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Carolina Flores

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THE QUEER AGENDA

CALL FOR PAPERS

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CAROLINA FLORES, EDITOR

VOLUME 26 | NUMBER 1 | FALL 2026

FROM THE EDITOR

Queers of the World, Unite! On Losing, and Fighting Anyway

Carolina Flores
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Dear reader,

I was recently at an outdoors party after a protest with a group of queer friends. We were sitting around a table hungrily gulping down cachupa (a Cape Verdean bean stew). All of us were tired from hours marching and shouting, but the atmosphere was festive. Some people who had just met were blatantly flirting, old friends chatting, introverts just soaking in the music and crowd at the party. Suddenly, S. points at the banners around us—with anti-racist, queer, feminist, climate, or housing rights slogans—and asks, "Guys, doesn't all of this make you sad? All of us marching down today, organizing, fighting, and we are losing." S.'s body tensed up, her eyes darkened, her voice shook. "I've been fighting my whole life, and we are losing. I'm done!" And she burst into tears. "I'm done! I'm done!" she shouted.

A friend later blamed this breakdown on S.'s recent heartbreak, and we all know the ravages of dyke breakups can take us to dark places. Still—with everything going smoothly in my life, thank you very much—I related to her outburst. I too often feel like we are losing. This "we" includes multitudes that I will not pin down; for the purposes of this special issue, I'll stick to the claim that I have moments where I feel that LGBTQ+ people (especially trans and gender non-conforming people) are losing, as the authoritarian far-right takes power and relentlessly reduce the space for queer life, attempting to shove us back into the closet.

This issue starts precisely from this place of disorientation, of not knowing how to fight back. The call for submissions was more articulate than this, but what I really was trying to do was ask into queer philosophical ether: What do we do now? How do we hold, protect, and stand by each other? How do we fight back?

Queer ether, it turns out, has excellent reception. Or rather: seven fantastic LGBTQ+ philosophers answered my plea (cough, call for papers) with beautiful pieces on resistance and solidarity. They come at my questions from different angles and with their own distinctive voices (you won't get bored reading them), while uniformly bringing the best philosophy can offer: a combination of rigor, care, and insight.

My recommendation is that you sit down—ideally, on a pastel-colored velvet couch, drinking kombucha, a guava sour beer, or another gay beverage of your choice—and read all the pieces in order. But, in case you have narrower interests or never enough time, here is a roadmap.

First up, a conversation between Qrescent Mali Mason and Shaeeda Mensah. Qrescent and Shaeeda are Black queer philosophers whose work draws extensively on the Black feminist tradition—a deep well of thought about resistance and solidarity under entrenched injustice. They are also friends. Their friendship has been a lifeline navigating a profession that is overwhelmingly white and straight. And their conversation ranges further, into the limits of white allyship, the value of being an insider/outsider in philosophy, and how philosophy can contribute to resistance.

After this, Cal Howland asks what comes first: resistance and solidarity, or understanding? In doing so, Cal responds to a hubristic insistence on individual understanding as a prerequisite for joining collective action that the "anti-woke" intellectual movement has made its banner. By examining the strategies of ACT UP, the revolutionary queer collective that fought on behalf of people with HIV during the AIDS epidemic, Cal argues that personal understanding is more often the fruit of deferring to marginalized others and resisting on their behalf.

Lauren Lyons also draws on ACT UP, as well as on the Compton's Cafeteria Riots in San Francisco in 1966, on Dean Spade's reflections on mutual aid, and on a number of other recent queer books. This isn't just a service to those of us who wish we could read everything. Lauren asks: What strategies of resistance should we adopt now? In doing so, she convincingly shows that this question is philosophical through and through. She has exciting concrete ideas for how to organize that I won't spoil—go read the essay!

Resistance isn't only something to study historically. Cat Saint-Croix was in the middle of it. She witnessed firsthand (and participated in) the mass protest actions after ICE officer Jonathan Ross murdered Renée Good in Minneapolis. Cat attentively documents the violent occupation of the city by an armed state militia—and, strikingly, the role of gamification in motivating ICE officers. But her real focus is on what she learned in the protests—and by reflecting on

queer chosen family—about the roots of solidarity and its potential to remap the self.

Where gamification can grease the wheels of state violence, play is a crucial tool for queer resistance—or so argues C.R. Muller. You'll meet them biking across a stage on a tiny tricycle with a cat puppet named Pussy, and follow that image into a theoretical journey through Lugones, Nguyen, and others toward a compelling account of how queer play is not only good for identity discovery, but also for creating communities of resistance. In the midst of despair, we need to carve out space for play.

Last but not least, Maëlle Roussel calls our attention to an urgent locus of resistance: action against climate change. This may seem remote from LGBTQ+ concerns. Maëlle argues it isn't. LGBTQ+ people have increased vulnerabilities to climate disaster and can fall through the cracks of institutional responses. But we also have resources to bring to the fight: skills at building alliances, producing spectacular visibility, and moving us toward a more accurate conception of nature, reclaiming it from traditionalist associations.

Read side-by-side, these essays bring to light how much everyone has to learn from LGBTQ+ organizers and thinkers. These essays teach us that, instead of operating under the fantasy of a hermetically sealed self, we need to recognize that we are already entangled with one another, shaped, even constituted, by those relationships. This is one reason why, against the recurring charge that identity politics fragments solidarity, LGBTQ+ politics has produced a trove of resources for us to collectively resist, care for each other, and build new worlds together. I hope these essays give you resources for hope—and something to say to your friends when they burst into tears and announce they're done.

Editing the *Studies* has meant building something with a distinctive character: a venue for mid-length essays that combine analytic rigor, personal experience, and stylistic experimentation. Philosophy needs more spaces where we can engage in serious play, where careful argument can coexist with personal voice and political urgency. I am proud of this work, and even more so of having collaborated with brilliant philosophers. But I have decided to step down from my editorial role. The reason is simple: I have now moved back to Lisbon from the US. Given that this is a publication of the *American* Philosophical Association, I feel that it would be better for this publication to be edited by someone who remains in the US—and for me to focus on my community here in Lisbon. I don't yet know who the next editor will be, but I am sure the *Studies* will be in capable (probably ring-studded) hands.

Thank you for reading!

In solidarity,
Caro

CONVERSATION

We Inside/Outside: A Conversation between Qrescent Mali Mason and Shaeeda Mensah on Queer Black Feminist Friendship

Qrescent Mali Mason
HAVERFORD COLLEGE

Shaeeda Mensah
MCDANIEL COLLEGE

In the following edited interview, queer Black feminist philosophers Qrescent Mali Mason and Shaeeda Mensah discuss friendship as a form of Black feminist solidarity and its relationship to navigating the profession of philosophy in the United States.

Qrescent is an associate professor of philosophy and Chair of Philosophy and Africana Studies at Haverford College who works in Black feminist autotheory and phenomenology and is currently working on a memoir for bell hooks, *Seducing Simone*. Shaeeda is an assistant professor of philosophy at McDaniel College, whose work examines contemporary life to explore social and political structures, marginalized identities, and Black feminism. In this conversation, the two friends examine the limits and possibilities of intragroup solidarity and how understanding themselves as "inside-outside" the profession of philosophy offers them avenues toward queer liberation.

Qrescent: Somebody reached out to me years ago to do a publication for a queer journal, and I was like, "Oh, I can't do that, because I don't identify as queer…" At the time, I identified as bisexual, and I used to feel very strongly about being very clear that that was where I fall on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. I don't know how I feel so much now. . . .

Shaeeda: There was one time, in a Facebook group or something, people were identifying themselves, and I said I was queer, and someone asked me, what did that mean? And it was an interesting moment for me to grapple with why I'm deeply committed to saying I'm queer. I wouldn't call myself a lesbian, for example. I think for me it is about broad-scale existing outside of particular kinds of norms. And so, I think of myself, not only existing outside of the norm of heteronormativity, but also trying to break certain gender norms that might be oppressive. So, for me queerness is representative both of my sexuality, but also of my positionality to heterosexuality itself. And my thinking about the ways that gender structures can be oppressive. I also like queerness because I see it as a way to ask more questions. I think the ambiguity of "queerness" for me is deeply philosophical and important because it doesn't have a set definition, so I think it invites us to ask questions about what do we mean when we identify as queer?

Q: Do you think there's a relationship between your queerness and your situatedness within philosophy?

S: Yeah, I think they're deeply intertwined. One of my entry points into thinking about queerness, and this was before I ever dated a woman, was reading Cathy Cohen's work, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." It was this idea that we conflate being in same-gendered relationships with being queer. Cohen proposes this idea that queerness is a commitment to existing outside of the norm and, in particular, normative systems that we might find oppressive. And I go back to something I was taught at Spelman that was such an important part of helping me identify my queerness. I went to an institution where Blackness and womanhood was at the center of all that I learned and I think of that as such a clear kind of queer in the sense of disrupting the norm of how so many of us are educated.

