. We'd all enjoy ourselves in the front, have drinks, eat food, and chat. Individually, guests would go to a middle room where they'd meet Jolynne to sign an electronic media release form and review the script while they waited for the performer before them to finish their recording with Max and Simone. Then, they'd move to the back room where a ceramic pitcher of lemon water sat on a pedestal next to an empty glass. A paper sign read: *Cleanse the palate before and after filming. You are safe here.* I knew that most of these participants will have heard similar lines as those scripted, and I wanted guests to have the option to engage in a short cleansing ritual before and after their recording session.

While I wasn't present between the first and second palate cleansing, I know the bare minimum that occurred: they must have passed through a black curtain that I hung up to section off the recording area, and then they'd have read from a few sheets of paper stapled together.

I wrote a note on the top of the script for the guest-performers because I wanted to make sure I was in some way present in the recording room. ***Instructions and tips for reading:*** *Each line is its own statement. Pause between each line. Infer the tone of each statement and read the words as though you're saying them in "real" life. Try not to sound like you're reading from a page. It's okay to whisper, shout, take breaks, contort your mouth, be dramatic, sound bored, speak slowly, speak quick-*

ly, speak lovingly, speak with disgust, emphasize some words more than others, or just get through the statements. There is no right or wrong way to make these statements. Only your mouth will show up in the exhibition, so try not to sway back and forth, if you can help it. I know that you do not own these statements and that you may never make these statements in “real” life. You are not responsible for these statements. I appreciate your energy.

How would they interpret the words and how would that influence their performance? The guests absolutely transformed into performing participants in that moment, and it fundamentally changed their roles in the exhibition; their proximities to the show would continue to shift in the coming weeks. Some would come to describe themselves as authors or co-conspirators of the work—these are titles I was also eager to ascribe.

My ideas about what it felt like to be there come primarily from what I eventually saw in the recordings during the editing process. What words were exchanged between Max and Simone of the tech crew or between them and the performers? I know that the space was small and that the camera must have been very close to each performer’s face in order to zoom into their mouth only. Max and Simone sent me a visual clue about what the experience may have been like:



I got to feel the energy of performers after they returned to the party. Some looked tired or a little worried. Others gave me a hug or told me that they’d been told some of the same things in their lives. A few asked for more information about a particular phrase that they were asked to perform. And as the night went on, I felt closer to each of the people who attended the party. We talked about our individual experiences with homophobia or with sexism and we processed what the show would mean for me or for them. Marcelle painted my fingernails. They ate all my food. We were exhausted and I, at least, was happy.

I could not have planned for such tender community-making and family-forging during the party that was as much “the art” as any other aspect of the exhibition. How different was this joy from my original motive for *Toast*?

### *the motive*

My agenda for the party had shifted dramatically over the years leading up to it. Even up until a few months prior to that night, I had expected a tense social

experience wherein guests would somehow be tricked into gathering in the gallery and reading phrases that had been gold leafed onto their drink glasses. This would be a highly performative *toast*, although guests wouldn’t have come prepared for it. They would speak both affirmations and derogatory phrases related to gender and sexuality, all of which have been said directly to or about me over the years. (In all hypothetical and actual versions of the party, I chose to center the content of the show on my own experience both because I don’t assume to understand all queer folks’ experiences and because I was willing to take on emotional labor.) This would have been a scripted and suddenly awkward event aimed at unsuspecting “allies” who have voiced, in my presence, incongruently heteronormative political aspirations without recognizing them as such. Pablo Helguera (*Education for Socially Engaged Art*) might categorize this type of social engagement as *involuntary participation*:

With involuntary participation, negotiation is the most subtle and difficult to do, because in these cases deceit or seduction plays a central role in the work. In these instances, participants . . . at first willingly engage but later become involuntary participants or actors in a [socially engaged art] experience . . . The enticement approach is a bit of a mind game, in which audiences and participants are placed in environments that compel them to engage in a particular way, not realizing until later that they are inside an artwork of which they are the subjects.

Setting the exhibition in a domestic environment that seemed to belong to me, however staged, might have cultivated an initially hospitable atmosphere in which I doted on guests and made them feel welcome—but that I, as the sole host, could quickly pivot and reframe to be as inhospitable as I chose.

I began mentally fabricating this party around the early part of 2013 and realized two years later that gold leafing delicate lettering onto forty unique chalices was not a productive use of my time, nor particularly stimulating for me as an artist, and it was an inauthentic representation of my home life. I don’t own gold leafed glasses, so why would I serve drinks that way? The logistics for the party had to evolve; I decided I would serve drinks to visitors in the gallery and send individuals to a back room one at a time to be filmed reading the statements off a teleprompter. Party goers would then be instructed to *not* talk about what transpired in the back room so that fellow guests would not know what awaited them. I hoped that guests would feel uncomfortable mingling with me after being let into my secret world of butterflies and perspiration. I was going to conjure the discomfort that many queer and trans people experience when they are forced to behave as though nothing is violent about heteronormativity, transmisogyny, homophobia, or what bell hooks might call the *imperialist white supremacist*

*capitalist patriarchy*. I hoped that this tension might initiate epiphanies among people who think they understand what it means to be an ally to LGBTQIA+ people, but *really don't*. I imagine that in a lot of ways, this pattern of ignorant or well-intentioned allyship exists throughout the intricately linked social movements for racial justice, migrant rights, crip justice, class liberation, reproductive justice, and others, and that I need reminders about allyship as well—so I'd also need to remain fully engaged throughout all of the discomforts of *Toast*. With a propensity for confrontation and antagonism, I figured this could all be accomplished by catching guests off guard. Of course, I wouldn't bother to try to start difficult conversations through modes of involuntary participation unless I thought, for a time, that it was the only way. I was aiming for an eventual open conversation about queer experiences with leaders in our community and was aiming to do so from a place of respect, whether the crude entrapment indicates as much or not. I suppose I would have been apologetic but not particularly remorseful.

Despite eventually removing the literal action of a group *toast* from the pre-exhibition party, I kept the word to document *Toast's* evolution as a durational work; because the exhibition has been so tenderly planted in the ephemeral, the temporal, the memorable, the relational, I longed for something a bit more tangible to grab onto while the show whipped us around new bends. I kept *Toast* as a title to document the momentary and sustained dialogical performances conjured with peer artists or with friends or with strangers, those performances that filled the years before the show's conception and beyond, through its opening, to dictate what the show would become. From the memories that provided content for *Toast's* script to the conversations on my couch in the gallery, the near-fleetingness of the show's parts relied on that which seems concrete (*Toast* as a constant, the script as written on paper) and decipherable (domestic space as familiar, drinks served as a function of an art opening).

After creating an agreement with Jolynne and Rita Mae to exhibit at the Arts + Literature Laboratory, the sapling expectations for this pre-exhibition party had to fill out its roots. I began to craft an invitation that was to go to every person I knew living in Madison, Wisconsin, with a special hope in my mind for those quietly unaware "allies" and local leaders to make an appearance. I planned to send the invitation to lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, nonbinary, polyamorous, agender, or otherwise queer people as well. Wouldn't that make the party all the more tense? Blending diverse perspectives might add to the group anxiety that I hoped to induce. How perfect! As I wrote the email, a sudden and embarrassing realization burned through me: aside from potentially positioning my friends as pawns, I could not put peer queers through foreseeably triggering social circumstances without warning them first, and I couldn't have some guests knowing what was going to happen at the party and others not know. Even more, I wouldn't know which guests to forewarn because there's no way I could

know how each individual identifies in terms of their gender or sexuality unless I unnecessarily provoked every guest by asking about their orientation or identity directly, intrusively. I was going to have to reveal some secrets about the potentially uneasy social dynamics that my guests might encounter, which would, by removing an element of deceit or surprise, characteristically change the show.

As with all other stages of *Toast*, I talked through my options with close collaborators and friends. Ultimately, I decided to reveal the filming process and give some clues about exhibition content in the emailed invitations. This decision was about consent and protection for my community, although I was nervous about what the ramifications might be for including this much information in advance. I later found that this late-in-the-game solicitude qualitatively transformed the work—and identified my co-authors. Here's what it said:

***You are invited to a private pre-exhibition party:***

*Tuesday, March 22*

*8pm*

*Arts + Literature Laboratory (2021 Winnebago)*

*Above all, this is an evening of music, drinks, conversation, and comfortable seating! With permission and for a short time, party guests may be filmed reading from scripts\* in a quiet area of the building. These performances may be screened during the public exhibition of *Toast* opening on April 1 at ALL. Guests will have opportunities to opt in or out of filming during the party.*

*Please RSVP by March 4; I'm reaching out to you because I trust your involvement in this project and would sincerely enjoy your company at this party. Because I will rely on a feeling of trust among guests, please check in with me before inviting others.*

*This project is possible thanks to support from Midwest Story Lab and the Arts + Literature Laboratory.*

*With affection,*

*Alaura*

*\*The script is a poem composed entirely of phrases said to or about me over the course of my life, but please do not discuss this with anyone prior to or after attending the party, unless it contributes to your overall wellbeing. You would be doing some "heavy lifting" for me by speaking these memories. Only your mouth—not your eyes or torso—would be filmed. Possible trigger warnings: gendering, homophobia, transphobia, some swearing*

This invitation solidified a few decisions I was making. I chose not to leave the community recording session entirely public because I wasn't yet ready to reveal intimate details about my life to total strangers. I also knew that I was sending the invitation to many, many people and that some of them *were* near-strangers. In this way, I still consider the filming party to have been a *community* recording session; I did not know everyone who showed up intimately. I also prioritized the safety and comfort of guests by allowing them to opt in or out of the filming process, alerting them to the process in advance, and offering content warnings. Revealing what the party was *really* about felt risky to me because it would give guests time to reflect on their otherwise unconscious performances and implicit biases surrounding gender and sexuality rather than interrupting them in real time. Above all, I was afraid that the trigger warnings in the final line of the invitation would prevent queer people from coming and thereby further estrange folks who often find themselves in dangerous social situations (if they are anything like me).

The invitation also meant I was throwing myself back into the eternally vulnerable experience of coming out. Was I willingly embarrassing myself in front of those arts leaders and policy makers I was inviting? Was it juvenile to bring such personal experience into a public exhibition and expect people to care? One of my notes from that period of time read: *what the hell are you doing?*

I was nauseated from the moment I hit send, but I didn't have to sit with the nausea for long. The first few RSVPs covered a clear cross-section of people I was hoping to reach. From what I know of the folks who responded in the first few days, I had heard from straight, queer, cis, and trans people:

*I would love to be part of this and I am honored to be invited.*

*Please keep me in mind for the future—I wish I could be there. Sounds inspiring! Good luck with the event; I'm sure that it will be a success!*

*This sounds like something I don't want to miss.*

The responses were encouraging and hopeful. These first reactions to the show's concept gave me resolve as I moved forward, slightly more confidently, into whatever the exhibition would become.

And, as the party grew nearer, one fact became absolutely clear: this was going to be a queer party.

Scheduling conflicts prevented a lot of the art-leader-policy-maker guest types from attending the party, but there were many people who didn't respond to the invitation at all. I began to wonder what kind of messages I had unknowingly sent with the invitation; had I overly catered to the needs of queer folks? Was it uninviting for people who don't talk about or think about gender and

sexuality often? I suspected that those trigger warnings doubled as warning calls to the straight people I most wanted to talk to: *you'll be uncomfortable, too!* And why shouldn't they get that message? After all, that social anxiety was my original intention for the pre-exhibition recording party. I wouldn't get any feeling of closure on this suspicion until the official opening of the exhibition, when a straight coworker (and evident supporter of my art practice) confided, "I did get that invitation. I'm sorry, I just wasn't brave enough to go to the recording party."

A few brave straight (or "straight-ish") folks did attend the recording party but, overwhelmingly, the guests were of my queer family. That is to say that I knew them to use labels like *lesbian* or *transfeminine* and we had bonded over those identities in some way in the past. The participating crew was small and a few people chose not to be filmed that night, which was surprisingly valuable to me. What did it mean that someone wanted to be a part of that party but not be recorded? From my perspective, these were indicators of consent and comradery flowing from adaptations to the party's original motive. Through these changes and others to come, I had very little authorial control of *Toast*.



## *editing and production*

Because the show expended all but ounces of the emotional and physical energy I'd saved up over the winter (we were recording and editing within a week and a few days of the show's opening), I hired Midwest Story Lab to assist in the technical aspects of *Toast*. I'm sure I can't fully articulate the extent of Max Puchalsky and Simone Doing's support throughout the exhibition.

There were a lot of late nights for everyone in the week or so that preceded the show's opening; two days after the recording party, Max sent me a rough cut which contained thirteen takes of the script by thirteen participating performers from the party, arranged back to back, in one video for review. The video was sent to me by email at 11:25 p.m. on March 24th. I was up until about 6 a.m. reviewing the work. I slept on my decisions for a few hours and started the feedback and co-editing process with Max at 12:22 p.m. on March 25. We would later get together in the gallery to edit footage on the large and powerful computer that he set up in the gallery space. In a process that was a bit of a blur, these concrete details are important in order for me to fully recall *Toast's* workload.

