

Season of Shadows

by Borealis and collaborating artists



photo by Duke Virginia

Season of Shadows

“. . . Marriage equality is hardly the point, to be honest. We aren't going to know what queer liberation looks like until we know that everyone has access to healthcare and housing that keeps them not only alive but thriving. The shape of queer liberation is a world without prisons. A world where children are safe in schools to learn and grow. Some kind of world where I'm a human whether or not you can discern my gender. Like it or not, my transness is political and its spiritual and its necessary and it's about gender but it's also about the kind of world I want to live in—a little more free.”

Season of Shadows Public Happenings

Oct 13, 14, and 26, 2017: Community costume-making sessions hosted at Monroe Street Arts Center, Arts + Literature Laboratory, and Everyday Gay Holiday respectively. Participants were invited to make statement pieces for themselves or to share. “Queer costuming is the best thing to happen to 2017,” said one guest.

Oct 20, 2017: UNPREDICTABLE FORMS occurred at a contemporary art pop-up exhibition, The Basement Show, curated by Kelsey Wenberg of ArtFly Gallery in Eau Claire, WI. Borealis invited guests to sew onto their growing garment over the four hour performance while hairy projections were cast on the scene. Some guests explored gender alongside Bo while others stitched their ideas onto them in more uncomfortable ways. Performance photography by Cinda Lillibridge.

Oct 27, 2017: Queer Shadows at Queer Pressure’s Halloween Party at North Street Cabaret in Madison, WI, with coordination and graphics by Sarah Akawa, photography by Duke Virginia and Aida Ebrahimi, and performance by numerous guests. We set up a small “dressing area” with costumes available for guests to get ready for the party. We invited guests to have their portraits taken in front of spooky projections. We were interested in the ways that queers take care of each other and leverage adornment as a means of limitless expression.

Nov 9 and 10, 2017: Season of Shadows (In Real Life) at Chocolaterian Cafe’s window displays in Madison’s east side, presented by the Madison Arts Commission BLINK program for temporary art. Performances by Borealis, Misa Rodriguez, Owen, Sawyer Johnson, Oliver Gruebel, Ande Johnson, and Sylvia Johnson. We sat in the window display and replicated the process of interviewing that has otherwise happened in private for the Shadows project. While we talked, a computer sloppily mistranslated our speech to text, sometimes missing whole segments. This text was projected onto us and could be read, in part, from the street. Some guests huddled behind the back of the screen in an attempt to listen in to our conversations. Photography by Jennifer Bastian and Duke Virginia. Installation support from Katie Huber.

Nov 27 – Dec 2, 2017 / closing reception Dec 2: FORESHADOW installation at Everyday Gay Holiday in the front window display, where soil seeped through a table, fern decaying atop, light cast by backlit medical scans and a mirror-faced clock. We’ve wondered what we can divine and what we can do about it, what grows under pressure and how a body copes with waiting. Readings by TK Morton, coordination support from Kim Charles Kay, installation by Borealis.

*Dec 2017 – Jan 2018 / opening reception Dec 7: **Embodying the Shadow*** exhibition at Black Locust Cafe. Mixed media drawings (primarily oil pastel and ink) by Borealis explored their individual experience throughout the Shadows project. Collection concerned embodiment, queerness, chronic pain, and mental health. How do gender and disability talk to each other? Curatorial efforts by Sarah Akawa, Queer Pressure, and BG Creative.

*March 13 – June 3, 2018 // reception May 4, 2018 6-8pm: **Season of Shadows at Overture Center for the Arts.*** Excerpts from interview transcripts, photography from project installations and performances, and other artifacts from the social project are on display.

Happenings to come...

Join us! *May 12, 2018 12-4pm: **Season of Shadows Open Studio*** at Overture Center's Wisconsin Room: Join Borealis and friends to materialize metaphors in this interactive open studio session. Drop-in art making and family friendly!

Stay tuned! Coming out in 2019: *Season of Shadows*, the book. This text will include research on the aesthetic language of shadows, project reflections, extended interview excerpts, and other essays on gender.

een hired like your recently which of these are my pronouns and I was able to use the framing of here's how you would
ay a sentence for hydrocyanic explain to a kid right like one of the students ass so I got to use that angle of line to ask
out it which was like oh yeah shirt and I only had one co-worker response to the e-mail really positively right and
and obody else has a lot of people using a long time I have a really hard time with this and you know changing the way that I
alk about you and I don't understand and actually I like not wanting to say that I was right because it was too hard so I get
n interesting fact and effect where it took awhile for someone to actually call up and say something and then just the
ther day someone had sent an email to me has been seeing me from the beginning of time and it was amazing the
hange is not happening at the paste that I needed I really have to be uncomfortable for 2 months because of the work
rat I was doing my co-workers how for you because you don't And I usually want to go to the restroom with them and I
as with him there's sort of the I feel the safety and going into the men's room with my son and I'm not even look at me
fferent with my kid and it's okay Maybe like trying to figure something out about me by observing word choice I make
aybe it's also a person who like you know we have some kind of relationship but you know like they don't fully get
ender stuff or whatever like I always feel like I need a choice I'm looking in front of someone if somehow reviewing some
nd of information like you know like we need to figure out right I have an agreement with some of my
ousins friends like please just don't look at me which I know because I will be assessed if you're not watching the
nake that choice I'm making that choice I mean don't know where am I where am I least likely to
ave to interact with someone as much either just like not leave me alone every single time and I feel like I've
nade choices for them Yeah that was a remember we have had our first couple was just so I was just so excited to
nally be having these conversations with someone like son in Madison not just back in North Carolina or as the
ole how is it going for you physically one of the things that I like that's what I do that's that's out of like we've got to be for
ny comfort like I actually when my back is really bad even if it's like medium I can't wear pants that have like like a
vaistband or like that button or something I have to wear stretchy pants like I have to wear like maternity pants basically
he end which is also an interesting thing about because my back is really bad and forgive me if you talk to her all this
tuff already but like it's true for me right now when my back is really bad and I have to wear things like leggings or like
hese connections between like one of my body's not feeling good and when I have to dress a certain way and maybe I
don't want to dress that way and so that an extra not feeling good know this makes a lot of sense because it's funny how
hese organic things in our bodies that are getting in the way of getting in the way of the way we want you know I thought
lot about start but there's a whole piece because but also there's a lot of interesting how would this affect me and how
ould it affect me Just deposit is empowering kind of room entering is the word that first came to me if you how I was
eeling yes I think that's that's the word that is the word and then also just talking with people and talking with people
elling people doing really excited because other than the first time that I believe had a event to talk about it what does it
nean Do you know the comic the Family Circle end like it's a poper it's a poper and how big they always draw a little
oy he's trying to go from like this house to the car but it shows it like walking around goes around goes around the tree
because I don't hear any place you were talking about a little kid walking around but at the same time like Can I read it or
he outside around like they Cyrus I really appreciate it oh yeah to have the Center for me so excited 2 hours All the
amily have already said listening to reason was really tired of having more time to go we haven't got a chance to
e like have that first conversation and you know like in multiple other talks so perhaps when I asked you about this what
ad to that we were going to talk about these things that are a little harder to see but fairness and kind of phantom
ness and of like separating us from what we perceived For some folks there comfort in & of writing that rhyme with
ing to go with their comfort within their own experience right or what they were reading to learn out if you just may be
titled I look and waiting for a question or like you know what it looks like if I noticed something just need to come which
can like there's no pressure for anything particular way but I'm just relating to the feeling of like yeah I have some
questions for us but I really wanted this does right now Because of the way is it was I don't if you say something and
ike to me whole and that you've been talking for while before that and I was just like I don't know how people normally
se this too this resource if you can call that but I'm really interested in the next train stations that are happening next
rain station where am I I think that I'm going to have a dialectic with gender for the rest of my life I think I'm really starting
o move away from perceiving gender identity but rather as a performance in a process and so I am really starting to
see if you ever mostly because I'm starting to feel like so many of the pitfalls of identity politics and I'm starting to see how
he changes more times than they ever did bringing people together I think a lot of in the past 2 mode where
'm like it's been a year I'll get it out of my head a lot of 24 hours what's going to make me feel right there ir
front of me I think there when I first came out in the past 24 hours what's going to make me feel right there ir
ike that's what I like like I must be the but not the dualistic thing like I was just responding to that