Q: I like the idea of queering. I have a commitment to queering. But even the "queering" has to be specific. What is this opening up to? I guess this comes from lived experience. I dislike the idea that there is some kind of fantastical queer landscape that resolves ideological issues. As a person committed to ambiguity in relationships, one realizes that queer community ain't utopia, either.

S: Again, I can just think of Cohen as making it so concrete when she points to gay white men as having emerged as a paradigm of queerness and then calling out the ways that paradigm is heteronormative. Then she points to welfare queens or women who have children out of wedlock as queer. For me, that really disrupted this idea that queerness is about one's sexuality. It could be about one's positionality, one's orientation, how one stands in proximity to or from a standard that is set up and what happens when you fail to meet that standard. So I don't see queerness as providing an answer. I see it as opening the space to ask more questions.

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S: I'm pretty sure we connected through the Collegium of Black Women Philosophers. I don't know. I can't pinpoint it. I feel like I've known you forever.

Q: Well, that's a good feeling. For me it started at the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute.

S: Yeah. "Diverse Philosophical Perspectives on Sexual Violence," I think, was the title of it.

Q: Were there other Black women who were there?

S: I think we were the only Black people there, period.

Q: I take that experience as a strong lesson in thinking about how the term diversity is employed in a variety of ways. It was such an interesting experience to me because it betrayed the philosophical approach to sexual violence. There were all sorts of affective registers being triggered. I think a lot of that solidified our bond because we were trying to say are you seeing what I'm seeing? And how do we get out of here?

S: I speculate that part of that also was about both having gone to Spelman. We know that philosophy can be done otherwise and are uniquely positioned to know that there is an otherwise. And I wonder sometimes if that is accessible to some people.

Q: Can you say more about that in relation to the experience at the Summer Institute?

S: I realized that a lot of the things that I learned in undergrad and approaches that I had access to as an undergrad are not available to a lot of people until they go to grad school or sometimes even after grad school when they're in a reading group.

Q: That helps to underline the frustration that coalesced our relationship, or at least gave us something to speak around. And having that same foundation and being Black women in that space also contributed. I'm thinking about how solidarity functions particularly for queer Black women in philosophy. I think it's very valuable to think about the notion of flight or marronage as a way that solidarity shows up in this discipline. When I think about you in the context of solidarity, our way of showing up has often taken the form of just having a space of safety. Not having to code switch and also coming from a similar orientation with regard to critiques of the discipline and folks in the discipline. One of the things that we did during NEH Summer Institute was that we went to a party together. I didn't have transportation, so I was stuck.

S: It's so interesting that you bring up escape because I didn't stay in the dorm. I actually brought my son and my grandmother down and they stayed at my aunt's house and I commuted. I'm inside and outside, and it's intentional. For me, there's something important about being outside of the field that feels like it gives space for refreshment. We weren't escaping the field all together, but I think we were able to escape the kind of hegemony of what was happening.

Q: I even think about how we, at times, have found escape in each other. There was a particular moment at the NEH thing where you asked a critical question that alerted me to, like, oh, okay, I see what Shaeeda is on. It's something very special about having a friendship with someone who thinks in the mode of philosophy. It allows that thing about inside-outside. I can think alongside you about ideas. And also be foolish and use my colloquial language and also be talking about my relationship and also be talking about your babies and also…. Something about the fluidity of that for me is related to queerness. It's only possible by virtue of the ways we find ourselves situated. You, for me, have been a kind of queer utopia. I was the only Black woman in my program [at Temple University], so my experience was colored by feeling isolated and marginalized in the field. That's why it's so funny to me that you think we connected at the Collegium [at Pennsylvania State University] because my experience at Collegium was like, oh, here, is a group of [Black women] who have each other.

S: I think grad school was a little bit similar to undergrad, where there were a lot of Black women, but I sometimes still felt like an outsider because of class. I'm gonna misquote the data, but I think some overwhelming 90 percent of people with PhDs have a parent with a PhD. My mother didn't finish high school. I started grad school when my older son was ten months, and that really shaped my experience of graduate school. There was absolute solidarity in the sense that many of those Black women helped me raise my son. Everybody was an auntie. And I will be forever grateful. Sometimes I felt a little lonely navigating grad school as a parent, as the only one with a child because I had certain limitations on my time. But even before then, I've always gone to predominantly Black schools. I grew up in the projects in the Bronx. Everyone was pretty much Black, Puerto Rican, or Dominican, and so I didn't grow up with whiteness as a standard for much of anything. I think that was hard for me because I do think that I went into certain spaces assuming, oh, we're Black and we're women; we're navigating the world in all the same ways. So that offered an important lesson in thinking about the fact that Black women's experiences are not a monolith.

Q: That's one of the key lessons of going to Spelman, right? You've mentioned the role of class a few times. Can you relate it to the position of Black women in philosophy?

S: I think there's this way that the life of the mind is one of privilege, right? I think the ability to spend hours thinking and theorizing and not laboring can be a privileged position. I've always loved to read. I've always loved books. I've always loved learning. But I do think there is a way that I constantly felt the pull of, there are things I probably should be doing instead of thinking. I should probably be working. I should probably be laboring. I should probably be using my body rather than my mind. So it was a major sacrifice that I spent ten years in grad school instead of ten years working. I think that when you don't come from a certain background, there are consequences for not doing that labor and not making that money because you might find yourself behind the curve without a soft landing spot if things don't work out. Those things are at the forefront of my mind because of my class background, in ways that I think is not necessarily a lived experience of all Black women.

Q: I mean, it does relate to market conditions, right? Being in philosophy is also a profession. I think a function of solidarity, even in our relationship, is thinking about how to navigate those market conditions. As Black feminist philosophers, we have to be clear that our areas of specialization are not central in the field. We're not getting all the jobs. I don't think that's necessarily specific to you.

S: I just wanted to make sure I didn't over-generalize it because I do think that some of the things I experience are reflective of being from a working-class background, and anyone from a working-class background and having a PhD is going to be a minority.

Q: I do think it means that certain people are going to make the decision that it's not the path to take. And some of those people are absolutely well suited to do it and bring in extremely important perspectives. And they get more and more filtered out as the career goes on, when we think about tenure-track jobs, associate professorships. . . .

It seems to me that the kind of choices that you're describing are also in line with certain Black feminist philosophical and political commitments. Black feminists being like, this career is not my entire being; there is also the investment that I am making in understanding myself as a whole person. This reflects a kind of holistic orientation to what it even means to be a philosopher. Those kinds of decisions that I hear you describing are, for me, not ham-fisted decisions, but conscious decisions being made about the kind of person you understand yourself to be.

S: Absolutely! I was thinking about the distinction between saying, I am a philosopher, and I'm in philosophy, or, I do philosophy. No one has to remind me to go back to my community and teach the things that I learned. I'm not gonna spend my whole life sitting in a room, thinking and theorizing. I think of philosophy as what I do, but not who I am because it feels like to say I am a philosopher, I have to cut off so many other parts of my life that are so essential, even, to how I do philosophy.

Q: What would it mean to say, I am a philosopher outside, as well as inside? What does philosophy bring to bear on your outside life?

S: I think the reason I love philosophy is because of the ability to ask questions and to get answers and then ask them again. I think there's something really important for me about the kind of philosophical trajectory of not assuming some big T truth. I think about a feminist epistemological approach of all these little t truths and putting those together to get us to some bigger version of truth. Looking at something, but then trying to shift one's gaze to figure out, what did I miss when I looked at it the first time? What might happen when we come to terms with the fact that we are looking at something in very different kinds of ways?

Q: I just always want to know, why are we doing this? What is going on? In organizing and political work, I often find myself being the person who asks, what's the structure of that? Or what's the logic that we're following here? I've devoted my life to studying this stupid thing and I want to know how I can change the world on the outside for queer folks, Black folks, women. The actual folks in my neighborhood. What does this bring to bear? How do I use any of this so I don't feel so split up?

S: I will say that there are times where I feel kind of full. Even if I'm not speaking at a protest or as involved in activism as I want, hopefully some of the ideas that I'm passing on get taken up by students who then get dispersed in the world and do a variety of things.

Q: I do wish sometimes there were more opportunities to confirm that.

S: My hope is that the person who goes and becomes a kindergarten teacher, or a lawyer, and someone leading a

chapter of a BLM in some other city, that some of those ideas get transferred and dispersed. But I just have to hold on to the thought of it.

Q: I think I'm personally losing faith in the power of the classroom. I used to feel like when I was introducing students to ideas, maybe they'll go on to be and do whatever. But now I worry about how the ideas that I'm trying to introduce are ultimately taken up or not taken up.

Going back to the scene of us going to this party together at NEH. I am thinking about embodiment in philosophy and how there is something philosophically important about the fact that I have danced with you. . . .