I experienced a storm of emotions on the first night that I reviewed the video. My partner, Chayse, was out of the country at the time, so I was all alone in my bedroom but for a package of Oreos, a stack of hasty notes, and my desktop moved up to the space just for the occasion. I clicked the Vimeo link that Max sent, entered the password, and saw *TOAST - Stringout* under a still black-and-white clip of a recognizable face. I hit play. Black screen, then a new face popped up along with *00:00:00:00 Take 1*. A pause with the performer breathing as the timestamp ticked on and then, *They is*.

While the script for *Toast* had been written as a poem, I later took some lines out of the piece and rearranged others to develop a narrative that was a bit different from the original version. Nevertheless, experiencing this initial vision for the show through the performances of each of my guests, one after another, was, at first consumption, visceral. As the 33-minute cut of the recordings rolled on, I saw the range of interpretations that each of my new friends had brought to the lines. Some phrases that carried a highly negative association in my life were accidentally spoken with tenderness while real-life tender moments were hissed through the teeth in performance. Every now and then, a performer would, without knowing it, deliver a statement almost exactly as I had heard it in my life, and this would unlock choked tears and laughter simultaneously. I remember pausing the video, tapping my chest, mouth agape, staring into air in disbelief. I remember talking to myself, *Can you believe this*, and catching my breath and smiling and holding back sobs. There was a sort of high and a sort of comfort in the exhaustion my body felt while seeing each performer, up close, oxidizing the memories I'd hoped to pull out from the dust for the show.

Michael Rush (*Video Art*) foreshadowed how the medium might function for *Toast*, as it does for other artists, when Rush wrote, "It is in Video art, unlike any traditional form, that time can be manipulated, literally slowed down, sped up, erased, thus eliminating the boundaries of past, present, and future." I stopped and started the video countless times, going back and forth to compare deliveries of lines, jotting notes into a spreadsheet about what might work for the show and what wouldn't—about what might need to be erased and which bridges might need to be built to connect memories that are disparate on the surface.

In this way, too, I felt like more of a director than a sole author of the work.

Some phrases were perfected by a lot of performers while some phrases weren't really pulled off by anyone. *I hope you don't give my grandbaby AIDS* was one of those phrases that seemed to be difficult to perform. But how could it be easy? Sometimes, performers would take a longer rest before this line, or they'd rush through it. Or they'd laugh through lines like *Oh, I'm fine with it; one of my bosses is a lesbian*. While these wouldn't work well for the final cut, they were a great relief to me while reviewing the footage. *Of course* some lines would be impossible to perform confidently and of course some lines would be cathartic for queer performers.

A few of the lines that were written into the script didn't show up in the final exhibition. In some cases, there was really no way that any of the performers were able to deliver the line effectively or, more often, I decided at the last hour that the risks were too great for me to share the memories in a more public venue. At the time, I couldn't bear the idea of answering questions about some of the memories I carry. For these same reasons, I haven't included them here in this print documentation. Call it cowardly or call it self preservation; I appreciate the performers' efforts to bring moments back to life despite my eventual decision to keep them buried. For now, anyway.

This kind of content editing wasn't limited to the moments after the recording party. While writing the script, I had to decide where to pick up memorable conversations or even which phrases to include. The thesis of some of my memories could be distilled down to one or two words—like "*your lifestyle*"—and didn't really fit in the script, so I didn't include them. Another notable edit surrounds those lines that refer to things said about me, such as the infamous *I hope you don't give my grandbaby AIDS*. The original moment, as it was reported to me by loved ones, was *I hope she doesn't give my grandbaby AIDS*, and took place while I wasn't around. I chose to have all of the phrases except for *They is* in the second person so that I increased my odds of an audience considering their relationship to the work through "you" statements; I kept *They is* so that the gender open pronoun—my presently preferred pronoun—showed up in the poetic script. While very few phrases needed to be adjusted in this way, I think it's important to record these details of the process. After all, these memories may slip away from me and I'll want a clear and honest recollection of them in this book, right?

With an edited script, recordings, and final flow organized, I worked with Max to build in pauses between the phrases and determine the final placement of the videos to be projected on the walls. We used two projectors whose light covered three walls of the gallery; thanks to Midwest Story Lab's talent, we were able to stretch the files in a way that filled the walls and prevented distortion of the images. If this work ever shows up in a new space, the videos would need to be edited, or we'd need to replicate the Art + Literature Laboratory's dimensions, or we'd *allow* distortions of the memories—which may succinctly represent how the

weight of these memories continues to shift as the social aspects of *Toast* bear on.

Midwest Story Lab cleaned up the audio as well. Then, speakers were mounted on the wooden beams of the ceiling and voices were thrust into the open space of the gallery. When guests visited the show, they would be confronted with periodic and way-larger-than-life mouth close ups in black and white as well as the voices of the performers. It would be difficult to be in that gallery-space-turned-apartment without knowing that there was a video-based work embedded in the installation. The video and audio played together on repeat, so visitors might enter the show at any moment in its more than six minute loop—in fact, many people may not have known the exhibit as it is presented in this book, because there was no clear beginning or end as it existed in the space.

Jolynne and Rita Mae of the Arts + Literature Laboratory let me know early on in the exhibition planning process that it was okay to cast the audio into the open space, and that they would not censor the content of the show because it might make audiences uncomfortable. I had contemplated incorporating headphones into the exhibit so that folks could choose whether or not they wanted to hear the words. Ultimately, I took the decision out of visitors' control. We placed a sign on the door to the gallery letting folks know they were entering a space with language that might be challenging for some audiences, and that queer or gender nonconforming folks might find triggering.

If I were to show this work again, I would find a way to build in safe-ish spaces specifically designed for my queer family. I imagined that the middle or back rooms of the gallery might be an oasis from the constant flow of difficult-to-process narrative, but because the speakers were attached to the wooden beams of the ceiling, the audio also traveled to rooms in the building where the exhibit was not actually taking place. I know that this was hard for some visitors and it was a rushed oversight on my part. As it happened, the show's opening was at times so full of visitors that the words of the exhibit couldn't be heard over folks' conversations. In some ways, this was a needed break from the persistent flood of potentially-triggering phrases. When contemplating the presentation of *Toast*, I know that I should also have found ways to communicate the phrases with deaf visitors. Some folks may have been able to lip-read, but the videos popped up and disappeared so suddenly in sort-of random places that it would have been difficult to keep up if the goal was to lip-read. This show was also written and performed in English, which reflects both the ways my experience doesn't represent all queer folks or all of queerness (that is, if queerness can possess such boundaries) and the ways I may have narrowed my participating audience.

## *opening*

Claire Bishop (*Participation*) describes artistic practices utilizing “social forms” as those that might “collapse the distinction between performer and audi-

ence, professional and amateur, production and reception. Their emphasis is on collaboration, and the collective dimension of social experience.” I'd already experienced the collapse of production and reception during the pre-exhibition recording party; guest-performers were prompted into participating in the process of *Toast* while simultaneously providing its content not only through performing the lines of the script—if we regard performative labor as raw material—but in a much slipperier way, through the conversations that flowed during mundane (albeit transformational) moments off-camera. Use of food, control of light, and casual signifiers of a party may have allowed for that *bridging* content—the dialogue *making meaning* of the script—to be realized. Nicolas Bourriaud (*Relational Aesthetics*) might call these details

“relational” procedures (invitations, casting sessions, meetings, convivial and user-friendly areas, appointments, etc.) . . . vehicles through which particular lines of thought and relationships with the world are developed. . . . Relational art . . . tends to draw inspiration more from the flexible processes governing ordinary life.

Bourriaud also describes that in relational art, these “exchanges that take place between people, in the gallery or museum space, turn out to be as likely to act as the raw matter for an artistic work.” By claiming that party goes, and later, participants of the opening reception, and even later, participants during gallery hours, and so on, are characteristically authors of the work in that they produced some or all of its critical content, I am again relinquishing the notion that I might have been the sole author or producer of the work, although that was apparent even before the party, with the collaborative engagements with Midwest Story Lab. Bishop notes that “on a technical level, most contemporary art is collectively produced (even if authorship often remains resolutely individual)” and that:

The gesture of ceding some or all authorial control is conventionally regarded as more egalitarian and democratic than the creation of a work by a single artist, while shared production is also seen to entail the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and unpredictability. Collaborative creativity is therefore understood both to emerge from, and to produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social model.

My declaration of *Toast* as social may be a dubious one in that, at moments, there seemed to be no risk of public failure if guests never transformed into participants or peer authors. Tom Finkelpearl (*What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*) asks, “Could it have been achieved without cooperation, and if so, how would that change it?” *Toast* may have been received as a multi-channel video loop embedded in an installation only, would not have existed in conversation



outside of the gallery, may not have warranted this textual reflection, and would, actually, have been nothing, as I relinquished so much to Midwest Story Lab in order to produce it at all. As it happened, most of the active subjects of *Toast* were not immediately aware that they were involved in a social engagement, and so the general public, too, may not have been aware of my intentions for sociality to provide the bulk of *Toast's* meaning; if one or more parties of an exchange are unaware that it's happening—is it? I suppose, in these ways, framing *Toast* as a social project has its risks as its life *as* a social project had its risks.

The opening looked like many art openings might look: the art seemed to exist or be happening when guests arrived, and guests could look upon it with drink in hand. Of course, I'll continue to assert that guests were helping to *make* the art by showing up and talking to me and each other about what seemed to be happening there (even as they made it happen), or by standing uncertainly in a corner as fresh fixtures of the installation, or by punctuating the light of the room by opening the entrance door halfway, reading the content warning about the show, turning away from the exhibition. Grant H. Kester pulls from an interview with artist Peter Dunn (*Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*) to describe the work of artists who “have adopted a performative, process-based approach. They are “context providers” rather than “content providers.”” For *Toast*, I served as both, but so did, in many ways, the guests-turned-authors. I did provide a *spatial* context (projections on walls, some furniture framing the room) as well as a *temporal* one (co-producing improvisational conversations before the exhibition and, perhaps, for some foreseeable time after the publication of this book) where co-authors have been able to both consume the show and become the art. My uncertainty about whether I was providing content or context found some resolution after reading from Suzanne Lacy (*Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*) that,

Many new genre public artists express their connection, through memory, to traditions of ethnicity, gender, or family. They talk about their habitation of the earth as a relationship with it and all beings that live there. These essentially ethical and religious assertions are founded on a sense of service and a need to overcome the dualism of a separate self. . . . between perceived public and private components of the artist's self.

And so, perhaps, co-authors were also providing context for my own experiences, both of us producers of content and beneficiaries of context.

I'd used a table that lived in the space throughout the exhibition to set up glasses next to wine and sparkling water and small snacking foods (or: the props) and made sure that I was serving the drinks to all guests. By stationing myself as the sole host or server, guests were invited to confront me through an inconspic-

uous performance. Guests could choose to discuss the show's initial content or its environment with me or not. Guests might have asked questions or they might have grabbed their drink and scurried back to their friends. In combination with these confrontations, which totally changed *my own* understanding of the show in that I caught a glimpse into the meaning making of all guest-participants, stationing myself in one place for the majority of the opening also allowed guests to perform amongst themselves without my watchful eye. Were some guests “performing” queerness alongside those who may not use such titles for their sexual or political identity? Did anyone use the opening as a comfortable oasis, and did that comfort strike discomfort among others in attendance? Friend and creative co-conspirator Marcelle arrived to the party in a feather boa and reminded me, “Sometimes I'm a cowboy and sometimes I'm a drag queen.” How might these personal performances have *actually constructed* meaning of the show? How many and what kind of conversations took place on the couch, away from my ears? (Take note of a critical interaction that took place on that couch when you get to the *Don't expect me to change basic rules of grammar for you* section of this book.)

The first moments of the opening were elementally specular. I believe it was the poet Joey and friends who first arrived to the scene. (Joey would later read work at a night of poetry at the Arts + Literature Laboratory centered around *Toast's* themes, but I didn't know that at the time.) Perhaps next it was Yvette and Denita in the room, but my memories on these first moments are trapped behind the wall of anxiety that dominated that period of time. I do recall that these initial engagements at the opening were still: we all, including myself, stood towards the entry of the gallery and watched toward its back as mouths popped up, way larger than life, on the walls of the far end of the room. These mouthy projections spilled onto lampshades and over chairs and off of mirrors, and we faced them head on. In these opening moments it was most easy to listen to the content that I had provided for *Toast* along with the type of information that the performers provided through their delivery of those memories. In our own soundlessness, there was very little “space” between those guests and me (all of us spectators, watchful, shoulder to shoulder, expectant), which was a highly vulnerable experience, possibly for more than just me.

*Toast* as a social form was more obvious after the room filled out; for much of the opening, conversations were so loud that the words of *Toast* (*Hey faggot! Shave your legs!*) couldn't be heard at all unless a guest moved to another room in the building or to the bathroom, where the audio traveled through the wooden beams of the ceiling to land in the openness of those spaces. It's curious: if guests stayed in the physical space allotted for *Toast*, they were unconditional participants in a social experience because all that *could* have made up their time during the noisy moments of the opening were their conversations that produced such noise. (Although, perhaps the moving of the projected faces acted as a perpetual meditation for eyes to rest on, even if the words those faces spoke could not be

heard.) If a guest *left* the large room designated for *Toast: an exhibition by Alaura + you!* they would be confronted by the words that only I provided, left alone to process them on their own.