Illustration by Rena Yehuda Newman

Google sloppily translated our speech to text during the Chocolaterian Cafe performances in November 2017, often mistranslating our words or missing long segments of dialogue altogether. We are curious about the feelings and ideas that are not translatable through words or images, what might be misinterpreted, what goes unsaid. This illustration was drawn over some of that computer prose and made during a private Season of Shadows gathering for project participants.

RENA YEHUDA NEWMAN

I have two names. In the secular world, I use the name Rena. It's a very Hebrew, Jewish name, a good name. In orthodox settings I use the name Yehuda, a very masculine name that my parents gave me when I came out. I realized if I'm going to be davening on the men's side (or if I'm going to be praying on the men's side) of the mechitza (a gendered divider in certain orthodox prayer spaces), I can't be called up to do things or introduce myself as Rena. That would make me very uncomfortable. Part of this is passing but part of this is feeling like I need a masculine name . . . The name Yehuda, at its core, just means Jew. Or also: commitment. The name Rena means Joy or Joyous Song. So my name, Rena Yehuda, literally means Jewish Joy.

... I was at shabbat dinner with my parents and I sort of told them what my experience was being in some of these spaces and you know—I said that I'm not necessarily trying to change my name but I feel like I need another Hebrew name to use in these spaces. So I asked them, could you think of one that you think would suit me? It's actually the masculine version of my grandmother Judy's Hebrew name, which was Yehudit. I like knowing that I'm named for a strong and important woman in my family. There is also an inherent queerness to the name Yehuda because to a non-Hebrew-speaking ear, the name sounds feminine because it ends in an a ... I don't know if in a non-Jewish setting it actually has any masculine meaning. It's only gendered meaning is actually slightly feminine. But Yehuda is one of the most classic, masculine Jewish names that exists. There's a sort of cultural queerness in that.

... As a Jew, my gender doesn't exist in isolation to my Judaism. And the two are so deeply intertwined that I don't think I could survive as trans if I wasn't Jewish ... You know, the other aspects of ourselves illuminate the rest of who we are. I think that my Judaism so illuminates my queerness and gives it context and gives it memory and gives it a richness and a texture that can't exist on its own.

I'm very concerned with American amnesia. I'm very concerned about this crisis of collective memory that seems to exist in America where it constantly feels like there's no precedent for what's happening even though there is. Living as a Jew is really the opposite of that, because so much of what it means to be a Jew is grounded in this notion of memory.

... And queerness, with all of its variation, with the way that gender is inherited and is part of this recursive process that we're always creating and recreating and redefining and taking what we've been given and pushing back—it's so much a part of that process of memory work that the two just—my Judaism and my queerness are so inseparable because they're so compatible.

PHOEBE BEE SCHLOUGH

Phoebe: We're having an exceptionally private conversation in a public space. And you put that conversation on a pedestal in the window [at Chocolaterian Cafe], and as much as I was listening, you had to be right up on the curtain to hear anything. I was looking at everybody come up and read the statement, then watching how long they engaged with the piece. Not a lot of people were actually going up and sitting next to the curtain like I was. I really just wanted to drink in everything you were saying, sort of learn myself through others. I didn't see how many people stopped outside to look at it and then come in, but it was fascinating to watch people's reactions. I mean, I'm an urbanist and I'm really interested in the intersections of public and private. A coffee shop is a really semi-public space. Having that conversation and putting that stuff on display there—I was thinking about how much effort it took for me to listen to the performance, like it takes me so much effort to find any resources about this kind of gender stuff. I honestly feel like that performance is a centerpiece to this whole thing. You all sort of distilled down everything about this project in that work. I'm kind of turning into arts reporter mode—

Borealis: No, I feel the same way. That piece feels critical. Aside from the general collisions of public and private, or a private conversation on display in a public window, we also had a lot of the recorded, slightly more private interviews at Chocolaterian. To know that we could build more content by having that conversational performance in the window—thinking about who we were inviting to engage with it or who wouldn't—really felt like a representation of project and life-long processes.

Phoebe: You did those performances about a week after I came out to myself. So, I felt like I needed to drink in everything . . . and the context of a space you're in changes how we get to talk about these things. A dance party is really different from an in-depth conversation. How can you really play with those contexts and represent those metaphors? You know, I love the work here [at the Embodying the Shadow exhibition at Black Locust Cafe] but it is definitely very personal. This show is personal to you, this is a person's private experience, which is what I read from these images. Which is powerful in its own way.