S: Where we could just be Qrescent and Shaeeda, not philosophers. And yet, we're always philosophers.

Q: Yes, yes, exactly. What is the special need for a kind of, like, friendship of solidarity in these contexts that we've described? Because racism, sexism, classism, etc., exist in the academy, in the classroom, in the professional space, in hiring decisions, right? So these are not just subjects we're thinking and teaching about, but also something we're simultaneously experiencing in the profession itself, right?

S: I'm very much interested in this idea of being an accomplice rather than an ally. Like, yes, I'm willing to maybe get into a little bit of trouble with you.

Q: And affirm the kinds of things that you are seeing. And I'm not just gonna be like, I'm sorry you're going through that, but also like, how do we work together to address these things? Because I think it's one thing to be supportive of someone else; it's another thing to strategize with somebody else to make plans to and to say, even if we can't change the field or the institution itself, what pockets do we have for being able to survive ourselves so that we can go back into those spaces?

For me that is the beauty of our friendship. We do both parts. We're gonna go back in the classroom. We're gonna go back in the field. We're gonna keep writing. We're gonna keep reading. All the while recognizing and holding space for each other's fullness. I also want to say very practically that writing together has been really helpful. And also, saying, like, hey girl, I'm not feeling it today. Having that space and flexibility. Thinking about each other when jobs come up, sending each other scholarships, writing recommendations. . . . Like, whatever you ask me, I'm always gonna do it, period. That's not something I feel with many other people or that I feel reciprocated for me.

S: I think those very practical things matter as well, but I see them as Black feminist practices. You find the side door, but you don't just go in by yourself; you hold it open so that a few other folks could get in with the clear expectation that those folks who got in will eventually also find a side door and take some folks in with them. And that is how we sustain ourselves because some of these possibilities just aren't going to exist in the more traditional spaces that many of us are navigating. That's how we build the space to find the little Qrescents and little Shaeedas. I try and hold on to that idea.

Q: I had one queer Black student in the past year with whom I worked very closely. Then over the summer I invited them to a picnic I had with my friends. So, I ended up seeing that outside-inside thing happening: seeing my Black queer student in my Black queer community, in the neighborhood, dancing with me. That is exactly it, you know? Seeing them as their whole selves, right? Like, not just as a student or a thinker, but a dancer or someone who laughs. Someone who eats, someone who has fun. That was a very special experience for me.

S: I learned Black feminism before I learned about hegemonic feminism, so I think about the Combahee Collective, which says, your investment in racism is not going to take away your gender oppression. If you're a Black woman, an investment in gender oppression is not going to take away racism. I'll say in my experience sometimes with working with white feminists, there has been this idea of solidarity until there's a misuse of power.

Q: Presumptions are made on the basis of a misunderstood conception of solidarity. Sometimes I feel instrumentalized by white feminists. Sometimes I find that white feminist philosophers are able to talk the talk, but are unable to relate those ideas to their lived experiences. The presumption is made that because they can quote Audre Lorde, then they're in actual political solidarity with me. Meanwhile, they forgo the need to work on behalf of women of color's lived experiences or contexts.

S: I think sometimes we might overemphasize shared experience. And then when there's time or need to think about differences in our experiences, the things start to collapse. Whenever difference emerges, we create hierarchies. I'm always thinking about what difference without hierarchy look like. As a Black woman, I'm often at the bottom, so I am very inclined to not create that hierarchy because I understand what is at stake. But I think that there are some white women who have not yet come to realize the tendency to create hierarchies higher up on the totem pole.

Q: And don't consider their own participation in the replication of those hierarchies because, I think, they don't understand how it's all implicated at the top to begin with. Your access to opportunities by virtue of white supremacy is always already connected to gender, right? And so, if they don't see how it's all connected at the top, it feels to me particularly frustrating because I'm dealing with thinkers. I'm dealing with philosophers who should be able to understand that. If anyone should be able to understand that, it should be y'all.

S: But I think that with enough power, you don't recognize your experience as subjective, right? Some of us have so much power and privilege that our subjective experience gets positioned as objective. And so, then, if we see ourselves as objective, then everybody else is being subjective. So, it presents itself as if it's the universal and the standard, and then anything that diverges from it

becomes abnormal. It becomes strange, it becomes weird, it becomes overly subjective.

Q: I mean, for me, that would speak to a limitation. Feminist philosophy comes out of being able to see lacuna or being critical of "philosophy." That same critical movement can be made from hegemonic philosophy to a more complex philosophy. It seems to me that one's capacity to make those critical moves should facilitate your being able to make critical reorientations.

S: I see it a little bit differently. So, yes, one is making a critical move, but I think when someone comes behind you and makes another critical move, that rupture is sometimes rejected. So, I think the hegemonic feminist starts to respond in the same way that the white male philosopher does: I don't like disruption. I've created the standard. It feels good. I like it. So, when something new comes along, it's like, oh, no. I think progress necessitates disruption. People get corrupted by power and then reject the very disruption that they use to get the power and privilege that they have.

Q: But you're not disappointed by this? You're not like, hey, do better?

S: No, I think the change always happens. I think there are some people who are always going to be disruptors and progress will happen. I'm not disappointed. I just expect it.

Q: Is it a losing battle? Are we going to continue to be able to recruit soldiers?

S: I mean, I think so, because I think we continue to see Black women pursuing degrees in philosophy. I think less about winning and more so being a part of the game and realizing that there is subversive potential in the game. I think it'll be a perpetual kind of work that has to be done. I hope that when some of us get tired, there's a generation of people coming behind us who will take it up. And I see that in terms of thinking about other Black feminist foremothers, who did their work and passed things down. They wrote. They talked. We took up their ideas and carried them down through generations. That's the thing that gives me hope. I assume that there is some generation of folks that will come behind us who have taken our class or read our work, and they will take it up and make it relevant to their generation and to the things that are needed at that time and place, and then the work just kind of continues from there.

ARTICLES

Deference-Based Solidarity

Cal Howland
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I. INTRODUCTION

Standpoint epistemology is having a moment again, though whether that moment feels like a revival or a reckoning depends on who you ask. One of the questions at stake is familiar but still unsettled: Can solidarity be grounded on deference to the marginalized?

Classically, standpoint epistemology says yes. Standpoint theorists argue that deference to marginalized standpoints is warranted because marginalized social positions can provide an epistemic advantage. On the other hand, recent papers by Tilton and Toole, Táíwò, and Hannon disagree.[1] Here for brevity, I'll focus just on Hannon's argument. He claims that even if deference is sometimes appropriate, it cannot give us what solidarity demands: moral understanding.

Hannon's argument unfolds in two steps. First, he objects to strong versions of the epistemic advantage thesis: if understanding comes in degrees (which he takes to be largely uncontested), then no group has an absolute epistemic privilege. Second, and more importantly for my purposes, he argues that deference is the wrong epistemic tool for building political movements, because deference involves taking someone's word without fully grasping why it's right. Without felt and reasoned conviction, Hannon claims solidarity can become fragile and easily fractured under pressure.

This paper begins from a place of partial agreement. Moral understanding matters. It deepens commitment and stabilizes movements. It gives people the language and reasons to keep going. But is moral understanding really a prerequisite for solidarity? What if, instead of grounding solidarity, moral understanding is something that *emerges from it*?

To explore this possibility, I turn not to a thought experiment, but a moment of crisis: AIDS activism in the late 1980s and early '90s. In particular, I focus on ACT UP—a movement that did not wait for consensus, did not demand shared theory before action, and did not assume that everyone involved fully understood the moral terrain they were entering. And yet, ACT UP was wildly successful in achieving its demands. ACT UP didn't begin with a unified moral framework about healthcare, gay rights, or state responsibility. It began with anger, grief, urgency and, crucially, a willingness to defer to those most affected. What followed was not confusion or collapse under pressure as Hannon would predict, but one of the most effective political movements in recent history.

The history of ACT UP suggests a different picture of solidarity than Hannon's. Not one where understanding precedes action, but one where action that is messy, incomplete, and collective can *generate* moral understanding over time. In this alternative view, deference is not a failure of reasoning. It is a starting point, and a scaffold. Deference is something we build with, and outgrow, as movements take shape.

II. CRITICISMS OF STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY

Standpoint theorists argue that deference is warranted because marginalized standpoints can have greater credibility on questions concerning one's oppression and social position. The argument that deference can be epistemically fruitful comes from two foundational claims

in Standpoint theory: (i) that knowledge is socially situated and (ii) that marginalized locations can generate *epistemic advantage*.