Some of the dependence on *people* to produce the aesthetics of the work—the meaning, moral implications, and imagery—in *real time* can be reduced to the visual. What is a comfortable mock-up of a home without people to sit in it? Guests showed that the space was functional—or one that they should engage with—by picking out books from my collection to browse by the glow of the projections, by sitting on the wooden chairs, by squatting on the footrest, leaving drink glasses on my dresser. (In earlier versions of the pre-exhibition party and the show, I'd wanted to leave drink glasses—lipstick stains and all—all around the space throughout the exhibition as a document of time passing, but I decided this was another inauthentic representation of my private life and an awkward performance. Excluding those dirty glasses may have further pulled the literal interpretations of *Toast* as an exhibition title further out of context, which was arguably preferable, as the glasses really have nothing to do with the memories outside of their hints at themes of consumption or objectification.)

In addition to usable furniture, there were mirrors placed both on my dresser and on one of the walls of the gallery. Depending on guests' height, they could see their reflection in the mirrors when moving past one of them or while sitting on the couch. To look at a mouth projected on one of the walls might mean looking at one's own reflection as well. I believe that this fundamentally contributes to the visual aesthetic and the complicity of guests as authors of meaning. Most intriguingly, if anyone stood between the projectors and the walls, their own silhouette would be included in and interrupt the mouthy images on those walls (see this book cover for an example). This was a sort of “happy mistake” that Max, Simone, and I stumbled on when arranging the tech of the show, and we kept these interruptions as a way to further implicate guests in the work. How might literally seeing oneself in the exhibition adjust one's proximity to its messages and prompt engagement in it? In combination with using “you” statements in *Toast's* script, could a guest view the videos of *Toast* and not see themselves, either as the speaker or recipient of those words?

I suppose calling that night the opening of the exhibition is deceiving. Hadn't guests already engaged with the work, producing its meaning, when *Toast's* teaser videos were posted to social media? (One such instance is described in the *Don't expect me to change basic rules of grammar for you* section of this book.) Or before that, during the pre-exhibition recording party? Maybe *Toast* as a social form began with the discussion with the Arts + Literature Laboratory about whether or not to censor some language from my memories. Because the show's first script relied on memorable social interactions, perhaps it's not a stretch to imagine that *Toast*, as socially engaged, began from the moment I was asked *Dude, are you a guy or a girl?*

## *gallery sitting (or: improvisation)*

The first moments of the first gallery hours after the opening were hectic. I'd forgotten some critical step in getting the projectors to turn on properly and recalled a conversation with Max that if I pushed one of the remote's buttons (don't ask me which) before the others, the separate video loops making up the collective projections wouldn't be in sync. We'd already experienced the risks of a tech-dependent exhibition in the dress rehearsals leading up to the opening, where the projected memories would suddenly collide with each other because of a barely measurable delay on one of the machines, or one of the videos would freeze, or some other alarming combination of complications. These collisions were poetic but not a part of the presentation plan. So, while trying to open up the gallery by myself, I was stymied by my own uncertainty for *over an hour*.

Fortunately, no visitors came through the gallery within that first hour and so no one was subject to my anxious fumbling except Max, Simone, and Jolynne's voicemail inboxes. In an exhibition that required so much of my emotional energy and of my presence in body, these anxieties are important for me to record publically. And so, finally, after reviewing emails from Midwest Story Lab and making a few guesses and getting a call from one of my teammates, the videos were up and running. After a few calming breaths, I took an Arts + Literature Laboratory sign out to the sidewalk so that passersby might be lured into coming in. The day was windy, though, so windy that it continuously knocked the sign over. I was unsure if anyone would know to join me in the gallery space.

Eerily immediately after getting the videos started and the sign up on the street, a stranger walked into the room. Long hair, crow's feet, hello, hey!, how are ya. Well, welcome in, thank you, make yourself comfortable, oh thank you, some strolling. *That's nasty, you better shave that shit.* Grabs a strawberry, more strolling around the room, I love this place!, book browsing, nods. Some time passing. *Do you have a mouth hey faggot that's nasty.* The video loop was just over 6 minutes long, and so measuring the duration of a guest's stay was sometimes possible if I kept track of the quote they walked in on. Throughout the guest-participant's more than fifteen minute stay in the gallery—which was very much very full of very loud words being propelled into the space by performers' larger-than-life-mouths—this guest *never once* said *anything* about the show. Well, I suppose that's not exactly true.

Shortly after walking into the space, the guest made a beeline for my dresser and picked up what I came to refer to as *cross stitch Jesus*: now this right here is something I could get into how much is this guy I'm a big fan of garage sales and thrift stores and all that and oh look at these chickens are the chickens for sale who painted that did you stitch this how much for Jesus?

Despite the bulk of the show's consumable content being shared through the video projections, I knew that the objects I chose to display in the space

would contribute to guests' understanding of the show, or even, in at least a few cases, act as prompts for conversation: well the cross stitch isn't for sale no sorry the chickens aren't for sale either yes got them from my grandmother no the Jesus came from a thrift store nope didn't stitch it myself yes it's quite a piece sure well thanks for coming by! Cross stitch Jesus is dominated by soft blues and vibrant reds, halo at the top of the work, Sacred Heart at its center, delicate wooden frame painted in gold.

I had discovered cross stitch Jesus with my mother, Mum also scoring a new rosary to add to her collection that day. My mom and I can trace my relationship with religion and with spiritual inquiry back to second grade, when I was kicked out of Sunday school. While my dad was raised Catholic, my mom grew up Lutheran and it was a Lutheran church that I attended for part of my childhood. As the story goes, I'd been asking my Sunday school teacher too many questions (the crux of the expulsion springing from my confusion over dinosaurs and Adam and Eve), so she sent me to talk to the pastor to clarify, and he politely asked me to please not return to the church. Mum told me that if I wanted to go back to church, she'd support me, and that if I wanted to attend another church of any religion, she'd support that, too, but even more notably, like a total badass, she gave me the option to not go to church at all. And so, up until moving out of the house at 18, my religious education came from the History Channel; my spiritual education came from Mum's sermons on energy, kindness, and the connections between all things. In fifth grade, my public school science teacher instructed the class to, "Stand up if you went to church on Sunday," and I was the only one left sitting.

The receptions of cross stitch Jesus were varied. While the first guest of the show focused on the piece as craft, ignoring the queer confrontations of the video projections, other guests openly combined the representation of Christ with the projections in order to process the meaning of their coupling, in some cases describing the ways their religious upbringing may or may not have influenced their understanding of LGBTQIA+ rights and issues.

By stationing myself in the gallery for as many hours as I could and despite the tone the first cross stitch Jesus inquirer seemed to have set for the show, I was able to have a broad range of discussions with guest-participants. Some of these were sweet: I'd talk with artists I respect about our mutual experiences and find community and strength in this effortless understanding. A few encounters felt dangerous, the show made to feel like a spectacle, the guest never fully entering the position of a collaborator or even a participant. During one such encounter, I'd stayed late at the Arts + Literature Laboratory so that the videos could be viewed as crisp against the backdrop of darkness. (The show had an entirely different feeling at night, lamps lit low, dampness on the street.) I'd been alone in the space for about a half hour or so and was using the time to do computer work for the position I had at the University of Wisconsin-Madison at the time; ALL

had laptops donated and allowed me to use one while gallery sitting. In these moments, I performed the mundanity of my domestic life *within* the encumbering and literally encompassing memories, both internal landscapes left open for consumption, both left susceptible to further assault. As the laptop's glow spilled onto my face, I heard the door open abruptly and a figure enter the room. Fidgeting the machine, glancing in trepidation. *How queer do I look?* Walking in slowly, hands in pockets, glancing at me, glancing at walls, periodically stopping a gesture short to face new mouths as they popped into the space. After some time—perhaps the amount of time it might make for it to become awkward for me to now open a conversation—the guest sat on one of the wooden chairs, approximately across from me, still gazing at the walls quietly. In that moment, I closed my emails and opened a new Google document, beginning to type at 5:33 p.m. on April 2: *Am I safe in the space at night, alone, in the dark, with folks entering unannounced? On a night like this, with guests far and few between, like hiking unfamiliar trails, uncertain anyone would hear a cry for help. Are they avoiding the videos or looking at them? When to speak, to break the ice, to create a space of safety. Is that my responsibility? Am I read as a passive gallery attendant or an artist? Am I read as a woman or something else and which is more vulnerable? Is it still a social project if two bodies sit rigidly across from each other, no words spoken? Body language is social, too, right?*

I was also uncertain if the show could be considered participatory during the moments that other people were gallery sitting. I didn't know what happened between folks in those moments and I wasn't sure that anyone had showed up to check out *Toast* at all in my absence. I did find out that at least one person attended the show while I wasn't there because this guest sent me a message following her visit. I'll share it because I have so few recorded responses to the work: *I LOVED the show. Congratulations. It is so seamless. It is hard to hear those words, but it is made easier by the space and the care that has gone into the presentation. So cool! I'm sorry I couldn't make the gathering or the opening, but admittedly felt happy to take it in on my own. Thanks for the great work!*

On some days, I was constantly performing for friends and for strangers. A guest would arrive, they'd eat my snacks, they'd ask questions, we'd get tired on my couch, and that guest-turned-participant would leave and another would creak through the door. On some Tuesdays, or maybe a Wednesday, no one entered the space. Was I performing when no one was there? I'd walk around barefoot whether visitors were there or not, but I wonder how my behaviors changed when a fresh spectator-turned-actor left the room. One of these days was particularly suspenseful, the moments stringing together like a brutal marathon I didn't realize I'd signed up for: when guest-participants were in the room, they carried the weight of the words of *Toast* with me, doing that "heavy lifting" of shared emotional labor. When they weren't in the room, I carried it all by myself. After a few hours of being alone, I cracked at the words *I think it's time you gave*

*this whole thing up.* They sprang at me as though I had never heard them before, catching me off guard, taking on new meaning. Maybe this show didn't mean much. Maybe I was forcing folks to care. Maybe I was being petty. I couldn't bear hearing the slurs or even the affirmations any longer—I'd been listening to them on repeat all day, no breaks in the bombardment—and so I plugged earbuds into the laptop, put the other ends in my head, covered up with a blanket, and closed my eyes. I alternated between nausea and sleep. When I got up, the first thing I heard was *I thought you were going to tell me something else.*

And so, perhaps, I will tell you the things you aren't expecting. Am I a reliable narrator?



### *dude, are you a guy or girl?*

I joined the wrestling team in second grade because my best friend told me I'd be good at it. I lost every match of this inaugural season but the last, where I achieved my first pin during a home tournament. After a particularly noteworthy win within the first few seasons, I reportedly attempted cutting off all my hair so that "no one would know I'm a girl." My competitor had been spanked on the spot, in front of everyone, for "losing to a girl." I made my parents and coaches call me Al in tournaments so that the boys I wrestled with wouldn't get any extra pressure or punishment for my femininity. Somehow I knew that the toxicity of patriarchy takes no prisoners. Except for a few brief periods in my teens and early twenties, I've had short hair ever since. I only know two people who still call me Al on a regular basis, the name floating like an historical ash we breathe in, like bones left only two inches below the sand.

I must have thought myself a strong girl and call my first username to the stand to confirm: *girlwrestler89*. Much later, just before the injury that would

end my ten year wrestling career, I was invited to join a national women's team. While I wasn't necessarily very good, I imagine that my passion for the sport drew the team's coach to me. I imagine that my excitement about this team in particular serves as more proof of my absolute womanhood.

When I was younger, I was interviewed by a novelist about my path as a wrestler. The record of his questions and my responses are forever lost to the ancient *girlwrestler89* account, but I remember feeling excited, albeit a bit nervous, at the opportunity. When his book finally came out, my full name was cited in a thank you section among a dozen or so others. The title of his novel has the word *girls* in it, and I offer this as further evidence of the gender I called home as a child.

The first sentence of his book reads, "Sometimes I wish I were a guy." Not a single hair on my body could relate to this, but I tried to read a few pages on. I couldn't find anything that felt like my testimony, and I was left wondering what I had offered him during the research phases of his book. Did other girls wish they were guys? As I began writing about this time in my life for *Toast*, I had a sudden realization that perhaps his novel was about a trans child! I rushed through the internet to find excerpts and stumbled upon, "So, before word gets out . . . that I might be considering "augmentation" to my south-of-the-border region, let me clarify: I wish I could be *like* a guy." This was likely not a trans story and it wasn't my story, although I'll never know for sure because I still haven't finished reading the book.

### *are you a boy or a girl?*

I've put off writing all of this because it means I'm coming out again. And coming out somehow means I must have the perfect language to describe the nuances of my experience, which I don't, or that I've come prepared to divulge the hidden bridges between each aspect of *Toast*, which I haven't.