Borealis: Do you recognize the masks back there? Those are from the costume making session at Everyday Gay Holiday . . . So, you're totally not wrong, this is my experience in the middle of a really social project. In some cases, I was losing sight of myself a little bit. Holding a lot of spaces for and with other people. For me as the common denominator, I was starting to lose my capacity to reflect on my own experience. Sometimes, I could hardly get sentences out. So, this collection of work was important for me in that sense. It's also representative of the duration of this project. I'd say it's not just my experience with gender generally—this collection is my experience with gender during this project, you know?

These drawings were a way to show that timeline of my experience in between interviews and performances and parties, particularly my experience as it relates to the body pain I have behind the scenes.

Phoebe: There's so much going on. I guess the question I have, again, is how do you represent these experiences and bring them to other people? The question of venue constantly comes up, in my mind. Where are the costume making sessions held? When? Who's invited? I mean, Overture Center is a powerful place to bring this, it's a pillar to Madison's art world. People who aren't necessarily there to think about queer experience might have to confront it. Sorry, I'm in arts reporter mode again.

Borealis: I think it's interesting to hear you talk about it. We're making sense of the project that's already started. Giving meaning to things that have already happened. Building and setting the stage for things that are going to happen. It feels cyclical, very much nonlinear. I think that we're making meaning in little groups, in real time. I'm curious to see what happens when more strangers engage with it.

Phoebe: There's also the fact that it gave me pretty important context to figure out something about myself. I had started thinking about my gender more critically around the time you started having workshops for the project. For a long time I was really afraid to look up any of this stuff. Deeply terrified to do my own research, and I still kind of am. There's a part of me that's afraid of this new thing even though I find this new part of me more comfortable. There's this discomfort that I know versus the notion that I can work through this discomfort to be in a better place. That takes work. I'm afraid of what I'm going to dig up.

Borealis: Sure. Maybe it feels like things are going to move or change?

Phoebe: That's kind of where I'm going this year. I need to work on these things, no matter how long it takes or if I'll never be done with it. It's better to be working through this than to be in a space where I'm constantly uncomfortable about it. When I finally settled into knowing that I can be agender or nonbinary, that sort of thing—when I finally came out to myself, I laughed uncontrollably for thirty minutes straight. I felt pure joy for the first time in years.



*Photo by Jennifer Bastian
Season of Shadows In Real Life, Night 1
Chocolaterian Cafe*

ANDE

I'm 42 years old and I feel like I've been a little late getting to the table. For me, the process has been really internal. I'm not close with my family, I don't have a lot of close friends like me, so I haven't had a lot of opportunity to explore ideas with another human being. So I was just excited to get to talk through some of this. When I moved from North Carolina to Wisconsin four years ago, that was really when I felt free enough to start coming out. So I came out to my partner, and I do think that a lot of the falling apart in our relationship revolved around my exploration of gender and how I was processing, the things I was talking about . . . I just remember when I came out as queer in college, there was a lot of talking to people—oh my gosh! I tried to explain it to someone and it's like you've been living your whole life left handed and now you've realized you've got a right hand, you know? And you want to tell everyone, "This is my right hand! Look what it can do!" I'm not having that experience with this round of coming out around gender. I have all the excitement like I found another right hand, but I'm not getting the same kind of feedback as I was with sexual orientation.

You know, I'm binding full time now. And since I've had chronic infections—mastitis, but I'm not nursing now—I wonder, is this an infection or is this just sore from binding? So I worry, and my body just makes me think generally about transitioning. How does that look for me? I'm type 2 diabetic so I don't heal well from surgery and infections. I think about top surgery all the time but I don't know that emotionally I want to deal with it. I keep wondering if I didn't have that tissue that keeps getting infected, well—then I wonder if it's worth the slow healing of the diabetic body . . . I've felt like my body didn't belong to me, like it was kind of for other people. So, binding was kind of for me. When my partner and I split up two years ago, I was like, 'I'm buying my first binder! Now I've got two!' I tried on everything I own. I was like, 'What is this shirt like? What is this shirt like?' It was an amazing feeling. You know, I'm feeling really settled with where I am right now. I'm not feeling a lot of dysphoria. I'm pretty emotionally stable, so I'm just going to enjoy this point in my life and if something happens and I really start coming up against this again, I can come back to this question of what a medical transition would look like.

One thing I am constantly dealing with is voice dysphoria . . . I've tried voice training, but it's not really my focus right now. That would be my main motivation for starting on T—to start changing my voice. But I've never had anyone who has said, "I get that," like you just said to me. Never. You're the first person in my entire life. Any time I've ever said, "I have voice dysphoria," people will go as far as to say, "Well, you have such a great voice, you have this soothing tone, the way you enunciate things is really calming." And I wonder, is that my voice or is that me? If my voice were lower like I want it to be, so that maybe you need to stop for a second, which I think would be a dream—I don't think I would lose that quality. I don't think I would lose my delivery or tone. I don't think that's about the octave

that I'm speaking in, it's about the way I present myself. I can calm you down over the phone, I can make you feel better, and I think I can do that just as well in the octave I'd rather hear from myself.

My family is very Mormon and I was raised in a very Mormon home, so there were a lot of very explicit gender expectations growing up. I never fit them. I would say I was a tomboy but I never played with the boys, I always played with other girls. The boys were too intense and too rough. So, tomboy, for me—and this has carried into my adulthood—I don't consider myself particularly butch or particularly femme. I'm more—let's flip over a rock and look at all the bugs and I can hold all the dirty things, the worms. That tomboy. I was that kind of kid who played in the mud and the creeks and I wasn't scared of those kinds of things. I had lots and lots of girl heroes. I think about all my childhood heroes . . . my youth was a lot of girl. But no matter how much my parents tried to push and squeeze to get me to fit in, it was always just kind of itchy, you know? As a kid, there was a lot of pushing. The Mormon church is so segregated between men and women from the time we're kids to—forever. You're in separate groups, you do separate things, and, luckily, I got out of that church when I was a young teenager.

Right around the time my parents split up, my mom stopped going to church and I didn't have to. Since then, religion has been really fascinating to me. I don't consider myself to have a religion. I'm not agnostic, I'm not—for me there's so much cognitive dissonance even talking about religion, because what I would call god and what you would call God aren't the same thing, so I don't know how to have that conversation . . . And it's hard, because you can't just say you're not Mormon. They have these hoops you have to jump through to remove yourself from their records. And I've done that. And I'm more scared of my family and extended family knowing that than anything about gender or queerness because religion is such a big deal.