The roots of standpoint theory can be traced back to Marx. Marx argued that workers occupy a distinctive position from which the coercive nature of capitalism becomes visible in ways they are not to those who benefit from it. Feminist theorists, including Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, and Sandra Harding, in the 1970s and '80s extended this idea: if class position can shape knowledge, why not gender, race, sexuality, or disability? Smith contributed the claim that knowledge is *socially situated*—what people experience, notice, and understand is shaped by their social position because different people experience different social realities. Hartsock systematized this insight into the idea that marginalized locations can generate *epistemic advantage*—women's positions within systems of social reproduction and caregiving provides access to dimensions of social reality hidden from dominant perspectives. Harding and Hartsock both theorized standpoints as not merely social identity, but *achievements* arising through collective reflection and political struggle. Standpoints, in their view, emerge through consciousness-raising, critique, and shared political engagement. The epistemic advantage that emerges from this cultivation of standpoints means that marginalized people often have knowledge about social oppression and power structures that deserve special weight or deference from outsiders.

These claims have come under sustained examination in analytic philosophy in recent years. Saint-Croix, for example, argues that the deference that standpoint theory recommends is the beginning of epistemically excellent inquiry.[2] In her view, one can defer to another person's judgment while continuing to investigate the reasons, mechanisms, and evidence behind that judgment. Saint-Croix's picture of the role of deference in inquiry suggests that standpoint theory in general recommends inquiry that is attentive and investigative of who is an epistemic authority on a given topic.

On the flip side, authors including Tilton and Toole, Táíwò, and Hannon argue against deference epistemology due, in part, to the worry that deference can discourage independent learning and promote epistemic laziness.[3] Specifically, Hannon argues that calls for deference to the marginalized should be rejected because such deference hinders the development of moral understanding.

Moral understanding, as Hannon appeals to it, is capacity for understanding *why* a moral proposition is true, and as such it is a capacity that (i) comes in degrees, and (ii) can vary in depth, breadth, and coherence. Moral understanding can be achieved in a variety of ways: via perception, first-person experience, and moral reasoning.[4] Hannon defines deference as "the willingness to accept or believe what another person says without independently verifying the claim."[5]

Deference cannot impart moral understanding because moral understanding is a capacity for consistent, apt moral judgment. Deference, as defined above, in no way develops this capacity. Since uncritical deference promotes epistemic laziness, according to Hannon, it does not in any way contribute to a person's ability to *reliably act rightly* and *effectively justify their actions* to others, which straightforwardly impedes political solidarity and coalition building. Hannon describes this succinctly:

> [Deference] creates barriers to the deep understanding and conviction needed to sustain effective political movements . . . when allies rely on deference, they may fail to internalize the moral reasons behind calls for change, leaving them ill-equipped to persuade others or articulate the cause in broader terms. This can result in a fragile form of solidarity that collapses under pressure.[6]

But a standpoint theorist might reasonably respond to Hannon's criticism that one should not *blindly* defer. Deference should be accompanied by efforts to understand the perspectives of marginalized individuals. In other words, people still have to take responsibility for "doing the work" to develop their moral understanding while deferring. However, Hannon doesn't think this truly solves the problem. He provides the PETER PROBLEM.

> PETER PROBLEM: Suppose Peter, a cis man, and his female roommates are interviewing a new potential roommate. After the interview is done, Peter's roommates nix that candidate because of sexist behavior, but Peter didn't notice anything. Assume deference is appropriate in the first instance, the standpoint reply suggests that Peter should defer but not suspend his own reasoning entirely—he should engage his housemates to better understand the concerns, seek out feminist literature, and reflect critically on his assumptions and understanding. Suppose he does all that and a similar situation arises months later: Peter's housemates again judge an applicant's behavior as sexist, but Peter sees nothing objectionable. He has made good-faith efforts to improve his moral understanding, yet his judgment still diverges.

The purpose of the PETER PROBLEM is to show that insistence on "doing the work" does not really address Hannon's underlying complaint about deference. Because, according to Hannon's interpretation of standpoint theory, anytime a disagreement arises the privileged individual is expected to defer. So, the moral understanding that Peter has developed is inert with respect to his decision-making.

However, if now that Peter has developed his own moral understanding, he should rely on it in the second case, then why shouldn't he develop his own moral understanding and rely on it in the first place, instead of deferring? Hannon concludes that

> despite attempts to balance deference with independent moral reasoning, standpoint-based deference would remain deeply asymmetrical. Those without the relevant social location are expected to defer, even after making serious efforts to understand the issue for themselves."[7]

Hannon supplements his argument with Dishaw's disengagement problem. When faced with conflicting testimony from marginalized individuals, attempting to defer to both perspectives equally will cause an impossible position. The only thing to do in this case that is rational is to suspend judgment. Conflicting testimony for the deferrer results in judgment suspension, not because of careful consideration, but "because others have not settled the matter for him."[8] In these instances, suspension of judgment means standing in solidarity with no one.

Hannon concludes that genuine politically viable solidarity cannot rest on deference. It requires active engagement with the experiences and perspectives of the marginalized. It emphasizes empathy and mutual (and moral) understanding. Without this we cannot build strong and sustainable movements because the moral core of the movement will be too weak. Even if the movement is built on some moral knowledge that is taken for granted, everyone supporting that movement has to be plugged into that moral knowledge in a comprehensive and active way.

III. REJOINDER: DEFERENCE AS A SCAFFOLD

Hannon's picture of solidarity, at moments, feels like the ideal: a group of people who not only act together but understand, deeply and reflectively, *why* they act. There is incredible power to be had in movements like those he envisions, which are grounded in shared reasons, mutual comprehension, and moral clarity. But here I'll argue that these ideals mislead because they're mistaken for prerequisites. The question isn't whether Hannon's kind of solidarity is valuable—surely it is. It's whether it's *required*, especially of nascent communities, and whether movements have to wait for moral understanding to catch up before they and the individuals that comprise them can act at all.

And here, I think, the picture weakens. Because when we turn from philosophical models to actual political history, what we find is something much messier, and much more urgent. Movements rarely begin with shared theory or understanding. They begin with uneven commitments, conflicting perspectives, and a sense—sometimes barely articulated—that something must change. If that's right, then perhaps deference plays a different role than Hannon suggests. It is not indicative of a failure of moral reasoning, but as a way of moving forward together *prior* to full understanding. To see what I mean, let's turn to a case where academic inquiry and epistemic reflection was subsumed by the urgency of need.

A. ACT UP AND THE URGENCY OF ACTION

By the late 1980s, the AIDS crisis had become impossible to ignore and yet equally politically neglected. Thousands were dying. Institutions tasked with responding—government agencies, pharmaceutical companies, medical establishments—were managerial at best, and deliberately slow, indifferent, or openly hostile at worst. For many of the communities affected, the situation was existential. And so, ACT UP emerged—not as a carefully theorized movement, but as a radically democratic, action-oriented coalition. Its organizing principle was strikingly minimal: **direct action to end the AIDS crisis**. That was it. No unified moral framework, no comprehensive theory of justice, no demand that participants first align on why the crisis mattered or what grounded their obligations.

This becomes especially clear when ACT UP is contrasted with the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the NYC AIDS organization which dominated advocacy in the early 1980s. GMHC, established in 1982, was focused on health and social services for HIV-positive individuals. GMHC filled a critical social support gap that many experienced due to lack of family support and failures of public health and disability funding. GMHC at the time of its founding was the first large AIDS service organization and became a core model for professionalized nonprofit care. It functioned as crisis counseling, a buddy system, and social support for dying young people who lacked family support.

GMHC was centrally structured, and decision-making authority was **top-down**. The board of directors and paid professional staff made decisions oriented at coordination with hospitals, funders, and government agencies. Inside GMHC, people living with AIDS were beneficiaries of support and often volunteers, but not consistently the primary decision-makers. GMHC's animating value was that people with AIDS deserved care, dignity, and support—*even when the state abandoned them*. That value resulted in their social services orientation emphasizing life affirmation, reducing stigma, shame, isolation, which gave rise to a fundamental goal of making people with AIDS legible to power.

This goal implicitly required a kind of respectability politics—seeking support and non-alienation from philanthropies and government agencies; emphasizing responsibility, care, and citizenship of all individuals in the US including gay men; and framing AIDS as a public health emergency not a moral failure.[9] Due to these inflexible features of their animating principles, GMHC found themselves consistently conciliatory to powerful institutions, no matter the opinions of people living with AIDS. They limited the sexual explicitness of their public messaging and militant confrontation with medical, religious, and governmental institutions.

This orientation came from what I will call GMHC's *principles-to-praxis model*. Their guiding principles, founded on an argument for why they held those principles (moral understanding), is what grounded their solidarity with and support of people with AIDS. The testimony of people with AIDS as to what they wanted out of advocacy groups did little to change their principles because that testimony was seen as irrational; direct action and structural critique did little, according to the board of directors, to provide social services to as many HIV+ people as they could.