I felt my most certain and my most afraid of the show when the air was still. Sometimes, someone else was there. Maybe it was RC helping me put together a desk (I'd decided last minute that my usual desk—my great grandfather's—was too fragile to risk moving for the exhibition, although embracing this fragility may have been more in line with *Toast's* themes) and maybe it was the confidence of RC's working or the noise of RC's power tools that released a great weight we'd both been carrying. Every now and then, that weight came crashing down around us, leaving us brittle and grateful that it did. Or perhaps it was in the less-quiet shuffling just before the opening, when Max or Simone would ask if I needed anything and I didn't know how to say that what I needed was to run away or put on a disguise or pretend this show didn't matter to me. I was terrified that no one would show up to the opening, leaving us up like meat to dry, and I was also hoping no one would. I was sure that I'd be exposed as a

hack, having given Midwest Story Lab a (token) payment to coordinate the tech, or as a self-centered artist only guided by the narrowness of my experience. I was nervous that what I wore would reveal some truth about my gender identity and might decode phrases like *Are you a boy or a girl?*

What I wore during the party, opening, and gallery hours became the costume for my performance. This conscious performance was not unlike my unintentionally gendered performances in life.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Description of Clothing worn</i>
<i>March 22, 2016</i>	<i>Black dress, cardigan, tights, socks</i>
<i>April 1, 2016</i>	<i>Jeans, black shirt, blazer, fly brooch</i>
<i>April 2, 2016</i>	<i>Jeans, large polka dot button down, hat</i>
<i>April 7, 2016</i>	<i>Chayse's sweater, jeans, socks, hat</i>

I've been asked *Are you a boy or a girl?* by more than a handful of children in my work as a teaching artist, just as I was asked as a child, just as I'm asked by emboldened strangers. Sometimes, other kids will chime in to help their peer sort me out. *Those are boy pants*, one might say, or *Boys don't wear earrings*. I appreciate these assessments as genuine attempts to understand reality and fiction: of the performances they invent themselves and the ones invented for them.



*see, i told you she's  
a girl*



*i'm guessing  
you're a boy*



*boys don't wear earrings*



### *i'm confused. which one are you?*

To write about *Toast* is to remove a security blanket of ambiguity, the veneer of simultaneous detachment and grandeur so valued in the sublime. I wonder: could the collective confessional—the spoken and the heard—be sublime, too? Transparently disclosing subjectivity, perhaps, even naively, may risk alienation from my co-conspirators; so, too, are these confessions risen out of a need for collective belonging. Do you remember telling stories? And in doing so, were stories then told to you? Is it possible that in confiding, in the confessional, we allow for peers and for our dragons to confide as well? Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider*) confided as she empowered:

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. . . . What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? . . . And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. . . . we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid.

Mario told me, “Write it all down and lock it in a vault for twenty years if you have to. . . . Just write it down, immediately,” and, in saying so, freed us up to these secrets, these facts.

*it's selfish. pick one, like everyone else*



Two victories were announced in the months following *Toast* as a physical exhibition, where two US citizens have legally changed their genders to *nonbinary*. I understand that these are the first instances in the US of courts ruling that nonbinary is a legal gender deserving recognition. While legal recognition will not be a source of self-actualization for all people, policy has a way of changing the public's perception of *good* and *bad*, of cultivating in queer folks any faith that the government might be capable of representing us, of interrupting an insidious cycle of gender-based violence that's often homogenous with racism and xenophobia. These proclamations can have powerful consequences for the health of trans, gender nonconforming, intersex, queer people, and so I find them useful.

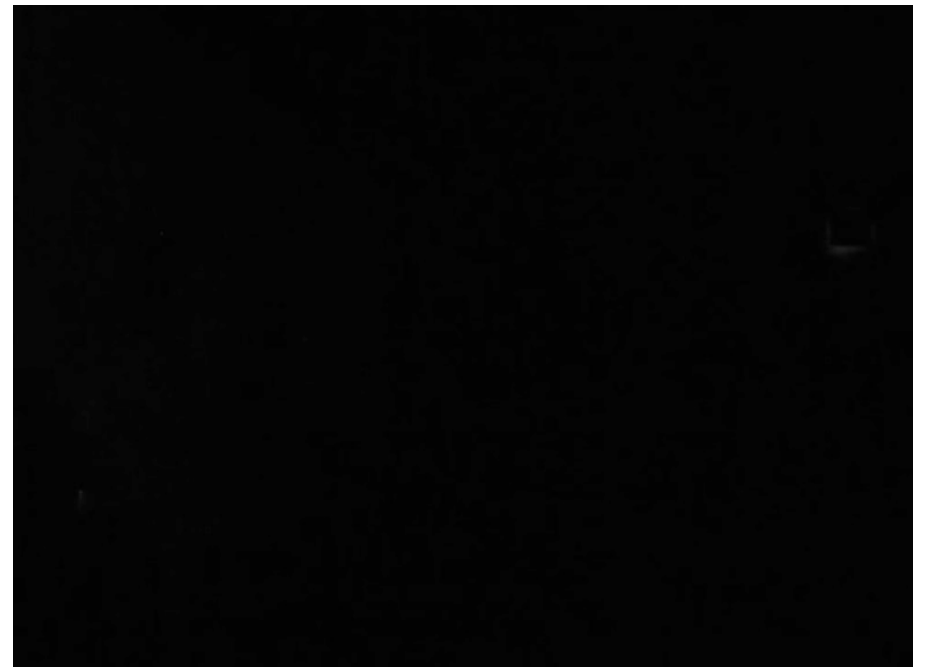
My understanding of gender is informed by my experiences raised in a small town, predominantly white, overwhelmingly Christian. It's built on burnt hands climbing trees and terms like *tomboy*, on playing football with the neighbors and step-shuffle-hopping in dance rehearsals with Kenzie. Bits of hair behind the recliner, prom dresses, calves. In math class note passing: *it's just that sometimes when you wrestle people can see stuff and my dad thinks maybe you should wear a tighter bra but let me know if you want me to braid your hair before the match tonight!* and so, too, in Saturday Night Rides and words like *fairy*, like *phase*, like *faggot*, *no homo*. There's no origin story here.

For many, sex, sexuality, and gender are intricately woven together (or entirely made up) in universes we know in the flora of our guts before we stumble upon them in our politics. I didn't know it until an activist-acquaintance helped me see it: I am trans. I'm transitioning from old versions or expectations of myself to those that make me feel most whole today, as queer, and perhaps, too, as deconstructed. For a lot of people, the term "trans" is an umbrella term for nonbinary folks who see themselves outside of the "traditional" gender binary, although many rich traditions and histories around the world tell us that there is nothing absolute or universal about a woman-man binary. "Trans" or "nonbinary" labels *might* function well for agender people, for drag queens, for intersex folks, for female-to-male transmen (or, put simply, for men), for fat femmes, for Two-Spirit people, for all those embracing the liminal. Or these labels might not work well at all for these folks. Individual experiences with words are too nuanced, too important. I don't pretend to know all of the consequences of these terms for all people, their risks, their prescriptions.

So, for anyone who has asked me to explain what it means to be trans or nonbinary: I have no fuckin' idea. But if to be trans is to transition, then to be trans is to be in constant action, constantly changing in our immeasurable awakening. I'll use terms like trans, like nonbinary, until I no longer require protective actions, where I'm no longer erased by a single word, where we're celebrated for the multitudinous nature of selfhood without need for digestible narratives.



*but I love you anyway*



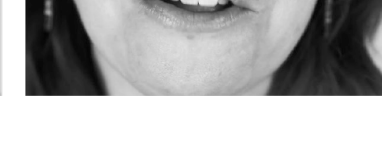
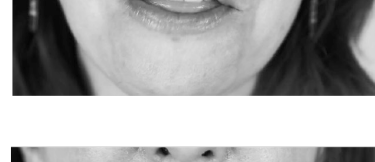
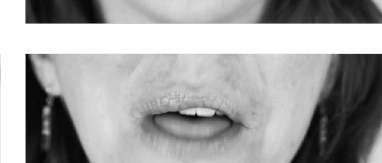
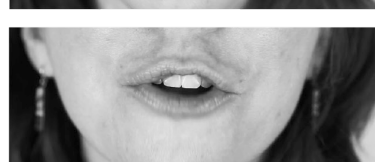
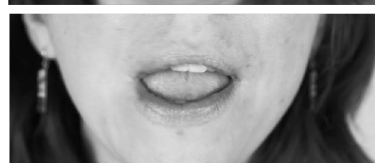
## *you'd make a great mother*

I had to exercise discretion while cropping memories for *Toast*. Where would I pick up a conversation or end it? What inferences would an audience make of the show's ambiguity? Some performers and gallery goers commented that *you'd make a great mother* must be one of the positive affirmations I snuck into the script. And with Sarah's theatrical delivery of the line as well as gleaming smile at its close, I can understand where this notion comes from. The truth is that *you'd make a great mother* keeps my body up at night and spoils my gut in the morning.

*I'd love to parent a child with you. You'd make a great mother.* The words were forward and sentimental, two qualities I tend to value in flirtation, but were fetid breaths in the context of my lived experience. While I try to unpack the sources of the rot, know that the psychological and physical aspects of my cringing are wrapped up in each other.

Know, too, that this statement was told to me in a coo by a self-proclaimed genderqueer friend. To cut to the core, the speaker gave me a highly gendered title of *mother* despite being intimately aware of the consequences of such gendered terms. Quickly, social and biological assumptions were tacked to the body beneath the clothes: if we had children together, I would be the fecund mother. The rest of the conversation confirmed that the speaker must have meant *literally produce and raise offspring* when they said parent. I've never thought I was meant to conceive a child. And if I did, I might still not see myself as a mother, as empowering as motherhood is for many people. While these personal truths may shift some day, the statement was triggering: when I raise up and celebrate my femininity, I project unintended messages about what my body might be able to do and what that should be called. Where we once stood on common ground, I was left searching for the horizon.

With distant intentions of ethical fostering and adoption, I do hope that I would make a great parent. My friend was probably trying to celebrate this, and I should take the statement as a compliment, right? But what the speaker must know now is that *you'd make a great mother* was a betrayal of trust, an invalidation, and a disregard for my body's needs. These conclusions are largely dependent on certain situational factors: the speaker often, but not exclusively, performed masculinely and, more importantly, was a part of my queer family. I strain to recall it and I'm filled with doubt: was there a drink in their hand? Had I referred to myself as a mother? And then I remember that I am not responsible for the expectations that other people put on my body or the supposed-to-be-flattering but actually objectifying fantasies they make for our futures together.





*did anyone ever feel you up?*

*have you ever been groped by a boy?*

*you gotta boyfriend or somethin'?*

This is actual:  
red pickup truck  
a window  
the body scan  
the ask

*Wanna have a beer with me?*

*I've gotta room in town.*

the sidestep

*You gotta boyfriend or somethin'?*

tripping off the ledge sideways as

the "cunt" and the "bitch"

and then the vile spit

on the body

living body recoiled

before wheels took it away

leaking venom in their tracks

*do you have a mouth?*

This is historical:  
felted mattress edge  
a blessing from his mother  
the body scan  
the moment

*Will you be my girlfriend?*

*Come on, will you?*

the sidestep

*How many times do I have to ask?*

falling into holes in the linoleum

and then the restriction

of the body

living body caught

between the plate of crust

and sulfur boiling

*i don't give rides to women with mustaches*

I've got fuzz on the upper lip, certainly, but no amount to write home about. I suppose that, in combination with passing as a cis woman and sporting untamed underarms, legs, and brows, my facial fluff might have its way of intimidating a stranger if she assumes we're otherwise peers. I'd approached her in a gas station parking lot somewhere in the South (I really have no idea where) while my hiking-partner-but-soon-to-be-life-partner was inside snagging snacks. I'd drawn the short straw and it was my turn to try to hitch a ride back out to the woods. "Hey there! I'm really sorry to bother you, but I'm just wondering if my friend and I could get a ride with you back out to the Appalachian Trail. I think it's a pretty short drive and we could—"

*I don't give rides to women with mustaches.*

This exchange is amusing for me in retrospect, but I was shocked in the moment; I'd found myself in a few sticky situations while hiking 1,019 miles of the Appalachian Trail, and almost all of them involved people who lived in the towns along the hike. I wasn't interested in causing a stir, so I walked away.

Walking away wasn't a clear option for me when I sat on a doctor's examining table a few years later. I teetered on its edge with a backless hospital gown until she invited me to lay down. I rolled first to my side, then slowly turned to my back (as I'd learned to do as a result of chronic back pain). Skirting the sciatica, I was lying flat on the table. I had a certain amount of comfortability with the routines of doctors but a hard time trusting them, so I made sure to inform her of past traumas so that she could care for me to the best of her ability. As a dutiful patient, I made sure to lay out all the needs I could think up and, as a dutiful doctor, she promised to only poke and prod as much as absolutely necessary. So when she told me that, "You know what, I think we should go ahead with that testosterone test after all," I believed that it *was* absolutely necessary. When she proceeded to infantilize me with, "Because all that unwanted tummy hair's gotta get checked out! We can get you on a hormone therapy, like a birth control pill, to get rid of that right away."