You could even tie metaphors into some religion stuff, too. You know, you've got God forming man from clay. That's a whole piece in Genesis. Making a man out of earth. We have all this raw material, and what do we make from it? I'm a potter, and I'm no good at the wheel, but handbuilding does a lot for me. You have to work it, flatten it, build it up, press something into it to get a texture, cut it. That's more how I think about my journey with self discovery. It feels like I'm making something, and I don't know what it is when I first look at the lump, I don't know what I'm making, but something is constantly getting chiseled away or getting formed.

DIMITRI VANDERBRAUGH

I did a lot of cosplay, and I thought that I just wanted to dress up as guy characters, but as I realized it was influencing my stylistic choices that I took on a day to day basis, I thought, wait a second—I feel happy not being either gender or being both. One today and one tomorrow. I tried to tell my parents about it and they didn't understand. I grew up in a really Catholic household so it was pretty difficult at first. I haven't come out to many people at all because as much as I want to advocate for myself and others, it can get tiring to have to explain myself all the time, over and over, to people that you know don't really want to understand.

My parents used to go to mass every Sunday when I was really little and I didn't really understand higher level Spanish yet. I didn't really understand what was happening and it didn't really pertain to me, you know, because I didn't know what was going on. But it was something I grew up with, it's all I knew. I never questioned it until I got a little older. My dad and maternal grandmother are still very Catholic but my mom started going to those Christian, non-denominational churches, so there's always been a strict God presence in my household. And I feel that since I did go to a Catholic high school for two years those values are instilled in me. All I've done is question them, though, because they've never brought me any happiness. According to those beliefs, everything I love is wrong. And nobody likes to be told that everything they love is bad. Things that make you happy are sins. I definitely felt like I wasn't allowed to be who I thought I was, "maybe you're just going through something," or like my mom would say, "it's God testing you." I'm not very religious, but I think that if there is somebody up there, they made us like this for a reason. We're supposed to live our lives and figure out things for ourselves. There's way too much to do to spend all our time judging everybody else.

In one of my English classes, we're learning about lots of different religions. We learned about this Scandinavian religion with a god, Loki, who would go back and forth from male to female all the time. I thought that was fascinating because it made me feel a little more valid. If it's documented in stories that old, like older than even Christianity, then how long has this been going on for, you know? Other religions have been fun to learn from.

Otherwise, it's debilitating to not find validation anywhere around you. You start to wonder if you're a person after a while when so few people understand you. For a while I struggled with being self, not even just being myself. Just what it means to be somebody. It was hard. But now I have a better support system of friends around me. I think that for someone exploring like this, it's important to find that. I think if I had had it earlier, I could have avoided a lot of bad decisions in my life that were misguided, you know? I wasn't sure where to go. And it's hard because you don't really want to open yourself up to danger. I've had way too many experiences where I share these parts of myself and it pushes people away. That's why I was excited about this project, just to have space to branch out and actually talk through some of this stuff.

DEC FINN

My grandmother, I call her ‘Bubbi’ and my grandfather ‘Papa’ because my bubbi is Jewish, so it’s Hebrew. We’re close, I know they all care about me, and they’re family and they help us in any way that they can. But I kind of held off on telling them because she grew up in a really different place than I did. She grew up in different countries and she’s been all over the world, and her parents are different than my parents are and different generations. So I was like, “I’m just going to wait and see,” and when I told them it kind of just spread to my entire family and I didn’t have to come out to anyone else.

Actually, the time between when I realized, “I’m trans, what do I do?” and the day that I came out to my mom and my friends was a few months. Maybe 5-8 months after I realized, I came out to my mom. Which is a really short period of time compared to other people. But when I went shopping with my bubbi . . . I didn’t really know how she’d react to me going over to the strictly masculine side, and at times it felt like I was suffocating. Which is a way that a lot of trans people describe it, which is obvious because it does feel like you’re suffocating a lot. I was kind of like, “I don’t know if I can keep this a secret for so long,” which is probably why I didn’t. I mean, hanging out with my friends really helped . . . I got really sad a lot, pre-outing myself. But now, I can wear mascara and I can be a boy, and the suffocation went away a bit. I feel a little stuck sometimes because of dysphoria but I got a binder and a binder has helped. I guess I feel more free, which is a really generic term for coming out, but it felt really good to be able to say, “Hey, I’m a boy.”

But I’m always dysphoric, whether I’m wearing my binder or not, and I always wear my binder no matter what else I’m wearing. Some mornings I’ll get out of bed and I have an anxiety attack and I freak out and I’m really struggling and I feel like I have to take my binder off and put it back on, hide under my covers for like fifteen minutes which means I’m usually late for school, but it’s really a struggle. Like, it’s really easy to express myself, but there are some mornings where I think I really do not want to wear my own skin, let alone clothing.

Because I’ve only been around trans people for the days that I’ve been out, it kind of also makes me feel suffocated; I have the trans community and I have the cis community and just—I feel like right now I can have one or the other, and I feel like I can’t have both at the same time.

I’ve been having a series of appointments with the PATH clinic at the UW Children’s Hospital, which is under endocrinology, and that’s the hormone therapy. Next month I’ll hopefully have one of my final appointments before I start testosterone, which is pretty great. I’m excited for that. I’ve been on hormone blockers for a year and six months now.

TK MORTON

For me, the easiest way to describe it is: I am trans. Transgender. I use the word femme . . . and I also identify as a boi. B-O-I. Because I don't really identify with womanhood, but I'm not really super macho-nacho-masculine. So boi was the nice in-between. So I want people to call me boyfriend with an i. I'm a cute femme boi, it's great. You know, a black boi. Those are the easiest ways that I'm able to identify my gender, but coming to the realization that I was just trans was so hard. I came out as a transman and I thought I had to be the people of my father . . . But the only way masculinity comes out now is in how I dress and potentially in facial hair since I'm physically injecting myself with testosterone for the last 4 and a half years of my life. People would be like, "Why are you trans and on hormones but then you want to wear a dress? Why is that a thing?" Me being trans is the closest thing I can identify with as an umbrella term. I'm not in a binary.