This principles-to-praxis advocacy was a stabilizing force, but also a kind of restriction. By establishing strong principles first, organizations can insulate themselves from challenge. When principles conflict with marginalized testimony—especially it demands confrontation or disruption—that testimony can be filtered, moderated, or dismissed as impractical. The rigidity of an organization's principles ends up constraining what solutions it imagined

to be possible. And in the context of the AIDS crisis, this principles-first approach translated directly into channeling political energy into managing suffering.

Larry Kramer famously resigned from leadership at GMHC in 1983 due to frustrations with the failure of the organization to move the needle politically. The core tensions between ACT UP activists and GHMC staffers was that GMHC had "depoliticized" the AIDS crisis. According to ACT UP activists, GHMC was structured to avoid the root causes of suffering and normalize privatized care. As a result, they thought GHMC had a net negative political effect: it had made state neglect survivable rather than unacceptable. As a member of both organizations, Kramer describes the difference between the organizations:

> The big difference between the two organizations was this—I was determined that whatever got started [ACT UP], it would not be structured because that's what GMHC had become. Everything had to have a job description and approval by this, and approval by that. And I didn't want that. So, we went the other way. I often describe [ACT UP] as democratic to a fault. And when people came and said, we want to start this, or we want to start that—fine.[10]

What Kramer describes in detail might be abstracted into describing ACT UP as an experiment in radical democracy with big tent politics. ACT UP had only an organizing committee for dispensing funds and an affinity group structure[11] committed to its single principle (direct action to end the AIDS crisis). This structure was directly opposed to that of GMHC; rather than expertise being credentialed, in ACT UP expertise was experiential.

ACT UP's goal was to be accountable in its operations to the lived experiences of its rank-and-file members, particularly those living with AIDS. Call this radically democratic approach a *praxis-to-principles* model. From this foundational deference to people with AIDS as political agents, and not just clients, the question was how to craft direct action that would push for those demands on a structural level. For example, instead of supplementing caregiving where nuclear families had failed, ACT UP explicitly politicized kinship relationships. They called for structural changes to healthcare access like allowing hospital visitation rights to non-family members and legal recognition of caregivers that were not biologically related to the person with AIDS.

Their model led directly to the huge simultaneity of response that Kramer describes. This radically democratic structure led ACT UP to many substantial wins that have changed the face of public medicine and social services today. Those achievements were largely made through direct action including direct action to close down FDA headquarters in Maryland in 1988, protesting at the NY Stock Exchange over AZT prices, and well-known "die-ins" across New York City.

This meant that ACT UP was not a consensus-based, structural power-dependent movement like GMHC. It did not push all of its members into only one analysis of the current moment or one strategy for a solution to the crisis. ACT UP did not put theory first. It realized the aspirations of its members in action and concrete demands first. Maxine Wolfe, an organizer for ACT UP describes this strategy directly: "If you do action first, your theory will emerge, because you have to make decisions that coheres with your values."[12] Schulman adds, "if you do theory first you all end up polarized, and you are fighting with each other, and nothing's actually at stake."[13]

Instead of starting with theory, ACT UP eschewed any deep theory for successful action. Instead of centralized authority, it embraced decentralization. Instead of credentialed expertise, it foregrounded experiential knowledge. And crucially, it did not require that everyone involved *fully understand* the moral stakes before participating. If anything, it assumed the opposite: that volunteers and activists who did not have AIDS would not fully understand the stakes, and their understanding would grow from a deference to the lived experience of people with AIDS to a moral understanding through their participation and relationships built within ACT UP This allowed the weight of the crisis and the success of the strategies to develop and be witnessed by participants organically.

B. DEFERENCE IN PRACTICE

Taking the lessons that Kramer and others offer from ACT UP invites an enticing alternative to Hannon's pessimism about deference. Unlike what he claims, movements and the solidarity that knit them together give rise to moral understanding and depth of values, not the other way around. Recall, Hannon's argument is that moral understanding is necessary for true solidarity, which in turn is necessary for effective political coalition building. The flip-side of that argument is that deference, which requires no moral understanding, undermines effective coalition building and thus is not an adequate basis for political momentum.

However, the AIDS crisis is an epoch within American history where the most successful political momentum came from a group founded not on moral understanding, but as essentially a group committed to the emergence of their principles out of deference to the direction their members wanted to take the group.

Within ACT UP deference to other members was foundational—across differences in experience, knowledge, and vulnerability. People living with AIDS articulated experiences and demands; others creatively organized around them. Different affinity groups pursued different strategies, often without consensus. There was disagreement, fragmentation, even conflict. And yet, the radically democratic core of the organization held strong. ACT UP did not have a fully unified articulation of the reasons underlying each demand and strategy as it emerged. Rather, there was a willingness to take seriously the claims of others, even when one did not yet grasp the moral understanding behind them. This is deference grounded in orientation toward action under conditions of practical uncertainty. Larry Kramer captures this spirit in describing ACT UP's structure: if someone had an idea—an

action, a protest, a demand—they could pursue it. Others might join, or not. There was no requirement that everyone agree in advance or even understand fully what was at stake. Theory followed practice.

This is a striking inversion of Hannon's picture. Instead of moral understanding grounding solidarity, solidarity becomes the site *where* moral understanding develops. Participants act together, reflect together, and revise together. Over time, commitments deepen. Reasons emerge or become clearer. Moral underpinnings become more precise. But none of that is required at the outset, or of any initial coalescence of solidarity. And directly in opposition to Hannon's predictions, this deference to the testimony of people with AIDS didn't undermine ACT UP's effectiveness. The movement achieved concrete, lasting changes: accelerating FDA drug approval processes, lowering drug prices, expanding access to experimental treatments, and establishing needle exchange programs. These weren't fragile victories. They reshaped public health policy.

So, here's the tension. If Hannon is right, movements built on deference should be unstable, shallow, vulnerable to collapse. But ACT UP suggests precisely the opposite: that movements and the people that comprise them can be both deferential *and* powerful—epistemically imperfect and politically effective.

C. FROM PREREQUISITE TO OUTCOME

What this review of AIDS crisis advocacy suggests is not that moral understanding is irrelevant. On the contrary, it matters deeply—especially for sustaining movements over time, for expanding them, for articulating their goals to broader audiences. But it is not a *precondition* of solidarity. Rather, solidarity is scaffolded by deference.

Seen this way, Hannon's argument is useful because it makes a common temporal mistake; that we must reach the intellectual achievement of moral understanding before we can be effective partners for solidarity in any moral action.

But ACT UP (and many movements like it) reverse this order. Action under conditions of partial understanding generates the very capacities Hannon thinks are missing. Deference, in this view, is not a substitute for moral reasoning. It is a way of *getting into motion* when reasoning is incomplete; something we rely on when asymmetries in knowledge and experience make full agreement unlikely, if not impossible. As people act together, that scaffold is revised, reinforced, and even partially dismantled as understanding grows. Yes, moral understanding strengthens solidarity. But it does not have to precede it. Sometimes, it is solidarity—messy, provisional, and imperfect—that makes even partial moral understanding possible in the first place.

IV. CONCLUSION

Let's return to where we began. Hannon says that deference cannot ground solidarity because it cannot generate the kind of moral understanding that truly committed, durable movements require. And there is something right about that worry. Movements must acquire depth. They need people who can explain themselves, defend their commitments, and stay aligned when things get difficult. But what this paper has tried to show is that this picture is incomplete. It asks movements and individuals to emerge at full maturity.

Hannon grounds this claim in the PETER PROBLEM, where individual instances of deference on moral knowledge are at odds with developing moral understanding, and Dishaw's DISENGAGEMENT PROBLEM, where deference can lead to political alienation when trying to defer to two or more marginalized individuals are on different sides of an issue. However, when we look at actual political practice, especially under conditions of urgency, asymmetry, and crisis, we see something quite different. We see the opposite of disengagement—people taking up the actions and subcommittees that move them, and leaving the rest. We see coalitions built not on shared theory, but on partial trust—on a willingness to take the claims of others seriously and as an invitation to the ways in which communal understanding and theory is continually being built and reshaped. We see, in other words, deference doing real political work.

ACT UP is not an anomaly here. Instead, it is a vivid illustration. It reminds us that movements are not born fully formed, with coherent moral frameworks and unified visions. They are built in motion: through disagreement, through experimentation, through action that outpaces explanation. And in that process, something crucial happens. People begin to understand, not abstractly, but through shared struggle. Moral understanding, in this picture, is not bypassed. It is *produced*. ACT UP evolved a moral understanding over the 1990s of what kind of fair healthcare system would need to be brought about to support the most marginalized.

This reframing matters because it changes how we think about the risks of deference. For Hannon, deference threatens to hollow out solidarity, leaving participants without the resources to sustain their commitments. But if deference is understood as a provisional strategy, as an epistemic scaffold rather than a final stance, then its role looks quite different. It becomes a tool for coordination under uncertainty, a way of enabling collective action when full understanding is not yet available.