I felt the familiar electricity of shock that quickly changed its hue to embarrassment and then again to excitement. I *fucking love* all that tummy hair, thank you very much! But did this doctor know something I didn't? Was there some underlying biological truth just waiting for me to find? Perhaps my political hunches about gender were stemming from some very real mixture of potions inside me that I'd never known. But then, I knew better. I knew these biological truths can be blurrier than they seem and that, while there could be, there doesn't have to be a connection between our gender performance and our physiology. I was reminded then, too, that not all brands of feminism look the same or serve the same people.

I'd been wooed into trusting that doctor in the moments before she re-

vealed her scales, suggesting that something might be out of balance with my body. But then, she never followed up to ask me if I was taking T (with or without the supervision of a physician) and it would have been a great opportunity for her to open up a conversation with me about why I checked the “other” box on my intake form. What if I’d already started some other hormone therapies, and she never thought to double check?

Did you know that body shaming can cost \$144.00?

### ***Fuckin dyke, get off your phone and pay attention***

I had a T-Mobile slider phone and a new girlfriend. I’d come out to my parents as queer a few months before and was living in Portland, Oregon. I’d also been recently kicked out of the first house I moved into in Portland, my landlord citing “flaunting my sexuality” and “triangulating the household” and “it’s just not working out” as reasons for my short-notice eviction. I suppose the word *eviction* is a bit dramatic, but my month-to-month lease was, without question, terminated about a month and a half into living there. Graduate school was treating me well, but I was having trouble finding equilibrium with my volunteer work through a national service program. I was being paid living stipends below the poverty line, “So that you know what it’s like!” as though I’d never known what it was like to live worse off than paycheck to paycheck. The contract carried with it the expectation that I not take on any other jobs, you know, so I could really *focus*. I didn’t know this before I moved to Portland.

They sent us applications for SNAP (Supplemental Assistance Nutrition Program) with the gig’s welcome packet and I fed myself by going to a food pantry before the food stamp benefits kicked in. I was helped at the pantry by a volunteer working in the same national service program that I was. I was pretty nervous to be there and they asked me if I had a safe place to sleep; I did spend a lot of time on public benches wondering if I could find a new place to live.

I cried a lot during the first month or so of living in the new apartment, so loud that our neighbors submitted noise complaints to our new landlord. My roommate had been living in the house I had gotten kicked out of; he decided to move out with me as an act of defiance against the thinly veiled homophobia of our previous landlord/housemate. While he never really spoke to her about the emotional turbulence she unintentionally provoked, his loyalty through the move spoke more loudly than words could have: our rent nearly doubled.

He must have been pretty good at letting my wails echo off the bright red floors and clawfoot porcelain when I needed them to, or maybe I did all my crying when he wasn’t in the apartment. When we’d each moved to Portland, me from Wisconsin and he from France, everything was completely furnished at the house; our landlord insisted that we bring only the bare essentials with us so that we wouldn’t clutter her space. This was a wonderful perk when arriving in the

city but proved problematic when we moved to the new apartment without any domestic supplies to fill it. I slept on the floor in our living room and French Roommate took the bedroom. I was so grateful that he was willing to stay by me through the move that I was willing to give up my privacy for the duration of our new lease in the one bedroom apartment.

By the time I met Softball Girlfriend, I had quit my role with the national service organization, been convinced to stay with the organization, actually stayed with the organization, and normalized a routine of carefully planned food stamp meals and highly choreographed free parking maneuvers with the Subaru, it smoking under the hood whenever I slowed down. In my downtime, I alternated between watching Softball Girlfriend play games on a queer recreational team and begging my employers to pay for the bus fare or gas it took to commute from downtown Portland to the north side of Portland. When they decided that commute support was not in the budget, I often had to resort to working from home because my gas tank was empty, my debit card in the red. I’d just *hope* they wouldn’t fire me from the “volunteer” position that I relied on for its living stipend. I was working full time (I mean *servng my country* full time) as a sort of educational consultant, and I was actually able to prep for work tasks outside of the office on most days of the week. As much as that commitment burdened me, I learned a lot from and am really proud of the work that was accomplished by my team that year. I’ll never really know if I made the right decision to stay, but I’m grateful, despite the strain, for the good that came out of those efforts.

For a time, French Roommate and I didn’t have internet in the apartment—we obviously couldn’t afford it—and so I would set up my evening of studying and email catch-up in a local coffee shop. I would scrounge up enough change to pay for a 40 cent banana, and they, in return, would let me work there for hours. My favorite barista would give me plain hot water for as long as I asked for it and I would convince myself that I was drinking coffee or eating full meals; it’s funny what your brain can do when it has no other options. A few times, I had enough money to buy a sandwich or a coffee as a special treat. I was a little embarrassed by the extravagance of those days.

Softball Girlfriend, on the other hand, had no internet in her apartment and got by just fine without it because she had a *smartphone*. I loyally clung to my data-less slider phone, denouncing smartphones as a trick used to numb the general population, rooting us deeper into capitalism and stealing away our self sufficiency. Apparel shopping was her go-to meditation for mindless scrolling (nice to see you again, Capitalism), but she was generally disconnected from social media and other traps. Still, I would get annoyed when we watched a movie or cooked dinner together, the glow of the screen filling the room and me wondering what was so interesting in the little box that she couldn’t just be present for a few consecutive minutes. The relationship was queer but not necessarily radical. (Perhaps, then, it was not so queer after all?)

When I surrendered my flip phones and sliders and throw aways and got my smartphone just under a few years later, back in Wisconsin, I was pretty immediately addicted to it. Look at all this *information!* I'm so *informed!* Let's see what's *going on in the world!* And I was informed! And I did know what was going on in the world! But, during one of these brain nourishing scroll sessions, I also happened to be crossing a road in front of a car trying to take a right on red. And I didn't notice. But they noticed me. *Fuckin dyke! Get off your phone and pay attention!* And I was immediately thrown into the role of the hypocrite (and the dyke, as it seemed). I thought I was doing a fairly good job of watching my surroundings—and likely texted my now-partner to indignantly report as such—but was probably pretty plugged into my screen.

I felt this same hypocrisy, or maybe irony, or maybe responsibility, when I hauled a fresh-looking futon, rugs, books, lamps, and knick knacks into the Arts + Literature Laboratory for *Toast*. A note labeled *Documentation essay topics* written during the exhibition sketched the outline of my feelings: *Housing and guilt. What does it mean to have access to this furniture? What does it mean to have experienced housing insecurity and now receive compliments on my furniture?* I'd spent a noteworthy amount of time sleeping on a floor—or, let's be honest, in a car—in my life and it felt surreal to be told while gallery sitting that, "It's like you live in a magazine!"

how do we read furniture  
do they have codes?  
is furniture racial, gendered, or have a class?  
what ever happened to personal histories of ramen days  
and other-half-of-packet nights?  
did they disappear with ~~new~~ the rugs ~~on the ground?~~  
can a rocking chair  
trigger  
like  
do you have a mouth  
triggers  
like  
dude are you a guy or girl  
triggers  
like  
sleeping on the floor in the corner or  
finding a buck  
thirty five  
~~to sit in a coffee shop for the day~~  
might do

I found the word *furniture* scratched on the back of receipts and typed into the notes section of my fancy iPhone no less than a dozen times, and I probably didn't find every instance where I desperately tried to remind myself to write about the stools. See, I had carried another type of tension in my body during the exhibition, tightening in my chest whenever a gallery guest made a point of commenting on them. The stools' posts and feet were silver but for great patches of rust and their seats were wooden disks stamped

*Western Pine Mfg Co Ltd  
Spokane, WASH  
MONTH 8 YEAR 1945*

and

*AMMUNITON FOR SMALL ARMS*

I wondered: what are the implications of owning these stools?

Google search: *upcycling ammo crate ethics*

Fourth result: *Upcycling Junk: Home Furnishings You Can Feel Good About!*

EcoSalon.com

Ammunition crate furniture is a *Home Furnishing You Can Feel Good About!* That is to say, let's engage in warfare, use many crates-worth of ammunition (re-ally *use* them), and feed the imperialism back to our people in a nicely packaged commodity of patriotism and environmentalism that they *can feel good about!* And as such, we are exonerated! Needless to say, I felt frustrated at what the quick search stirred up. But we should use that lumber for something, right? The stools look so handsome, right? I suppose that I am most frustrated by the casualness of the market and the erasures of history.

*"Lumber is a critical material in our whole war program"....*

*Donald Nelson, Chairman WAR PRODUCTION BOARD  
give him a hand.....*

*BOOST PRODUCTION*

*Let's go Now!*

-WWII Poster

by Lumber and Timber Products War Committee (circa 1942)

As the U.S. military's demand for lumber increased in WWII, so did the propaganda encouraging workers to take fewer breaks, to work longer hours, and to display unwavering service to the country through industrial patriotism.

*More  
More  
More  
More  
More  
Production!*

-WWII Poster by War Production Board (circa 1942-1943)

But where there were violent labor disputes, this wartime forcibly cleared paths for cooperation and, eventually, the sort of industrial expansion that would get the United States out of the Great Depression. Alan Milward (*War, Economy, and Society, 1939-1941*) writes, "the United States emerged in 1945 in an incomparably stronger position economically than in 1941."

*We Need Lumber for Boxing!*

-WWII Poster

by Lumber and Timber Products War Committee (circa 1941-1945)

But at what cost? Many unions took a no-strike pledge during World War II. Despite this, the people rose against the propaganda which sought to perpetuate the wage-slavery feeding the engine of the state:

This week President Roosevelt ordered the Army to seize a small Minneapolis brassworks because the C.I.O. workers had called a "work stoppage," labor's wartime euphemism for a strike. . . . These flash strikes were almost never individually serious, but their cumulative total was. If walkouts continue at the present rate, labor will hang up a new record in 1944 of 5,200 strikes in one year. . . This means that work stoppages, despite labor's no-strike pledge for the duration, are occurring more frequently now than at any time during the past 25 years. . . The really serious strike period will probably come after the European war, when labor tries to get the same pay for a 40-hour week that it has been getting for the mandatory 48-hour wartime week.

-*The U.S. At War: The No-Strike Pledge*, Time Magazine, Mon. Sept. 18, 1944

While overreaching wartime asks speak not of the particularly poor conditions sustained for black laborers, women, and other marginalized populations within the working class, the sentiment was extended to all: consume less, produce more, and serve your country. Toby Clark (*Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century*) explains that, "Wartime propaganda attempts to make people adjust to abnormal conditions, and adapt their priorities and moral standards to accommodate the needs of war." Amid pleas to purchase war bonds and plant victory gardens and minimize careless talk ("*Mr. Hitler wants to know!*"), the propagandic posters served as a reminder that all laborers at home owed it to their troops to work steadily and without complaint.

*Don't be a job hopper! Our soldiers are sticking to their guns  
STICK TO YOUR JOB!*

-WWII Poster

created by Walt Disney for the War Manpower Commission (1944)

And why wouldn't laborers want to accommodate the needs of war? Wouldn't opposition to the Allies mean support for the Nazis and for genocide? But then, we know that war isn't sustainable and it isn't democratic. War is about control. Howard Zinn (*A People's History of the United States*) explains:

It was not Hitler's attacks on Jews that brought the United States into World War II, any more than the enslavement of 4 million blacks brought Civil War in 1861. . . . Surely it was not the humane concern for Japan's bombing of civilians [at Pearl Harbor] that led to Roosevelt's outraged call for war—Japan's attack on China in 1937, her bombing of civilians at Nanking, had not provoked the United States to war. It was the Japanese attack on a link in the American Pacific Empire that did it. . . . And then, on August 6, 1945, came the lone American plane in the sky over Hiroshima, dropping the first atomic bomb, leaving perhaps 100,000 Japanese dead, and tens of thousands more slowly dying from radiation poisoning. . . . Those 100,000 killed in Hiroshima were almost all civilians.