When I was younger, I used to have three sets of pronouns depending on what environment I was in. I would use he/him/his when I was working in an organic fast food restaurant. I would use they/them/theirs in generally queer spaces. In fully trans-inclusive spaces, I've used ze/zir/zirs. In general queer spaces they would always default to they/them/theirs because they always thought my pronouns were too hard to learn. And it wasn't until I met my current partner who taught me, like, no, why would you have someone use different pronouns than you?

Since I've gotten here, it's been, like, better than I expected. You know, Wisconsin is very white. Very, very white. Which is a stark difference coming from Philadelphia where I would legit see more brown people than white people. But in Philly, I was homeless during my grad program. My university couldn't find anywhere to house me, I was on the verge of being broke, I couldn't feed myself even though I had money. I was sleeping on an air mattress. I would go to different coffee shops and steal their Wi-Fi. I didn't have reliable transportation to go to a grocery store to get me food, so I legit just scrounged up anything I could. And my mental health was deteriorating very fast. You know when you get to that low point where you're like, whoa, I feel really bad but I know I can push through it? I knew that I couldn't push through it. That was the first time that I've ever had that happen in my life and I knew that I needed to go.

. . . I think that for me, I always have to deal with—if I'm going into predominantly cis spaces or predominantly queer or trans spaces here—that I'm probably one of the only people of color in the room. That was never acknowledged. Especially going through college, I would be in a trans group and would be the only person of color in the group, and I'd talk about different issues of that identity, and people couldn't understand. They could only maybe empathize. Which I'm like—that's fine. People just empathize with it. That's my experience in most of the Midwest. Like, "I'm sorry that you feel that way, I can't understand what you're going through," but I need more than that sometimes. Most of the time I

need more than that. More than being the only person of color in the space. How am I able to build community if I'm the only person of color in these spaces? So, most of the time, I have to get it from online. There's a huge, vast community of black and brown, gender nonconforming, trans, queer folks online that I'm friends with. And that's sometimes the only way that I'm able to find community. On the internet.

I went to this midwestern queer conference, and it was my first time in a room with predominantly people of color. I was in the back of the room sobbing. Someone noticed and they were like, "Are you okay?" And I just said, "I'm just really happy because I never thought that there would be other people in my community that look like me and feel the same way I do." Even though I'm in predominantly white spaces here, I know that the work I'm doing is still valuable and I know that I'm making a difference in what I do. Hopefully that will transcend to other artists of color.

You know, I'd say my gender is like the ocean. You never know what it's going to look like. Clear, blue skies, beautiful sparkling water that you can see through and see all the little fish and turtles and stuff. Then I can turn into a raging hurricane super fast. That's something that I like about my gender. It will engulf me in ways that I don't need to learn how to navigate. I know that it will always protect me whether I'm near it or not. I think that's also why I love rain. I feel a sense of security with it, with my gender.



FORESHADOW

*installation by Bo
at Everyday Gay Holiday*

*Tarot readings at reception by TK
Morton*

KRISHNA

Krishna: My name is Krishna and I'm about 9 years old. I picked my name from, well... I'm not sure how to explain it. Mom, can you?

Anu: Especially when they were younger, we used to read a lot of Krishna stories. Krishna is a god but also a character in a lot of children's Hindu books. We believe kids should be mischievous and try things! There are a lot of great stories about Krishna, who is a reincarnation of Vishnu. You know, when you read the stories, you see Krishna assuming many genders.

Krishna: But we do have differences, me and Krishna. I hate butter. I wear a shirt. I don't wear much jewelry all the time. Some similarities? We're both named Krishna! And we have something in common with India.

... And, well, my pronouns are a little different. They kind of sound like they are in French, but they're not. Ze. Because, in French it would be like, Ze pizza is ready! She/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs didn't really sound right to me, so my nurse said that she heard of some other pronouns. It feels the most right to me.



Krishna at a StageQ workshop, photograph by Peter Langeness

Anu: What's really interesting is that my elders, like my mom's sister or my dad's siblings, they're all in their 80s and close to 90s living in India. My brother was in India and he said, "You have to just share this with the family and see what happens. I'll help." Because I didn't even know the words in Tamil, you know? I didn't know how to explain it. The only word I knew was hijra which doesn't capture everything, right? So I called and I was explaining this to my aunt, who is probably 87, and she paused on the other end and I thought she was going to say something, you know? But she was like, "Of course there are more than two genders! Where have you been?" [laughter] And she just kind of went, "Yeah! That's human diversity. You have to love your child and support your child and of course there are so many genders. That's true everywhere. We'll see you in the summer, just come on over."

. . . You know, when Krishna came out to us, it was like—my god. There is my child. It was an unbelievable moment, like I saw my child for the first time. This child that I hadn't seen in years. Just, relaxed, sort of like, "I got this, I know who I am." It was just the best.

Bob: I never saw anything that would make me think that they identified differently, so when they first came out as transgender, it seemed kind of out of the blue. But once we realized the mistake we had all made, and they started dressing the way they wanted, they just relaxed. It was just happiness. 100% difference.

Anu: We would be driving to school and they would be like, "Mom, I gave you a hundred hints before I came out. Did you pick up on any of them?" [laughter]

Krishna: And, well, I don't feel transgender anymore [like I did at the Stage Q workshop] but you can share the picture from that day. I feel genderqueer. It just feels different to me. Genderqueer is like something else, I don't really know how to explain it. I guess it's like a tree. Gender to me is like a tree. There are different kinds of trees that grow different kinds of things. Like, trees make nuts different sizes and shapes. Bushes make berries in different sizes, shapes, and colors. And they all have different leaves. So, it just reminds me of trees. I have to explain genderqueer to a lot of people in my class. So, I say, genderqueer isn't really a girl or a boy. A lot of people, at first, will say, "You're a boy!" and I'll tell them I'm not, and so they'll say, "Oh, you're a girl?" Somebody else comes up and says, "Oh, so you don't have a gender?" And I'll tell them, "No, I have a gender. I'm genderqueer." The best part of being genderqueer is that I get to be myself!

HARVEY EUSTICE

So, before pursuing top surgery, I wanted to get all my ducks in a row to make sure I wouldn't be in debt up to my eyeballs. I already owed \$3000 for being on T and not having it covered . . . the long and short of it is that I have F64.0 on my record, which is a describer code for a transsexual male—I think that's the rudimentary terminology—and it led to certain services not being covered properly . . . I've been in a tough spot in the healthcare system because I identify as a non-binary person and use they/them pronouns, but I tell healthcare staff that I use he/him so that all this medical stuff can be covered. So it's difficult, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. Needless to say, that was a very stressful, pivotal point. This other insurance company said, go to your doctor, say that you need this [top surgery] and see how it goes. Document your dysphoria, they said, but it was super vague. They wouldn't give me their policy. So I wrote the policy.