As movements succeed, or fail, participants revise their commitments, deepen their understanding, and build new frameworks. The scaffold can be reinforced, adjusted, or partially dismantled. What begins as deference can become understanding, and what begins as partial alignment can become something closer to the robust solidarity Hannon rightly values. This does not mean that deference is without danger. It can slide into uncritical acceptance, asymmetry, or even disengagement—as criticisms of identity politics and ally culture demonstrate.[14] It can, in some contexts, obscure responsibility rather than distribute it. But these are not arguments for abandoning deference altogether. They are arguments for getting clearer about *when* and *how* it should be used.

Deference, then, is not the enemy of solidarity. Nor is it always its foundation. It is something more provisional—and perhaps more interesting. A way of acting together before we fully know why. A way of building the conditions under which understanding can emerge at all. If that is right, then the task is not to choose between deference and understanding, but to track the shifting relationship between them. To ask not whether we have enough understanding to act, but how acting together might be what *makes* understanding possible.

And in a world where waiting for consensus often means waiting too long, deferential scaffolding may be exactly what solidarity requires.

NOTES

1. Tilton and Toole, "Epistemology of Deference"; Táíwò, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege"; Hannon, "Social Identity."

2. Saint-Croix, "Zetetic and Epistemic Deference."

3. Tilton and Toole, "Epistemology of Deference"; Táíwò, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege"; Hannon, "Social Identity."

4. See Sliwa, "Moral Understanding as Knowing Right from Wrong"; and Hills, "Understanding Why." Whether the achievement of moral understanding comes from moral reasoning only or can be achieved in other ways, specifically via moral testimony, is central to the debate between Sliwa and Hills. I will sidestep this, as Hannon assumes only what is in agreement between the two.

5. Hannon, "Social Identity," sec. 4.6.

6. Hannon, "Social Identity," sec. 5.5.

7. Hannon, "Social Identity," sec. 5.5.

8. Hannon, "Social Identity," sec. 5.5. Hannon is citing Dishaw, "Solidarity and the Work of Moral Understanding."

9. Most starkly what they were trying to combat in messaging was the original framing, taken up by the Reagan administration, that AIDS was "gay cancer"—the result of living an immoral life.

10. Kramer, interview by Schulman, 9.

11. ACT UP is well remembered for its Monday meetings at the NYC LGBTQ center. However, critical to the organizational structure was that affinity groups never had to actually bring their proposed actions to the floor of the Monday meetings. They could do direct action and ACT UP would still provide legal support. This structure evolved out of suspicion that there was heavy infiltration of ACT UP by the police, which was later substantiated in redacted documents published by Schulman, *Let the Record Show*.

12. Maxine Wolfe, quoted by Sarah Schulman in New York Public Library, "Sarah Schulman with Kwame Anthony Appiah," at 54:29.

13. New York Public Library, "Sarah Schulman with Kwame Anthony Appiah," at 54:40.

14. For an excellent example, see Dean, *Comrade*.

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Resisting Authoritarianism: Lessons from Queer Liberation

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INTRODUCTION

In a moment marked by rising authoritarianism—specifically, intensified border regimes, expanding surveillance, and escalating attacks on marginalized communities (including queer communities)—there is a clear and urgent sense that something must be done. Yet that urgency is often paired with paralysis. The problems are many and vast, and it is unclear what to prioritize and what resistance strategies will be effective. In these conditions, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and retreat into inaction.

This essay turns to the history of queer resistance to ask what it can teach us about resisting authoritarianism today. What emerges from looking into this history is a set of lessons that can inform present struggles. Specifically, queer resistance shows the importance of embracing the messy pluralism of organizing: movements can and must act without resolving disagreements about ultimate goals or the best means of achieving them. It also reveals that the work of sustenance—meeting basic needs, building networks of care, and having fun—is not ancillary to political struggle but constitutive of it. The history of queer resistance also highlights the role of tactics that close moral

distance by forcing confrontation with the human costs of injustice.

Looming in the background of our present analysis paralysis is a question that haunts contemporary activism: What difference can any individual action make? Looking at queer liberation movements reminds us that focusing on individual impact rather than on what can be achieved collectively obscures how transformative change actually happens.

METHODOLOGY: ACTIVISM, HISTORY, AND PHILOSOPHY

Questions about activist strategy are often treated as non-philosophical: more matters of practicality rather than theory, better left to organizers, political scientists, or trial and error on the ground. Philosophy, by contrast, concerns itself with more abstract and squarely normative issues: what justice requires, what rights we have, what an ideal society would look like, and so on.

There is something intuitive about this division of labor. This is in part because in conditions as urgent as our own, it can feel like a distraction to step back and theorize.

But this way of drawing the boundary is misguided. At the core of activist strategy lies a normative question: Given a set of moral and political ends, how should we act under non-ideal conditions?

At least three normative issues are at play. First, addressing the question involves determining which ends matter—overall well-being, justice, power, fairness, rights—and how to weigh them against one another. Accordingly, in organizing, we confront difficult moral trade-offs: for instance, should one in order to secure immediate relief, or refuse in the name of transformative change in the longer term?

Second, activist strategy raises questions about constraints on means: which tactics are justified, how they should be proportioned to the ends they aim to achieve, and whether some are off-limits. Third, it involves reasoning under conditions of deep uncertainty, where there is limited evidence about which strategies will succeed. Philosophy offers resources for navigating uncertain epistemic environments, including ways of thinking about risk, harm, and proportionality.

All three families of questions can be framed as matters of non-ideal political philosophy. A central insight of non-ideal theory is that, in asking how to structure political and legal institutions, we should not assume ideal background conditions but instead theorize from the realities of deep injustice, limited knowledge, and imperfect agents.[1] The core question of activist strategy takes these facts as given and asks what should be done to make the world better, given how fucked up it currently is?

Looking at history can shed light on these questions. Social movements can be understood as large-scale experiments in collective action carried out under conditions we cannot replicate in theory. As such, they generate a form of practical-normative knowledge: insight into how people have conceptualized their ends and navigated uncertainty, constraint, and disagreement in pursuit of political change.

Looking towards history also expands our sense of the possible. Under conditions of political despair, it is easy to take present constraints as fixed and inevitable, to assume that meaningful change is out of reach. The history of resistance movements unsettles these assumptions. It reveals that with hard work and organizing, transformative change that appears impossible can become possible.

Further, queer resistance is particularly instructive as a lens for exploring the ethics of activism today. Faced with state abandonment, and pervasive stigma—especially during the AIDS crisis—queer communities developed strategies for both transforming unjust institutions and surviving their failures in the meantime. Unfortunately, we must also do both at once now.

AGAINST PURITY AND CERTAINTY: DISAGREEMENT AND PLURALISM IN QUEER ACTIVISM

One reason resisting authoritarianism feels so daunting is the dual uncertainty about what future we are working toward and what means will get us there. These are not just open questions but ones we actively disagree about.

One common model of organizing—call it an implicit *monist* or *purist model*—assumes that effective action requires first resolving uncertainty about means and ends and achieving consensus. Under this model, movements are expected to act only once everyone shares the same vision and strategy, and only alongside partners who also adopt it.

The monist model lurks within social movements and drives critiques of them. Occupy Wall Street, for instance, was frequently criticized for lacking a unified set of demands.[2] Organizations like the Democratic Socialist of America, on the other hand, are amidst a longstanding debate about whether to embrace electoralism as a political strategy or to focus on building power outside of the political establishment through mutual aid, unions, and tenant organizing.[3] This debate feels paralyzing if one thinks that organizing requires consensus about means and ends.

The history of queer resistance challenges this monist intuition. It reveals how the demand for consensus can paralyze action, rupture solidarity, and prevent experimentation.

In *Let the Record Show*, Sarah Schulman highlights how Queer movements during the AIDS crisis embraced disagreement and strategic pluralism and argues that this was key to their success. She characterizes decision-making within ACT UP as a form of "radical democracy," because at its height, "ACT UP never demanded full agreement for an action or campaign to be taken up"[4] To the contrary,

> if I wanted to participate in an illegal needle exchange on the Lower East Side in order to get arrested and wage a test case trial, and you didn't want to, you wouldn't stop me from doing it; you just wouldn't do it. If instead you wanted to organize a demonstration against the Catholic church and I didn't want to, I simply wouldn't do it.[5]

Schulman suggests that although this method was never overtly stated or theorized, one of its strengths is that "many different expressions of direct action were carried out simultaneously" because "none of them requir[ed] full consensus, total participation, or universal agreement."[6]

This embrace of pluralism had a number of benefits. First, it enabled individual people to pursue roles in the movement that most aligned with their values, skills, and capacities. Second, it built a broader coalition by empowering those who disagree to organize together. Third, it allowed for mobilization from multiple angles at once so as to push simultaneously on multiple pressure points.