My great grandfather, Richard H. Green, served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. During that time, he wrote hundreds of letters to my great grandmother, Florence; Florence held on to these letters. Mum and Kenzie have since transferred the letters from a stack in a briefcase to a three-ring binder, protecting them in thick plastic, Mum reminding me gently to not eat or drink around the collection. Kenzie transcribed the letters to a digital document to further protect them from deterioration. Many of the letters contained the sweet routines of a

husband writing to his wife, a kid at home and another on the way. February 18, 1945:

*. . . I repeat that I shall leave the choice of name for our coming event entirely up to you. I am perfectly agreeable to any name you choose. When it takes place, imagine me down in the hospital waiting room, nervously pacing the floor, as I did last time. I shall be nervously pacing the deck wherever I am.*

He was writing about my grandpa's birth amid mentions of war. Some of my favorite moments of the letters are where they refer to their other child, my great aunt Gail Meredith, who, among other labor- and housing-related activist work, later went on to challenge the Supreme Court of Canada as a representative plaintiff in *Hislop et al. v. Attorney General of Canada* after her partner, "my Judy," died of a rare brain disease; Gail was prevented from accessing the pension they'd built together throughout 16 years of partnership because they were a same-sex couple. In the first Charter of Rights class action to go to trial in Canada, the Ontario Superior Court awarded Canada Pension Plan survivor's pensions to 1,500 Canadians involved in the suit. Gail smiled under cat-eye glasses in a photograph on the dresser I installed for *Toast*. My great grandfather wrote of childhood Gail:

*. . . I suppose she is still the terror, and the darling, of the house and probably the neighborhood.*

The reality of war had to creep into my great grandfather's letters. In these moments, I feel the whiteness trained into our family and the collusion, conscious or not, with the military industrial complex. June 14, 1944:

*Made an interesting tour of the yard today and it is really awe-inspiring. Trucks dashing all around, huge overhead cranes running up and down between the dry-docks, riveting machines stuttering loud enough to wake up the dead, and the acetylene torches throwing sparks all around. No matter where you look, there are ships—carriers, battle wagons, transports, destroyers, LST's and many others. We braved all this bustle to sneak aboard the latest carrier—"Shangri-La"—and to stand along side of it and look up makes me feel like a pigmy. There wasn't much to see aboard as there are workmen all over the place. Hope to go aboard a battle wagon one of these days and see it close up. If you ever saw these ships, you'd know why we can't and won't lose this war.*

Sometimes, to read the letters is to take a sharp cut out of flesh. April 29, 1945:

*I am enclosing a contribution for your scrapbook, namely, the occupation currency issued to our troops before they went ashore in Okinawa. When the island is*

*taken and martial law established, this money is to be the legal tender, invalidating the regular Jap currency.*

And sometimes, he gave clues that he might struggle, in his way, as he served in a war that kept him in the dark. April 2, 1944:

*I think it stinks but then I think this whole business stinks. Do I sound too morose? Oh well, I'll get over it. It's all so new to be treated like cattle—pushed into lines, being sworn at and waiting around for some punk to make up his mind. As I said before, don't worry too much about this amphibious business.*

April 10, 1944:

*I rather hate to admit it but I feel damned low.*

His words leave hot blood in my ears. In Port, August 8, 1945:

*The big news, of course, is the introduction by us of the new and deadly atomic bomb. From latest reports, I understand it destroyed 60% of the Japanese city of Hiroshima. I don't pretend to know what it is all about but its apparent possibilities are appalling and it should bring the war to an abrupt end. It is extremely fortunate that we were the ones who discovered it.*

I read through the letters, some typed and some handwritten, while sitting on my designer stools (AMMUNITION FOR SMALL ARMS) back at home. January 31, 1946:

*The ship is going to load ammunition and boats and will leave for Frisco early the morning of the 2nd. I don't know where they will go from Frisco but imagine it will be a cargo run to Honolulu or Guam.*

*Darling, I get a queer feeling, better described as a thrill, when I think that I shall see you and the children soon. It doesn't seem possible that at last I am on my way home. So in a few days, when I walk into the house again, I shall be realizing that wish I had so many times during the past two years. Then, you can call me "civilian". Give my best love to the children and all the folks. See you soon.*

*All my love,*

*As ever,*

*Dick*

I get up to drink my coffee at the other end of the kitchen. I let the sighs breathe out of me. After a few nervous sips, I return to the binder. I find a flyer tucked in the back of it that Florence or Richard had decided to keep from the war:

### ADVANTAGES OF JOINING THE NAVAL RESERVE

*-Your training cruise will provide an interesting change from your ordinary life, and whenever possible you will be given opportunities for leave in a foreign port.*

*-You will be associated with a splendid group of officers and men.*

*-You will have the prestige of being a member of the Armed Forces of the United States and the personal satisfaction of serving your country.*



### *hey faggot! shave your legs*

Aside from loose calls to theater in *Toast's* staging, I felt, at times, that the presentation of my furniture and personal detritus was deceitful—would it matter that I bought a new desk for the show or that my actual home is full of screenprint failures and loose tissue or that, at times, my private spaces have been entirely empty? Would it be important for me to remind guests that the objects in the gallery carried histories or if the audience thought these were random bits of furniture? Did I choose objects that would facilitate a cohesive narrative? What was that narrative?

I moved every piece of furniture that showed up in *Toast* from my house to the gallery space by myself. Along with the ammunition crate stools, I brought an entire U-Haul truck's-worth of belongings. (Let's set aside false notions of belongings and property for themes of future creative research.) This was actually a larger scale "move" than all but one of the "home moves" of my life. In order

to move the futon alone, which was the size and weight of an average couch, arm rests and all, I created a sort of sled that fit under its legs, using it to pull the futon out of the house I rent a room in, down a small hill, and awkwardly up into and out of the U-Haul. I moved serving dishes in metal crates, mirrors tucked between changes of clothes, an old Schwinn bicycle, a metal trash can, a set of lockers, books by Audre Lorde and just-recently-acquired area rugs. Rocking chair, knitting basket, standing lamp, table lamp, fern. Clay pot of needles. Handkerchief inherited from my grandmother, a camo knife that Dad gave me, a candle I'd actually bought for Chayse. A note from Billie, two pen cups, a chalkboard, the typewriter from Cinda. Upholstered foot rest, the Mario chairs, a heavy trunk, coffee beans. That picture with Kenzie and Parker by the tree.

GIRLS STATE WRESTLING CHAMPIONSHIPS, said my t-shirt, torn at the collar and sleeves. "You're a tough broad," said some passerby as I pulled down the U-Haul's back door, securing it with a combination lock. Obligatory smile to the passerby. I tapped my pocket to make sure I still had its code before taking a cork board inside the gallery. I wore a heat wrap under a back brace that I'd gotten sometime after my back pain first started in high school. I don't remember a lot about the wrestling match that sparked the end of my wrestling career, but I remember that the front of my hips were pinned down to the mat after I tried to twist out of a throw inflicted by my opponent. His arm swept across my chest, pulling my shoulders up to the sky and back towards my feet. My lower back folded like an accordion.

Not until the afternoon after the match did I realize that something was really wrong. Our coach had launched a push-up competition and, after getting myself to the floor, I couldn't get myself back up. I went to the hospital that night. Weeks later, I convinced my parents and coach that I could still wrestle. The order of events is a bit foggy, but I know that I wound up at regionals with an ambiguously fucked up back, a cracked rib, and a hyperextended hip flexor. A trainer-turned-physical-therapist had bound my entire torso with a thick bandage from above my chest to below my hips, and the bandaging was clearly visible in the silhouette of my singlet. Apparently the coach of an opposing team had asked the trainer what my story was, which best explains why my competitor later stuck his knee in my ribcage and elbow in my back. The match was not stopped for unsportsmanlike conduct, a point that my coach tried making loud and clear from the sidelines to no avail. I lost the match and, after shaking my opponent's hand and the hand of his coach, began to pass out while walking back to my team's corner of the mat. My coach caught me in his arms before I could hit the ground.

Taking responsibility for physically hauling as many of my personal belongings as I could served as the sacrificial sweat I offered to the art gods. In the days before the recording party or the opening for *Toast*, I knew that I would be highly dependent on Max and Simone for the technological labor involved in the

show (*dependency, panic* read a note written while gallery sitting) or on Chayse as I tried to remain emotionally hinged throughout the exhibition. I'd chosen to air some dirty laundry at the Arts + Literature Laboratory and was unsure of what that might do to my personal life. I was relying on peer artists and I was wondering what that would do to my career as an artist. "Uh, have you heard of Tracey Emin?" someone asked. My *Bed* was exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1999 and featured an unmade bed, underwear strewn about, empty alcohol bottles, the ends of used cigarettes. "I think she took it a bit farther than you, but I see where you're coming from."

Along with unraveling queer and feminist domesticity, I often leverage the body and physical labor as media in creative projects; the act of moving the furniture was as much a part of the art as the recording party or the videos or the conversations with gallery visitors. This act was a performance. In my mirror portrait series, for example, I would find and laboriously drag found mirrors back to my apartment before drawing self portraits all over them. I once took two hours to walk a thrifted 45 pound mirror 1.4 miles back to my apartment before defacing it because I wanted to feel my body that day. When I installed *Toast*, my back was feeling capable and my spirits high. And when I had successfully maneuvered the necessary props to their home on the gallery's stage, I felt accomplished. I had done something for this show without relying on anyone, and only a few people had seen me do it. I was thrilled to perform such duties. *What does accomplishment have to do with art?* said a note written after the installation. When it came time to take the show down a month later, I was lucky to have Jolynne's family pass through the gallery by chance. Jolynne's kids and partner and perhaps even family friends, if I recall correctly, helped me get a lot of the furniture back up into the U-Haul in far less time than it would have taken me alone. The breakdown of *Toast*, in contrast with the installation, was an improvised, collaborative performance. "Congratulations on your show! How do you feel?"

The back injury incurred at seventeen years old has lived on as ten years of chronic pain. Symptoms tend to alternate between nervous strikes of lightning down the legs and muscle spasms blanketing the spine, threats of slipped discs, depression kicking in to punctuate the years; I've thrown my back into multiple spirals of short term paralysis. But as suddenly as the pain can overtake me, it can dissipate and give way to weeks or months of relative able-bodiedness. (*What is crip performance?* said a marker board note.) While I've come to understand the ways my sexual, gendered, and political queerness have become wrapped up in each other—all disobeying what Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider*) refers to as the "mythical norm"—it's taken me much longer to realize the ways that my embodied experiences have informed and made up my queerness. In this regard, I'm still learning.

In fact, forgetting the body and its treatment as queer may have been one of my greatest oversights of *Toast*. For all of the spontaneously collective authorship

that strung together the various aspects of *Toast* as a process, despite insistence from Molly or Rhea or RC to help, I still seemed to demand a solitary performance during the installation. Embracing the cooperative, dependent efforts of *Toast* might have made for a queerer exhibition.

My hesitation to draw a clear distinction between able bodies/minds and disabled bodies/minds is linked to my hesitation to reinforce other binaries or dualisms, but it is often able-bodied people who seem most fascinated in the medical details of my back pain and, I suppose, in pathologizing my gendered transitions. My experiences as hard-of-hearing (not a part of my cultural identity) or with asthmatic bronchitis (fairly easy to explain) or with anxiety and depression (no one wants to know) don't draw nearly as many mistrustful glances or detailed questions as my experiences with this pain. Folks want to *know* about the extra vertebra and *know* that it was fractured and *know exactly* how it influences the daily routines of my body. *Have you tried yoga?*

I believe that my age at the pain's onset critically influenced my political development and my development as queer. I lost certain bodily capabilities that I'd become accustomed to around the same time that I began to mentally rebel from the heteronormative hegemony of my hometown. Speaking of bodily losses is a tricky game for me; Alison Kafer (*Feminist Queer Crip*) writes of this game that

loss is a topic disabled people are typically reluctant to discuss, and for good reason. Disability is all too often read exclusively in such terms, with bitterness, pity, and tragedy being the dominant registers through which contemporary US culture understands the experiences of disabled people.

It's true: a close collaborator used the word *pity* to describe his feelings about the queer experiences I shared through *Toast*. Despite these nervous receptions, loss *has* politicized me and it has uniquely queered me. Robert McRuer (*Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*) describes the invisible cultural machines that chronic pain helped me begin to question as a teenager:

Just as the origins of heterosexual/homosexual identity are now obscured for most people so that compulsory heterosexuality functions as a disciplinary formation seemingly emanating from everywhere and nowhere, so, too, are the origins of able-bodied/disabled identity obscured . . . to cohere in a system of compulsory able-bodiedness that similarly emanates from everywhere and nowhere. . . . It is with this repetition that we can begin to locate both the ways in which compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality are interwoven and the ways in which they might be contested.

Coupled with the gendered aspects of *Toast* that were most obvious to gallery goers, my engagement with the aching body as media during the installation performance was also characteristically queer. Pairing stories of my life (emotional) with academic texts (scholarly) in this documentation book reflects, too, *Toast's* bodily display of experience (pain) in highly visible and accessible places (gallery) alongside the details of my domestic life (worn blankets) and processes of my career (calendar resting open on a desk). I was curious, in many ways, about what is considered private and what is considered public. Can a queer narrative be a public narrative? Or a universal one? Can something be both private and collective? How much is too much to tell and how do those regulations of decorum pertain to queer or trans folks? *That's not something they need to know.*

LGBTQIA+ people, disabled folks, people of color, immigrants, and women often have to balance erasure with overexposure in our society. In response to this, I suppose that I was interested in subverting the public gaze by enrolling it, resistant or not, in one-to-one performances (*You're a tough broad!*), collectively empowering encounters (*This is my show, too*), and antagonistic confrontations (*Are you going to make this a gender thing?*), all within the fibrous tension of sites ready to snap.

Eli Clare (*Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*), through prose rooted in wildness, through experiences I can relate to and those that I can't, has helped me begin to feel the queerness of my body and my politics, rather than just understand it:

The mountain as metaphor looms large in the lives of marginalized people, people whose bones get crushed in the grind of capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy. How many of us have struggled up the mountain, measured ourselves against it, failed up there, lived in its shadow? . . . Up there on the mountain, we confront the external forces, the power brokers who benefit so much from the status quo and the privileged position at the very summit. But just as vividly, we come face-to-face with our own bodies, all that we cherish and despise, all that lies embedded there.