. . . After going back and forth, they sent me their new policy, which had about 30% of what I wrote. I felt good and bad. Good overall. It's a step in the right direction. Yes, that's great, you have something written. Here's our six month plan, 3 year plan, and so on. In 5 years, I hope it won't be a big deal for a non-binary person to get whatever they need done. So they gave me this policy and they said, "Harvey, we're going to be really upfront with you. We've never done this before, you're a case study." . . . Just like any other insurance company, like your car or whatever, they're trying to figure out how to make it cheap and how to make it effective. I said, "Let's do it." So, they said, "Okay here are these steps that you need to make." One of them, which I wasn't an advocate for but in retrospect, I'm glad I did it, albeit for different reasons—was to get your doctor's write off on having documented mental anguish because of your body. They obviously call that dysphoria. They said, "That's pretty easy because you already have dysphoria." What they don't know is that dysphoria comes and goes. It evolves and is at times non-existent. It's difficult to describe and even harder to nail it down to surgery fixing it. It's not a constant that can be covered up by surgery. After surgery, dysphoria changes and finds other places to manifest. Gender can be a constant change if you let it. And I could talk forever in terms of "medically necessary" versus "medically appropriate" care as it relates to dysphoria. You don't have to have dysphoria to be trans. You can be perfectly comfortable in your body and be trans . . . You can also be cis and have a lot of dysphoria, which is where "medically appropriate" comes into play. I wish medically appropriate procedures (instead of medically necessary procedures) were written into policies for genderqueer and transgender folks today. That's how I wrote my policy. That's the 70% they left out. So all of these rights that we're talking about are not just trans rights. They're human rights.

So, this is the thing that I'm glad I did in retrospect, but I don't think it should be required, and it's not required in my policy: get mental health counseling first. Your shrink says you have documented dysphoria, that you're a good candidate

for top surgery and top surgery will help alleviate this dysphoria. It's basically all about you hating yourself. So, picking a good counselor is also very important. Some counselors will say that this is ridiculous. "We can sit and talk for an hour, but I'm going to help you write this letter no matter what." . . . Other counselors were like, "Well, the document says we have to have an ongoing conversation for at least six months." Do you know how much money that is, especially when it's outside of your network or if you don't have health insurance to begin with? As marginalized people, we can't afford that. It's a barrier to entry and it's not affirming. The whole medical system encourages, condones and literally requires us to hate our bodies as queer people. It's just another finger on the hand of the patriarchy.

You know, companies are afraid of people getting offended or going to a new insurance group because they're supporting trans people now. So, that's why I'm not a fan of tiptoeing around this issue; gender has been fed to us our whole lives and we're allowed to question it. We're allowed to question how we're treated in the system.



Embodying the Shadow (displayed at Black Locust Cafe); mixed media drawing by Borealis. Bo documented their experience with gender, the body, mental health, and the Shadows project as it has unfolded behind the scenes.

CORVUS

Of all of the ways I've had to come out, I think that gender is one of the newest ways. Especially with what's going on in our world politically, I have varying levels of safety in different geographic areas that changes my negotiations with myself about how outward I am or how ready to reveal myself that I am. When I lived in Madison I generally felt out and open, and I still am, but I think here by virtue of being in a more conservative community, I'm not necessarily pushing that envelope. At doctors appointments, for example, I kind of just want to get in and get out. I measure which conversations I feel like I have energy to have.

I think that my inner self feels like many, many multiplicities but when it comes to ways in which I might experience violence, prejudice, or misogyny, there's not really a way to sidestep that perceived womanness either. Clothes, to me, feel like performance or sometimes disguise. I love the t-shirt and the bro shorts, they're great for blending in. I think my femme presenting side has been very drag queen-y. It took me a long time to put two and two together, but I think that the ways that I've expressed as a high femme and in the situations that I have comes from that same energy of high-octane performance. All or nothing. If I'm going to wear stilettos, they're going to be the tallest ones I can possibly find. I think that drag has been in my consciousness for a long time in terms of how I present that part of myself. Sometimes I feel like this cowboy, like on the inside I'm this burly, hairy man, but I like looking at myself in the mirror with these lacy things also. Crossdressing cowboy is a pretty good way to explain my relationship to drag and gender.

Particularly as a younger person presenting more femininely, I got harassed all the time. It was a lot of unwanted attention. I had incidents beyond harassment and I started to feel unsafe as a femme presenting person. I can't even ride the bus without someone harassing me? So I think, in a lot of ways, my gender took on more masculine expressions over time as protection. It kind of sucks, when I think about it, that it became my armor. With the way I look right now, I don't get any of that. It feels nice to be left alone, to be honest. So I think that drag, in the way that I'm talking about it, to be campy, that was the way in which I was able to feel safe in presenting as femme.

I also cook a lot, so one way I've been perceiving this is, okay, if I'm going to show up with a plate of food, do people need to know the recipe? No, not necessarily. They don't need to know my recipe, so to speak, like what are all these parts of myself. I don't feel like I need to bring all of those details into the world in an explicit way. I can just show up as this dish that no one has seen before, or maybe they've never seen a star fruit before, but I don't need to break myself down like I have been. That's different than I'd say it was at the beginning of my journey. The constant for me is that I want to be in relationship with what's around me. Not necessarily at the detriment to myself but I do have to be perceptive as to where am I, who is around me? That changes the way I navigate.

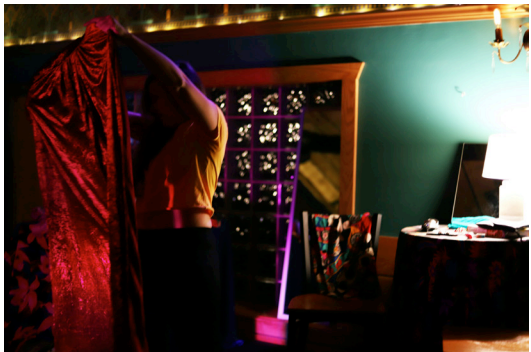
A lot of my energy is being taken up by my body . . . I do have some serious medical issues that are on my plate. And our Earth is falling apart and there's so much going on on a global scale that a lot of my heart space is being taken up by world grief, too. A lot of concern for the direction in which not only our country but our globe is going. In trying to figure out how I do my part to make things a little better, I've had to put on a few different lenses to see what's really important.