Given inevitable uncertainty about what actions will be effective, a multipronged strategy also offers a valuable form of experimentation. Sometimes, in organizing, we should throw things at the wall and see what sticks.

Looking at other moments in queer history reminds us how difficult it is to discern the impact of a particular action in advance. Consider the Compton's Cafeteria riots in San Francisco's Tenderloin District in August 1966, three years before Stonewall. On the night of the uprising, Compton's was, as Susan Stryker describes, "buzzing with its usual late-night crowd of drag queens, hustlers, slummers, cruisers, runaway teens, and down-and-out neighborhood regulars."[7] After management called the police on a group of queens deemed too loud—a routine form of harassment—the encounter escalated. Patrons fought back: coffee was hurled, dishes shattered, and officers were struck by the queens' stilettos.

Stryker argues that this moment proved pivotal for transgender resistance, catalyzing longer-term structural change. She suggests that in the aftermath of Compton's, local officials began to relate differently to trans residents, treating them less as a problem to be managed and more as citizens with legitimate needs. Activists also built on the momentum of the riot to establish some of the earliest community-based support services for trans people. But none of this would have been foreseeable from the outset; an unplanned, volatile eruption proved transformative in ways no one could have anticipated.

Embracing pluralism and uncertainty in resistance aligns with a rejection of purity politics, or the tendency to refuse engagement with any strategy, institution, or coalition that falls short of one's moral and political ideals. Purity politics sets a high bar for participation in movements: only the right tactics, only the right partners, only the right goals.

Alexis Shotwell's *Against Purity* offers a powerful philosophical challenge to the purist tendency. Shotwell argues that the pursuit of purity is both impossible and counterproductive because we are all implicated in unjust systems. We consume products made through exploitation, benefit from histories of dispossession, and participate in institutions we may oppose.[8] There is no position outside these entanglements from which to act. For Shotwell, the solution to this bind is not to struggle fruitlessly to disentangle oneself from injustice but to proceed from a morally impure starting point, foregrounding "complicity and compromise as a starting point for action."[9] In other words, the question is not how to keep one's hands clean, but how to do the most good with inevitably dirty ones.

Applied to activism, refusing purity can reframe what ethical participation in movements entails. Working through morally compromised institutions need not be categorically prohibited, nor the singular path towards justice, but part of a broader toolkit.

ACT UP's "inside-out" strategy illustrates this well. Rather than choosing between working within institutions and confronting them, ACT UP did both simultaneously. "Insider" advocates negotiated with bodies like the FDA while "outsider" direct action—protests, die-ins, media interventions—kept public pressure high.[10] These were not competing approaches but mutually reinforcing ones: outside pressure gave insider negotiators leverage they wouldn't otherwise have had, while insider access gave outside agitators credibility and information to sharpen their demands.

Schulman's historical project aims to tell "a story that should have been impossible, which is why it is crucial for us to understand how and why it happened."[11] What emerges is a movement whose accomplishments were pluralistic in both method and effect. ACT UP helped secure a fast-track system that allowed seriously ill people to access experimental drugs before formal approval—a model later adopted more broadly by the FDA. Activists successfully pushed the CDC to change its definition of AIDS, enabling many women to qualify for benefits and participate in clinical trials. They pressured pharmaceutical companies to alter research priorities and played a role in ending insurance discrimination against people living with AIDS. Beyond these institutional victories, the movement transformed social schemas around queer people, changing how "queer people understood themselves and were in turn understood by others."[12]

Without embracing messiness and pluralism, it is hard to see how these accomplishments could have been possible.

SUSTENANCE AND ROSES

Activism is often understood as fundamentally oriented toward structural change: changing laws, social norms, and institutions. On this view, meeting basic needs, building community, and providing care may emerge as secondary—at best supportive or a stopgap until change can happen, and at worst apolitical.

Similarly, expressions of joy, celebration, and pleasure within movements can seem like luxuries, things that take energy away from the urgent work of combating injustice.

The history of queer resistance suggests a different way of thinking. Far from being ancillary to political struggle, sustenance, fun, and community-building have been among its most powerful engines. In other words, the work of keeping people fed, housed, alive, and joyful has always been integral to successful resistance.

One reason to take sustenance seriously as a strategy is that it builds political power. Dean Spade's *Mutual Aid* offers a powerful account of why.[13] For Spade, mutual aid is distinct from charity, which operates within existing systems and accepts its terms: some have resources, others lack them, and the task is to redistribute enough to get by. By contrast, mutual aid, in Spade's view, is the practice of collective care premised on political solidarity rather than benevolence. We help each other not out of pity but because we understand our fates as bound together.

Spade highlights how mutual aid politicizes people by helping them build a shared narrative about why they are suffering. When basic needs go unmet, the dominant culture offers a ready explanation: personal failure and bad choices. Mutual aid counters this by building political consciousness around the institutional and structural failures that actually lead to material deprivations: the state's abandonment, the healthcare system's exclusions, and the economy's violence. In meeting needs together, people come to understand these as contingent and changeable features of structural injustice, not personal failures. As such, in mutual aid, we become movement participants, not just benefactors and recipients.

This dynamic was visible in the work of STAR—Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries—founded by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera in New York in 1970. STAR House provided food, shelter, and community to homeless trans youth and street queens at a time when the state offered nothing.[14] But STAR was not simply a service organization: it was an explicitly political project, advocating for prison reform and legal reforms to protect LGBTQ+ rights, among other structural changes. Johnson and Rivera understood that you could not ask people to show up for a movement if they had nowhere to sleep. Sustenance was the precondition for organizing, and organizing was the only way to ensure sustenance in the long term.

Another reason to center sustenance is that movements that neglect sustenance and joy risk collapse. Political organizing is exhausting, especially under conditions where life, livelihood, and basic moral recognition are at stake. As described by Spade, "eating together, having check-ins with interesting questions about people's favorite foods, plants, movies, or politicizing movements may seem silly at first but make a big difference."[15] This is because without deliberate attention to the needs of activists—for rest, care, pleasure, and community—movements burn people out and drive them away.

Queer resistance has long understood this, in part because queer communities have always had to build their own worlds. These worlds meet a range of our needs, from social to sexual to familial to political. Correspondingly, the bars, community centers, drag performances, and chosen families that sustained queer life under hostility were not escapes from politics but often functioned as its infrastructure. They kept people connected, replenished, and reminded of what they were fighting for. Joy was not a reward deferred until after the revolution, but rather a resource that made continued struggle possible.

The phrase "bread and roses" captures this sentiment. Originating in the labor movement—and specifically, the 1912 Lawrence textile strike, where women workers demanded not just fair wages but dignity and beauty—it insists that human beings need more than bare survival. We need joy, meaning, beauty, and community. A movement that aims only towards bread reduces politics to the satisfaction of material needs and misses something essential about what justice requires and how we should structure movements in the unjust meantime.

Sustenance work is also a form of prefigurative politics—the idea that movements should embody, in their own practices, the values of the world they are trying to build. Even in a broken world, we can build small, blissful ones within it. Prefiguration has long been central to queer organizing—the idea that we can experiment with new forms of life *now*, rather than waiting for some future liberation. This spirit animates utopian projects like Short Mountain Sanctuary, a longstanding commune for queer and trans people in rural Tennessee, as well as spaces like queer nightclubs, where different ways of being and relating are practiced in the present.

CLOSING MORAL DISTANCE

A well-documented feature of moral psychology is that our sense of obligation tracks distance. We are far more likely to intervene when harm is immediate, visible, and close at hand than when it is distant, abstract, or statistical.[16] This tension is perhaps best illustrated by Peter Singer's famous thought experiment: most people feel a strong obligation to save a child drowning in a shallow pond, yet feel far less compelled to aid those dying from preventable causes far away.[17] Singer argues that this intuition is mistaken; that distance is morally irrelevant, and our obligations to the nearby and the faraway are equivalent.

Still, most of us still hold some degree of *proximity bias*: as harms become more remote or more numerous, they become harder to grasp and easier to ignore.[18] This is a feature of how human attention and emotion work, and it has clear political consequences. Injustices are in part sustained because their harms are out of view. They are dispersed, bureaucratized, or even deliberately hidden.

If distance dampens moral response, then one important task for political movements is to close that distance: to make injustice perceptible, immediate, and difficult to ignore. This involves bringing visceral realities into public space and attaching them to bodies and stories. The result is forcing confrontation where there might otherwise be avoidance.