Clare has also aided my understanding of *Toast's* collision of sites—that of the private domestic space and the public gallery-stage—by complicating it. Clare writes of the “body as home,” as if to remind me of the ways that these divisions of the personal and the political, or the private and the public, are both fabricated and insufficient. By declaring the “body as home,” Eli Clare pulls the embodied life into this collision as a physical space literally holding that which is invisible or that seems impossible to contain. That which holds memory and experience and identity. Clare writes:

The body as home, but only if it is understood that bodies are never singular, but rather haunted, strengthened, underscored by countless other bodies. . . .

The body as home, but only if it is understood that place and community and culture burrow deep into our bones. . . .

The body as home, but only if it is understood that language too lives under the skin.

The body as home, but only if it is understood that bodies can be stolen, fed lies and poison, torn away from us.

The body as home, but only if it is understood that the stolen body can be reclaimed. . . .

The body as home.



*that's nasty, you better shave that shit*





***you're not the first of your kind  
to come through here—you know,  
a transvestite, with your gonads***

Alaura: I'm trying to remember the sequence of events at Standing Bear Hostel.

Chayse: From the very beginning?

A: Pretty much.

C: From what I recall, we were inside the house to pay for our food that we resupplied with—

A: Oh yeah!

C: —and you made a joke with us within earshot of the owner who was watching TV in there that we had to “pick ourselves up by the gonads to bust a move”—

A: Right, to get to Hot Springs, because Rocket said it would only take 12 hours.

C: Mmhmm. So later, out by the firepit, people were washing their clothes next to the bunkhouse and—

A: We were organizing our packs and I dropped my ear plugs next to the owner's feet. Or maybe manager's?

C: Yeah, and I don't know if I caught it right from the beginning, but what I remember is—uhh—

A: I needed my journal entry to help me remember. Do you want me to read it to you?

C: No, let me think. I think he opened the conversation with, “You're not the first of your kind to come through here,” and you were sort of puzzled by that. I don't remember what you said to that but—

A: I don't think I said anything. I think I just looked.

C: Yeah. He went on to explain that, “You're not the first transvestite to come through here,” and he said, “I heard what you talked about in my house about gonads.” I believe you retorted that you used the word “gonads” as a gender neutral version of another common phrase. Being that the conversation wasn't going anywhere fast, he kind of just exclaimed, “Don't be a jellyfish, grow a backbone!”

A: Yeah, I had no idea what that was about.

C: It just sort of came out of nowhere. He repeated it several times, as if he was disgusted by it.

A: By what?

C: By the idea of you being a “transvestite”—or at least his assumption of that.

A: Uh-huh. I really had to rely on my journal entry to get the flow of this right. I remember when I wrote the entry originally that I was kind of frantically writing as fast as I could and I think that I had to check in with you after getting it down to make sure I got it right. It just seemed so ridiculous. But I was reading back through that entry recently and I realized that I put the line in the show a bit differently than I had written it in my trail journal.

C: Yeah?

A: Yeah. So here's what it says in my journal: He said, “Oh, I listen alright.” “Listen to what?” I asked. He said, “You'd be the third of your kind to come through here. You know, a transvestite, with your gonads.” But I'm pretty sure I wrote, “You wouldn't be the first of your kind to come through here,” for the show's script.

C: Oh, okay.

A: So, I guess when I was trying to write the script for the show, I didn't actually double check with my journal entry to get the words exactly right. I'm kind of surprised that I didn't check it because I think “you'd be the third to come through here” is so much more specific. It's like the owner was keeping tabs on the people who came through, like, “You are number three.”

C: Yeah.

A: But then I have here that what I actually said back to them was, “Almost all people have gonads. Some turn into ovaries in the womb and some descend as testicles and some are somewhere in between.” I don't know if that's actually what I said but that's what's in the journal.

C: That's at least what you were trying to say.

A: Yeah. And I remember thinking, “I don't even know if that's scientifically accurate.” You know? I was all kinds of frazzled. I guess that's what I get for making bad jokes in the woods. But I remember being glad that you were there to witness part of it because I couldn't believe what was happening.

C: Yeah, it seemed pretty out of place.

A: I think this memory is special because it reflects some of the social dynamics I was interested in for *Toast*. Feeling comfortable and then suddenly not.

C: Well, yeah, we were having a good time. It seemed like a cool place, we were around great new friends, we ate a bigass pizza. Actually, I think we each ate a

pizza ourselves. We didn't plan on staying there for the night but it definitely set the mood for why we wouldn't want to.

A: I'm grateful that you can confirm all this because it really didn't make sense to me.

C: You mean about the backbone?

A: Well, I guess I know what they were saying but I don't understand what part about being a transvestite means you don't have a backbone.

C: Mmhmm.

A: Was anything else memorable from that day?

C: Well, they're not even jellyfish. They're sea jellies.

### *honey, you're in the wrong bathroom*



### *i can't have you here, flaunting your sexuality*

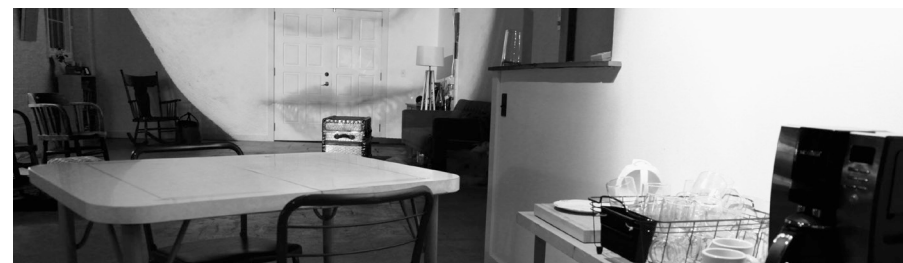


### *i mean, i have children, it's a safety thing*

### *i'll just assume you're a lesbian because you say you are*

*Guest, performer, guest-performer, participant, subject, collaborator, co-author, audience-member-turned-co-conspirator, artist.* I've heaved these terms and more to describe the various roles of the people of *Toast*, shifting these words periodically to qualify *my* uncertain understanding of their relationship to the work; I haven't tried to be consistent with this. So, too, I'll continue to use words like *community-based, public, participatory, discursive, dialogic, social, socially engaged, transdisciplinary, relational, new genre, conversational, collaborative* to describe my practice on paper and off. I prefer to trade in any single frame for a process of continual reframing. Rather than naming the work with one of these labels exclusively and perhaps, by extension, naming my work as a *whole* within the narrow confines or lofty expectations of such proclamations, I'll pull bits and pieces of theory or critique to inform the practice, even at the risk of botching it all, respectfully. As my body repels gendered labels, shuffling through them at will in order to make sense of my experience, so, too, does this body shed titles like *scholar* (what could a queer first generation college graduate *without* an MFA really tell *you?*), or *writer*, or *performer*, or *teacher*, or *socially engaged artist* as sole labels for my practice. Can you believe I'm a writer if I say I am? Or an artist while I teach, a performer in an empty room? Shannon Jackson writes for *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* that, "Once we develop a tolerance for different ways of mixing artistic Forms, however, we can get to the inspiring work of seeing how they each address the problems and possibilities of Living"—an idea I'm only just beginning to internalize.

Nato Thompson (*Living as Form*), too, frames the "living form" as structural and productive, "For, as art enters life, the question that will motivate people far more than What is art? Is the much more metaphysically relevant and pressing What is life?"



### *oh, i'm fine with it, one of my bosses is a lesbian*

***you should take off that hat  
and let your hair down***

Alaura: Could you help me walk through the incident with that innkeeper?

Chayse: We were talking with him about trying to get a hitch or something. We were making signs and—

A: We were making signs?

C: Mmhmm. We were writing *To Marion* or *To Atkins* or something like that.

A: Oh yeah, that's right.

C: Yeah. And you had your beanie on, that yellow wool beanie. Wait, did you have that on trail?

A: Yeah, I did.

C: Okay. Well, I don't know his exact words, but he essentially said, "Take that beanie off for a better chance of getting picked up." I don't remember exactly what he said.

A: I remember what he said.

C: What'd he say?

A: "Take off that hat and let your hair down." Do you remember anything after he said that? Like what I did or what he did?

C: You were like, "Why's that? You want me to take my hat off why?" And then he tried to backpedal. He started to give us something like, "Statistically, it's easier for women to hitchhike than men," or something like that. Then you took off your beanie and didn't have any hair. That's about all I remember.

***i knew you wouldn't mind, i mean, it's the workplace  
and everything***



***did you change your pronouns?***



***that's not something they need to know***



## *don't expect me to change basic rules of grammar for you*

Since coming out as nonbinary, I've told some of the people who interact with me on a daily basis to please refer to me with no pronouns or to use gender open pronouns like they, them, or their. Coming out as the antithesis of something, like a binary, can often feel like being a living, breathing empty space. What does it mean to assert what you're not? What I know is that I'm comfortable when someone uses only my name or these new pronouns when they refer to me; I'm not reminded of the restrictive gender constructs of our society at large, but of the spiritual productivity of honoring a transition. Don't get me wrong, gender is *serious fun*—whether you float through the world as a man (probably especially if you move around the world as man) or a woman or a transmasculine person or even bigender—but gendered labels are also *seriously functional*. For me, labels have provided makeshift markers describing transitions from gendered expectations as a child—not necessarily from my family but from Lorde's "mythical norm" reified through popular culture—to multiple chapters of sexual identity development, to gendered expressions as an adult. However imperfect, collective shifts in language itself tell us about what we value, who is extended dignity, and what we understand about the world. *What weight do words carry?*

When trying to entice audiences to attend the opening for *Toast*, we posted a few teaser videos to social media to give folks a taste of what the show might be about. I was extremely anxious about sharing them (*here we go!*) and knew that it would also give me a preview of the rest of the *Toast* experience to come. *Don't expect me to change basic rules of grammar for you* was one of the lines posted. Almost immediately, a dear friend sent me a panicked message from across the country: *So, I saw the 5 second video for your event and I was kind of...worried. BC when I had noticed that you had changed your pronouns in your email I asked to be sure and now I'm worried that was an obnoxious thing.* And at the opening, one of my housemates pulled me in for a quick check-in after I finally took a break from the drinks station. I leaned in close so I could hear him over the other conversations and the audio of the show. He asked if one of our other housemates had provided a line for the show. "You know, the grammar one? I don't think she said it like that."

Weeks prior, or maybe it was months, we'd had a conversation as a house about they, historically used as a third person plural pronoun, being used as a gender neutral pronoun for a single person. (I prefer to think of they/them/their as a gender *open* pronoun, as in *open to possibility or interpretation*, because matters of gender are rarely, but for the genderless, neutral.) A common thesis that the group circled back around to was that using *they* in its singular capacity was simply grammatically incorrect and wouldn't fly in academic circles or scholarly papers. I recall asking the less composed version of *why do we need to establish*

*what we deem acceptable based on such antiquated institutions?* I'd confided in my housemates that *I use they and it really makes me feel at ease when people refer to me that way.* The conversation was long and winding and, quite frankly, painful.

I take the time to clumsily relay all of these interactions because something truly remarkable came from *Don't expect me to change basic rules of grammar for you* showing up in *Toast*. After our other housemate informed me at the opening that my friend hadn't said the line *quite like that*, I knew that at least one person was made uncomfortable about the words in the show or was reflecting on their relationship with me as the artist opening the conversation. Before that opening, I had rarely heard anyone, in the house or not, be brave enough to break basic rules of grammar for me. After the show, I heard my housemates use *they* for me in sentences all the time. I mean that practically every day, I got to hear affirmations from people who didn't seem sure they could provide them.



One evening, I was facilitating a workshop for queer and trans teens. We were hanging out, working on art projects, when one teen shared with the group that, "When I misgender myself, I feel like I give other people permission to misgender me." I knew exactly what they meant. I've misgendered myself twice after making this quote public through *Toast*. *How does one misgender oneself and how does one know it has happened?* you may be wondering. First, it helps if you're incredibly socially awkward. That's a good start. Frequently referring to yourself in the third person is pretty helpful, too, but it's best if you use a singsong voice to narrate your life in front of others. In one or two of these singsong third-person narrations of my life, I'd used *she*, and I'd done so in front of my housemate. And she said absolutely nothing. I don't mean that she looked at me like she'd told me so. I mean that she was gracious and generous in not calling me out. I thought about those moments for days after and leaned on Chayse to tell me *it's okay, we're all learning.*

I couldn't bring myself to talk to her about these moments for a long time. I was really embarrassed. *If I misgender myself, I'm giving other people permission to do the same, right?* Well, decolonizing the brain doesn't tend to happen over

night. When I finally mustered up the courage to bring it up to her, after having written most of this book already, she asked, “Really? I don’t even remember you doing it.” She went on, “You know, I was really worried after seeing the show. I was thinking about all the times I used *she* for you and was trying to remember all the horrible things I must have said about using the *they/them* pronoun. I still think that, yeah, if I ran the world, there would be a much better option than *they* for the gender neutral singular, but I don’t run the world, so there’s that. But anyway, I don’t even remember you using *she*.” And like that, I could freefall in gratitude, each of us with wind in our eyes, prying loose the grip of shame. I believe that *Toast* was a major clue to her that these details are important to me, and it gave us the courage to talk about them, eventually, in the open. I’m hoping these conversations or revelations were possible among people I didn’t get to connect with one-to-one through *Toast*.