I go out into nature quite a bit and that's actually a place where I feel very comfortable finding energy in that primal creative way. Nature has so many examples of these amazing creatures or plants or life forms that blur the lines way more than we do outwardly as a human species. Nature is super queer when it comes to gender. I can say that I look to nature to see myself.



*Photographs by
Aida Ebrahimi*

*Queer Shadows at
Queer Pressure's Halloween
Party; playing dress up*



CAL SMITH

I keep thinking of a crashing wave. It can crash, it can be fluid—not to be too literal or ironic. It can be floating all around you, it can be overwhelming, it can be joyous. So while at times I think I have viewed it as overwhelming, there have definitely been moments or experiences where I felt like gender was euphoric.

I'm trying to be open to playing with gender more, but it's still really hard because any time I try to, someone comes along and imposes these strict ideas on me, or there's trauma that gets stirred up. Even when I try to push myself to explore, these things happen, and I wonder if I'm just being too sensitive? There's so much doubt and danger surrounding our identity out there. Why do I have to continue to be assimilative and placate other people? I felt like when I worked in higher ed that I had to be this perfectly packaged queer and trans person to make people feel comfortable.

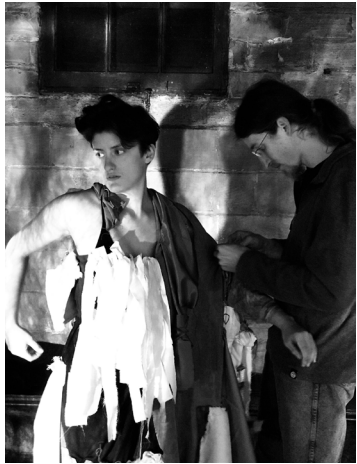
What we really need to do is build community. Real community. Actual, reliable, stable community. Especially with the political realm as it is, we can't rely on other things so we need to rely on each other. And since we need to rely more on each other, we need to focus on self care and mutual care for each other, not just for the trans community but for other communities as well. It can be hard because everyone has their own mental health to worry about and then you're worried about each other's mental health and it can become a slippery slope.

I don't think straight, cis people understand how hard it can be to come out when you've had all these other things imposed on you your entire life and you're trying to tell people, well, I'm the opposite of all these expectations you have; don't act disappointed that I'm not invested in all the normalcy you continue to push on me. Not just that but the expectation to lose weight constantly, or be feminine, to do what I was supposed to do to fit in.

I think a lot of things that have been a long time coming are finally coalescing, in a sense. I think especially seeing how my mental health has gone downhill, I'd like to come out as trans to my family . . . this feeling that I'm living this double life isn't something I can have continue to weigh on me. And to be quite honest, it makes me feel disingenuous in a lot of ways. I don't know, maybe it's just this pressure I put on myself. I feel like I need to walk the walk. It's been one of those things that's really hard to do. It makes sense that I've put it off, given what I've been through, but it's still there.

This person said to me, "I know you'll get through it." And I said, well, how do you know? And they said, "I just know you're really resilient." And that's really stuck with me. Speaking like this to each other, we just don't do enough. As I go further along in socially transitioning and thinking about medically transitioning, I think there's this push and pull of kind of being dysphoric in public or not . . . and

continuously being visibly queer and trans is hard sometimes because my safety's at risk because of it. Everyone has different levels of privileges or people around them who are supportive, or not . . . so, I think that building a community of care to help combat all that is really what we need to focus on.



Photos by Cinda Lillibridge. Performance by Borealis at ArtFly's pop-up gallery in Eau Claire, WI





Photograph by Jennifer Bastian

*Owen and Boralis performing In Real Life, Night 1 at Chocolaterian Cafe
(In Real Life was funded by a Madison Arts Commission BLINK grant)*



Photograph by Duke Virginia

Ande and Borealis performing In Real Life, Night 2 at Chocolaterian Cafe

OWEN PAUL

I tried a bunch of names on, looked up a bunch of meanings for names, and considered the meanings I knew about. Eventually, Owen felt good. It means young warrior. And my grandpa's name is Paul, so my middle name is Paul. It means humble. For me, I was thinking about how I want to embody masculinity and my journey going forward. I have had a lot of dreams or memories of fighting in previous lives, and so the first part felt really right and in line with what I want to do here in terms of being a warrior of the heart. Somebody who advocates for softness and love and connection and healing. I think of that tradition of warriorship rather than whatever other definition you might imagine.

. . . with Paul, I actually asked my grandpa if I could use his name. So, they took me out to dinner because they were visiting in Boulder and my grandma started crying and my grandpa was really sweet. So, I felt good about that. Also, not just in meaning but in his example of being a man—it's something that's really stood out for me . . . there's that kind of question of what kind of masculinity I want to embody. His is very soft and thoughtful and he listens really well. He cares really deeply about people.

. . . This person, who is somewhat of a medium, somewhere early on, was talking to me about—I forget her exact words but she was talking about the quality of honey and the softness of it and the richness of it. She was kind of talking about the tendency to harden when you're doing something "masculine"—but to remember that the softness is very important . . . I've held that image or that metaphor since that moment.

I think the tendency, in order to embody masculinity, is to armor up and be hard and be untouchable . . . and I think what a lot of people say toxic masculinity is, it's us hardening to our own emotions, like we don't actually feel them. The only ones that are acceptable to men are anger and maybe happiness. Anger is kind of a forceful emotion, typically. So, if you're hardened to all of your other emotions that are usually gooier and softer and raw-er, if that's a word? Those, for me at least, in my body—those kinds of emotions: hurt, pain, despair, shame, vulnerability, loneliness—feel gooey, whereas anger, for me, feels like a hardened layer of protection that then can deflect or fight or protect those more gooey experiences . . . for me, and for some other transmasculine folks who I've witnessed, the feminine gets smothered at some point because society expects us to. Everybody does. And also because there's some internalized transphobia, internalized homophobia, internalized sexism. So that is painful . . . I was really craving femininity in my body, and expression, and really noticing the toll that masculinity has placed on my body. I policed my own life expression until I said, I don't want to do that anymore. Being actually as fully expressive as I want to be is not something I've quite reached yet, so I'm asking myself more questions around that.