The truth, if it matters anymore, is that some of these quotes have been said to me multiple times with only slight variations between the instances. Our other housemate was right and I’ll clarify the archive now: *Don’t expect me to change basic rules of grammar for you* wasn’t actually said by my housemate or by the cross-country friend. I pulled from a different, clearer memory of it being wheezed to me. But is that a relief? Some participants of *Toast* attested to similar lines being told to them throughout their lives. See, these experiences aren’t necessarily unique to me or even to the people who say them to me. They’re indicators of a larger social order that we’re only just beginning to break open together.

While not as immediate as direct action activism, I’m growing more faithful in the power of stories to incite measurable change. Even small change. Even change I can feel in me first. Suzanne Lacy (*Mapping the Terrain*) helps me reflect on the consequences of *Toast*:

Whether it operates as a symbolic gesture or concrete action, new genre public art must be evaluated in a multifaceted way to account for its impact not only on action but on consciousness, not only on others but on the artists themselves, and not only on other artists’ practices but on the definition of art. Central to this redefinition that may well challenge the nature of art as we know it, art not primarily a product but as a process of value finding, a set of philosophies, an ethical action, and an aspect of a larger sociocultural agenda.

*they is... they is... they is... they is... trans*

## *you are important*

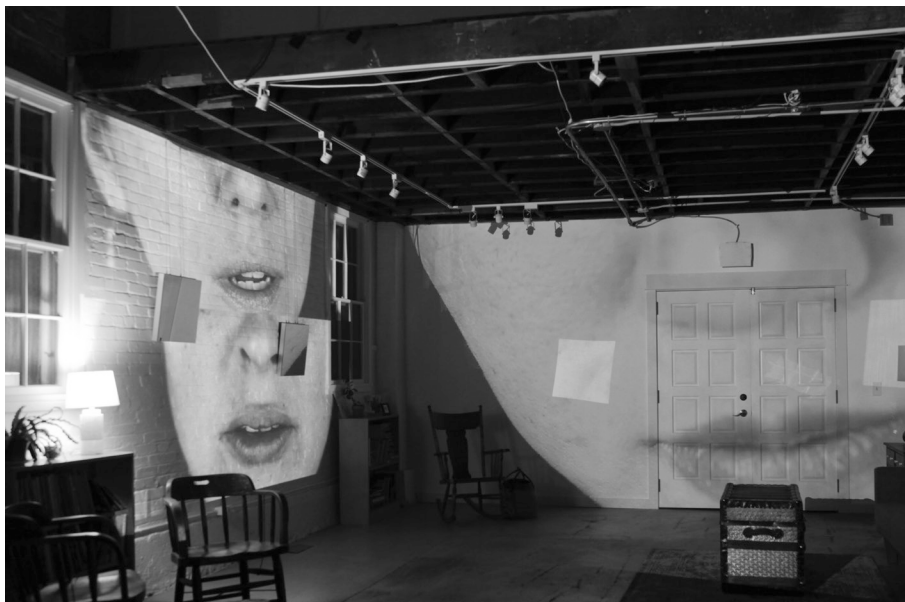
Perhaps I was calling on a real memory when I wrote this line into the script. I’m not sure, because I’ve since forgotten it. Much of this book as well as *Toast*’s script rely heavily on the assumption that my memory is fickle and easily faded; and so, I’ve worked quickly to chase images I’m not sure I trust, capturing them before they’re gone altogether. In the face of that risk, it’s curious that this is the only line whose precise origin I can’t recall anymore. I know for sure that while writing the script, I wanted my queer friends to have a moment of rest amidst the slurs, and so I included it.



memories are the stories we tell ourselves about  
 what we used to whisper to ourselves while  
 we couldn’t sleep  
 about the things that  
 have happened  
 to us about  
 those things that make up our blood(y) parts

The performers of the pre-exhibition party took memories so far out of context for me that even I have begun to forget their first locations. Was it an act of reclaiming, having these words spoken again? Was it just me reclaiming something? *Toast* has entirely disarmed some memories for me. I’ve now centered two separate creative projects (the other sprang up about five years ago) around

the phrase *Do you have a mouth?* and its knot has finally loosened from me; guest performers and spectators are owed a lot for working at the strings.



I imagine that by placing some of these memories back into context in this text—for instance, in the case of *Fuckin dyke! Get off your phone and pay attention!*—they’ve entirely lost their power. Was there a clear good guy or bad guy in that moment? Do we care? But placed within the narrative of *Toast* as a larger conversation, the words may still hold some earnestness in their appeal for accountability or for safety. It’s hard to be sure where these words may have taken participants’ minds as they first encountered them, or where they go now as I’ve explained a few of the memories explicitly. Gaston Bachelard (*The Poetics of Space*) creates a useful image of a house as a map for memories that slip, quickly locking into place at the site of the smallest detail: a doorknob, a cabinet door smelling of raisins:

The odor of raisins! It is an odor that is beyond description, one that it takes a lot of imagination to smell. But I’ve already said too much. If I said more, the reader, back in his own room, would not open that unique wardrobe. . . . Thus, very quickly, at the very first word, at the first poetic overture, the reader who is “reading a room” leaves off reading and starts to think of some place in his own past. You would like to tell everything about your room. You would like to interest the reader in yourself, whereas you have unlocked a door to daydreaming. The values of intimacy are so absorbing that the reader has ceased to read your room; he sees his own again.

Perhaps it’s in this stream-of-conscious game, where one prompt stacks onto another, that dialogue begins. For in telling of those rooms, that stage, of those actors looming in the corners, we begin to give shape to the things we’ve been asked to suppress. *Toast* seemed to exist in a mutual headspace, both deeply personal and entirely shared, at once starting from one edge of a mattress and then again exploding beyond our management.

These bursts of growth in meaning showed up during a poetry reading held at the Arts + Literature Laboratory on April 15 where poets Marcelle, Joey, M, and Araceli shared creative work that either responded to or held blood with *Toast*’s themes. I believe these themes still hold true: *Toast is an installation and video-based work reconciling the tension between private confrontations and public spectacles, contemplating both what people do spontaneously and what people perform consciously. The exhibition, screened in its final form, is born of a lifetime of intimate encounters and one night of filming with community members. Alaura is negotiating with memories while investigating accountability for social dilemmas, celebrating queer identity and cleansing the palate.*

The show started off with a bang: I was misgendered by the host within a few moments of the event beginning. Unfortunately for the speaker, they got to perform the mistake in front of a completely packed house. And, fortunately, for every flaming homo lesbian goddess in that crowd, the speaker immediately corrected my pronoun. Fixing a slip is as simple as that: acknowledging it, perhaps quickly, perhaps coupled with eye contact, and moving on (although an earlier confession of my own experience misgendering *myself* might shed light on how difficult that can be). I shared a sloppy poem at the start of the event, although I would have much rather read the entirety of this book and more than try to simplify my relationship to *Toast* in a few short breaths. Some of that work read:

*being a shadow but something fleshy  
is tough labor on aching spines*

. . .

*This is a love story for nonbinaries who bleed.*

This was the truest and the wholest of the collaboratively authored nights of the show. Joey, M, Araceli, and Marcelle blew us out of the water with experiences so unlike mine and so identical to all those in the room. These are award-winning poets. These are absolute badasses. I learned from these teachers. Marcelle brought a huge bouquet of flowers—perhaps they were irises?—and did a group tarot reading and a fire reading as queer spins on the poetic *reading*. I was crying. For a show that was *beginning to feel like one long apology* (one note from the exhibition), this night and these people revived me. On that night, with strangers curled up on my carpet, snuggled into my chairs, resting arms on each other, I was invited to crack open old doors in this house of my mind to peek at what awaits outside.

*i sometimes have a hard time not calling you “it”*

*i hope you don't give my grandbaby AIDS*



SILENCE = DEATH. Artists are natural activists for movements of social justice, for matters of survival, in ways that are not purely symbolic but that truly resist. While some activists may not see themselves as artists, to imagine realities beyond those that have been allotted is to create possibilities out of the seemingly impossible. Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown (*Octavia's Brood*) cultivated an anthology modeling what it might mean for artists and activists to imagine new worlds together, suggesting the responsibility of creatives to leverage the *power* of individuals' social locations as well as collective experiences to imagine new worlds. Imarisha asks, "Are we brave enough to imagine beyond the boundaries of "the real" and then do the hard work of sculpting reality from our dreams?"

And in the way that silence holds up structural racism, for instance, or xenophobia, or reproductive injustice, and has dire consequences for our humanity (see: BLACK LIVES MATTER) and the health, the existence, the people (BLACK LIVES MATTER), the AIDS crises in the US held the same impossible truths: that somehow, people could die, and people could be silent, and that would mean murder.

*KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO.  
CORPORATE GREED, GOVERNMENT INACTION, AND  
PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE MAKE AIDS A POLITICAL CRISIS.*

-Bus Ad by Gran Fury (1989)

Much of this fatal inaction, it seems, stemmed from fear—the *I hope she doesn't give my grandbaby AIDS* kinda fear. The *I hope you don't give my grandbaby AIDS* kinda question without asking so. Thousands upon thousands of people were dying and when, in the 80s, those people appeared to be gay (and often poor and not always white), there seemed to spring a growing chasm between the nightmare and the public will to stall those hells. In another context, Ann Cvetkovich (*Art, Activism, & Oppositionality*) writes of resistance to empathy in the essay *Video, AIDS, and Activism*:

The films were inaccessible . . . because they were too narrowly directed at a gay and lesbian audience. . . . these criticisms are based on the assumption that a video that works only for a specific audience, whether defined in terms of cultural literacy or in terms of sexual identity, is limited or flawed. . . . By conflating accessibility and truth and assigning a positive value to them, viewers could resist the work.

Those rejections mirror the silencing that forced the queer community to face the AIDS epidemic alone, that forces survivors of state violence to find catchy phrases in order to spark empathy. What appeals are required to be protected as human? To be listened to as honest in a plea? To be worthy? *Are you going to make this a gender thing?* BLACK LIVES MATTER: Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors (*blacklivesmatter.com*) "created the infrastructure for this movement project" today. Black Lives Matter is the imagining of black queer women coupled with the devoted response from collectives and chapters all across the country. And so, too, activist-artist groups like ACT UP and Gran Fury had sprung from the frustration of the people, demanding both for political powers to regard the deaths as a crisis and for people to stand up and demand this regard. SILENCE = DEATH.



WITH 42,000 DEAD  
ART  
IS NOT ENOUGH  
TAKE  
COLLECTIVE  
DIRECT  
ACTION  
TO END  
THE AIDS  
CRISIS

-Art poster by Gran Fury (1988)

Like the propaganda of World War II, gay and lesbian activists-artists-designers-teachers-lawyers-brothers used posters to incite action in the face of public denigration and governmental inaction. But much different than the top-down sloganeering of WWII, this movement rose from the people along with their demonstrations, marches, and co-education. Nicolas Lampert (*A People's Art History of the United States*) writes that, "What mattered to Gran Fury was that their images communicated to a mass audience. Whether or not their work was labeled "art" became inconsequential." For this reason, these creatives utilized a sort of "activist branding" for their calls to action. BLACK LIVES MATTER.

And while the AIDS epidemic bore on, flares from every direction, artists continued to consider their roles in the work or how those roles might evolve; Helguera (*Education for Socially Engaged Art*) reflects that, "Some artists are adamant that their work blurs the boundaries between social work and art work, and others are not concerned whether their work is defined as art or non-art." What do you call activist-artists who seem to bounce between disciplines in order to get their "work" done? Lampert summarizes the ways that social art began to blur with social work as a matter of survival:

As the AIDS epidemic continued into the 1990s, ACT UP began to move away from single-focus issues and began addressing health care, housing, poverty, and prisoners with AIDS. This broader focus addressed systemic patterns of inequality in American life, issues of class, race, and gender.

Today, the people continue to fight against the *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* (thank you for the language, bell hooks). See, people

are talking: LGBTQIA+ youth are reminding us that they're disproportionately represented among homeless and housing insecure populations, and that those risks are even greater for queer youth of color. Undocumented LGBTQIA+ folks speak out about being separated from their families through deportations or detention, where those detention facilities have misgendered and abused them. Trans women of color call out for safe publics. Indigenous communities show up despite attempts at erasure. Black men and boys at all intersections of class and sexuality fight against the criminalization of their personhood. Women cross state lines for a right to choose. George Takei is making movies. Although a few policy changes to rights in "marriage equality" have provided the economic and legal protections that some couples need to survive, they ignore the myriad ways that queer families come together, the food insecurity that burdens those queer youth who bring power to our movements, the systemic racism and the sexism and the Islamophobia and the classism and the silent histories that have tried to bar liberation for all people. Will we be quiet about it?

. . . *THIS IS TO ENRAGE YOU.*

-excerpt from a full page graphic  
wrapped over *New York Times* newspapers by Gran Fury (1989)



*(i think it's time you gave this whole thing up)*

*i thought  
you were going  
to tell me  
something else*

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**behind  
the  
scenes**

rhea  
marcelle  
lauren b  
danielle  
m  
kari  
molly  
rc  
liz  
lauren r  
kate  
jenie  
sarah  
joey  
araceli  
max  
simone  
rita mae  
jolyne

**. . . thank you**