As I've realized that internalized oppression, I've started ask... how can I not do this? How do I want to play this out and have this experience?

SAWYER JOHNSON

I'm kind of burnt out on doing queer-specific work. Yet, entering it has allowed me to access a space of emotional and financial security, where I've been able to explore my own transition. So I'm accessing top surgery right now—scheduling top surgery, fingers crossed. I'm also doing a little fundraiser for it. So, I feel like while my gender has been spotlighted, I've also been able to explore it. It kind of feels like diverging paths, because as I explore it more and more, I just want to hold it for myself. It's hard to explore and create something that's under a spotlight. If you feel perpetually watched by it, how would it ever grow? It feels a lot like something dark and secret, but not necessarily bad in that. We're both interested in the woods, right? I kind of think of it as a dark and damp place in the woods. It's still the woods, right, it's not bad. But it still is inherently and deeply secretive.

... I feel like I've entered this really limitless space of like, "y'all, it doesn't matter, it's fine." Like we're all practicing fake things, and putting on fake straps of fabric. I have a fairly radical set of politics, and in that is a certain lens surrounding materialism and what is. And what is for me is some of the bathroom stuff, locker room stuff. I swim laps, and I stopped swimming laps because I don't have anywhere to change. Also, as a water baby, and as water being a deeply spiritual thing for me, that's been challenging. But what isn't, like what isn't real and tangible, is gender. It's fake. And it's so funny because I've spent eight years or something training people, being like, "Bathrooms are a scary place, here's some things you can do," and then to actually experience it was like, "Oh no, this is actually very scary." As far as politics and gender—I think it's interesting that most of the leftist organizations I spend time with often have a decent chunk of trans people and there's a certain degree of mutual caretaking that I haven't necessarily seen elsewhere. People across identities are interested in one another's liberation.

And I feel like there's so much intersection between disability rights and trans rights. Because they're both just analyses of which bodies are appropriate, which bodies should be allowed to exist. So for me, being able to access transition, or identifying as trans at all is a matter of me overcoming my own perfectionism, in that I will have an inherently imperfect body, at least by society's standards To come to terms with this at least enough to pursue transition is really crucial, because I feel like I spent so long being deeply afraid of having an ugly, inappropriate body, to the point where I would choose that over having a body that felt comfortable to me. And I still struggle with that.

... I haven't experienced physical disability, but in the context of trauma and with PTSD I've experienced and really struggled with dissociation, and I feel like when speaking about experiences of trauma, I get a similar reaction of pity—and it's not what I want, or what I need, you know? It's a lot of default perceptions of "I think this is what you need," rather than, well—it's essentially us being not trained in knowing how to ask, "What do you need and want from me?"

I talk about my intersection of being queer and also really dirty, working class, very blue collar—my dad’s a truck driver, and I love my dad more than anybody, that’s my dude. And our relationship is so complex because of queerness and faith, but I love him . . . at times [queer] spaces were inaccessible to me on the basis of class, or like I didn’t quite fit in in those spaces and what I perceived as either feminized or kind of glittery, stylish, often urban drinking spaces. And I compared it to the old fairy myths where you enter through the mushroom ring and there’s a feast and a dance party and whatever and you’re not supposed to eat the food. Basically, if you ate the food in those spaces, you would get trapped. So I compared queer spaces to those spaces and entering through the fairy ring, and then contrasted the two where I was coming from and where I was entering. It was a magical space, and often times a problematic space.

I think of my vulnerability as being a gift, right, and how I’ll offer it differently depending on who I’m speaking with. I feel like if we’re accessing gender on a similar level, I’ll have a different level of conversation, and if we’re not maybe that’ll be more restricted or more private. One of the most freeing moments of

adulthood for me is being able to pick and choose and not feeling obligated to give everybody my story and to really keep it close.



The metaphors I’m imagining for all this are so soft and subtle. How do you depict something that’s simultaneously fog and simultaneously solid? Like it knows itself. How do you have something that’s both? How do you visually depict something that’s both? And then I also thought about one of the things I like best about the woods is finding the quiet spaces. Stopping for a second and listening to how you can’t hear anything. Or maybe it’s leaves rustling or a stream, but there’s often spaces where you literally can’t hear anything, and I love that. I’m always seeking that.

Photograph by Jennifer Bastian;

behind the window display turned stage of In Real Life, Night 1 at Chocolaterian Cafe

Find some of the artists and collaborators:

Borealis: AlauraBorealisArt.com

Duke Virginia, photographer: DukeVirginia.com

Aida Ebrahimi, photographer: AidaEbrahimi.com

Jennifer Bastian, photographer: JenniferBastian.com

Queer Pressure Collective: QueerPressureCollective.com

Overture Center for the Arts: overture.org

Madison Arts Commission: cityofmadison.com

Monroe Street Arts Center: monroestreetarts.org

Arts + Literature Laboratory: artlitlab.org

Chocolaterian Cafe: chocolateriancafe.com

Black Locust Cafe: blacklocustcafe.com

StageQ: stageq.org

BG Creative: bgcre8.com

Find some other resources:

GSAFE: creating just schools for LGBTQ+ youth in WI: gsafewi.org

OutReach: South Central WI LGBT community center: lgbtoutreach.org

Diverse and Resilient: Milwaukee-based resource: diverseandresilient.org

UW Madison LGBT Campus Center: lgbt.wisc.edu

WI Trans Health Coalition: witranshealth.org

Briarpatch Teens Like Us: queer youth group & case mgmt: youthsos.org

Freedom, Inc: justice thru leadership & community organizing: freedom-inc.org

Our Lives: mag celebrating queer and allied community: ourlivesmadison.org

Proud Theater: LGBTQ+ youth theater: proudtheater.org

Crisis support:

Emergency: 911

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Journey 24/7 crisis hotline: 608-280-2600

Trans Lifeline: for trans people in crisis: lines open 10a-4a: 877-565-8860

The Trevor Project, including online community: thetrevorproject.org

TrevorLifeline: crisis intervention & suicide prevention 24/7: 1-866-488-7386

TrevorText: Text “Trevor” to 1-202-304-1200. Standard text msg rates apply, evening responses



*Photograph by Duke Virginia
In Real Life, Night 2 at Chocolaterian Cafe*

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