Queer resistance offers some of the clearest examples of this strategy. During the AIDS crisis, activists faced both government inaction and widespread public indifference

to mass death. The direct action strategy of ACT UP aimed to close the moral distance that enabled this moral and political neglect. For instance, on October 11, 1988, over a thousand ACT UP activists gathered at the FDA headquarters in Rockville, Maryland. In front of helmeted police guarding the entrances, many lay down in a die-in, holding tombstone cutouts reading "DEAD FROM LACK OF DRUGS" and "VICTIM OF F.D.A. RED TAPE."[19]

ACT UP organized a number of die-ins in the years that followed. They worked by placing the reality of premature death in spaces where it could not be ignored. This transformed the abstraction of "the AIDS crisis" into something immediate and visceral. As Schulman explains, ACT UP's philosophy of political action drew on the history and success of direct action in the civil rights movement, like bus boycotts and lunch-counter sit-ins. "Instead of marching around with signs and listening passively to speakers . . . ACT UP created elaborate images of the obstacles they were fighting and the world they wanted to live in."[20] This, ACT UP participant Dudley Saunders observed, amounts to "invisibility made visible at the center."[21]

By making harm visible, proximate, and embodied, targeted direct action can transform what might otherwise remain an abstract issue into something that demands response.

This lesson is particularly salient in the present. Many of the most reprehensible forms of injustice today are organized in ways that insulate them from public scrutiny. Immigration enforcement is carried out in detention centers far from view. The human costs of war are mediated through screens and statistics. And the denial of lifesaving care for trans people and pregnant people is dispersed across a series of bureaucratic decisions. In each case, distance does political work. It enables inaction by making suffering and premature death easier to disregard.

The history of queer resistance suggests that effective opposition requires thinking carefully about which strategies could bring it closer: make it felt, rather than merely known. Not all forms of protest do this equally well.

There are several contemporary forms of resistance that align with this approach to direct action and can serve as models today. One example is ICE watch initiatives, which monitor, document, and disrupt immigration enforcement activity in real time. Where deportations typically unfold in the shadows, witnessed only by those directly in their path, ICE watch drags enforcement into public view and reveals its violence. Similarly, clinic defense and escort networks at abortion clinics make obstacles to reproductive care publicly visible at the point of delivery. The movement to stop "Cop City" in Atlanta offers another example. The campaign opposed the construction of a massive police training facility in the Weelaunee Forest, a green space on the edge of the city. Activists occupied the forest and made concrete two things that are too often experienced as abstract: the expansion of the carceral state and the destruction of nature, both literally taking place in the same patch of trees.

In each case, these strategies aim to structure attention so that it becomes difficult to perceive injustice as distant or merely theoretical.

FORGET ABOUT INDIVIDUAL IMPACT

A persistent puzzle in thinking about political action concerns the apparent inefficacy of individual contribution: given the scale of structural injustice, what difference will my individual action make? Indexed to the framework here, what difference will it make if I participate in direct action, or show up for mutual aid? Isn't my impact negligible, at best?

The history of queer resistance, and of organizing more broadly, reminds us that this is the wrong question to ask. Individual people do not make a difference, movements do. Just as structural injustice is not reducible to any agent's actions, neither is resisting it within the power of any person. The right question is, then, not *what difference will I make*, but rather, *what can we do?*

We are encouraged, culturally, to think in terms of individual agency and individual impact. This framing produces paralysis in the face of large-scale injustice. Confronting authoritarianism is less daunting when we center how we can do it together. Queer history shows that when people organize, what once seemed impossible becomes achievable. And we can do so in ways that are fun, sexy, and sustain each other in the meantime.

NOTES

1. Charles W. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165–83.

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3. See, for instance, Frank Ascaso, "The Lure of Elections: From Political Power to Popular Power," Truthout, March 30, 2018, https://truthout.org/articles/the-lure-of-elections-from-political-power-to-popular-power/.

4. Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993*, First edition (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 28.

5. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 28.

6. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 28.

7. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, second edition, revised edition (Seal Press, 2017), 85.

8. Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

9. Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 5.

10. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 207–09.

11. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 5.

12. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 5.

13. Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (Verso, 2020).

14. Stryker, *Transgender History*, 110–11.

15. Spade, *Mutual Aid*, 114.

16. See Stephan Dickert et al., "Mental Imagery, Impact, and Affect: A Mediation Model for Charitable Giving," *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 2 (2016); Hanna Zagefka et al., "Familiarity Breeds Compassion: Knowledge of Disaster Areas and Willingness to Donate Money to Disaster Victims," *Applied Psychology* 62, no. 4 (2013): 640–54; Tehila Kogut et al., "How Far Is the Suffering? The Role of Psychological Distance and Victims'

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19. "Seize Control of the FDA," ACT UP Oral History Project, accessed June 4, 2026, https://www.actuporalhistory.org/actions/seize-control-of-the-fda.

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21. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 26.

Revoked and Remade: Recognition, Kinship, and the Occupation of Minneapolis

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When ICE agents retreat, they leave a trail of garbage. Tear gas grenades and their ring-pull pins, sub-lethal munitions and their cartridges, rifle magazines . . . and sometimes even cars.

On the evening of January 14, 2026, federal agents working with the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency shot Julio Cesar Sosa-Celis, a Venezuelan man, in the leg. Agents shot him through the door of his home, which was occupied by four other people at the time. A bullet from the encounter would later be found lodged in the wall of a child's bedroom. During the ensuing standoff with protesters, agents also suffocated the family of Destiny Jackson in their car. Jackson and her family—her husband and their six children—were trying to return home when they were stopped by ICE agents, who deployed tear gas into their vehicle by rolling a grenade under the car. The family's youngest child, a six-month old infant, was resuscitated by CPR after he stopped breathing during the incident. Shortly prior, Jackson and her family had stopped to ask about the protest they encountered on their way home from a basketball game. Federal agents had blocked off several streets in their North Minneapolis neighborhood, setting up multiple confrontations with observers and protesters. Facing an increasingly raucous crowd, the agents eventually retreated, spraying protesters and reporters alike with pepper balls as they fled.

This time, however, the trail of garbage included multiple intact federal vehicles. Amid the tactical gear and planning documents, protesters found a strange stash: small, freshly minted medallions—challenge coins—still in their plastic packaging. In the livestream, onlookers saw a handful of unique coins, most striking among them a crowned skull flanked by vultures.[1] Another challenge coin, reported by Talking Points Memo in April of 2026, garishly repeats the skull motif, this time with a helmet, fiery eyes, and two M16-like assault rifles. "OPERATION METRO SURGE," "ONE NATION," and "UNDER GOD" are embossed beneath the skull, with portraits of President Donald Trump and Border Czar Tom Homan between the words "ONE NATION" and "UNDER GOD."



Fig. 1. Two of the Operation Metro Surge challenge coins. Left, recovered by protesters on January 14, 2026;[2] right, reported by Talking Points Memo.[3]

Challenge coins are a common part of military culture, especially within the United States. They are often issued by military commanders, units, or bases in commemoration of membership, missions, or important events. Their value is not monetary, but social: they are a way of recognizing the recipient as a part of the group. A witness, a participant, a member. These coins are treasure that marks their bearers.

Little information about the Operation Metro Surge coins is public. During the mission, however, it appears that these treasures were earned by abducting residents of Minneapolis from the streets. Given the variety recovered by protesters, it is clear that there was not simply a single Operation Metro Surge coin in January 2026. Rather, there were multiple coins one could earn. Perhaps achievements to be unlocked. Different medals for different goals—like a video game. Pick them off. Kill opposing forces. "Destroy the Flood," to quote both recruitment advertisements for the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency and *Halo*—a video game franchise. "The Flood," to clarify, refers to a parasitic alien invasion. All opposition are enemies. All opposition are NPCs.

"NPC" is short for "non-player character"—any character in a game that is not controlled by a player like you or me. NPCs might be allies, enemies, or neutral, but they are not people. They are not moral subjects. So, you cannot harass an NPC, you cannot mistreat an NPC, you cannot "grief" an NPC. All of these are terms of moral trespass, and you cannot morally trespass against an NPC. And this is how the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency encouraged its agents to view the residents of Minneapolis during Operation Metro Surge.

At least, that's how it felt in the winter of 2026. I have no official confirmation of why ICE chose "Destroy the Flood" as an advertising slogan or what official purpose the array of commemorative coins was meant to serve. Even so, as a resident of Minneapolis, it felt as though we were NPCs in the eyes of agents who descended on our city. Brown neighbors were the Flood. Anyone helping them, defending them, or simply observing what was happening to them was just an NPC. Enemies to be defeated, points to be harvested, achievements to be unlocked.

RECOGNITION: REVOKED AND RECONFIGURED

In *The Politics of Recognition*, Charles Taylor writes about

the deep importance of others' regard in our lives. We are made, in part, by the way others see us. So, too, we are unmade. Challenge coins make this all too literal. When a superior officer hands the crowned skull to his subordinate, it is grim glorification of the subordinate's action. This token recognizes the violence and celebrates its execution at the subordinate's hands. The coin is cold, heavy, and satisfying. The subordinate has something new and rare: a gift from one whose role is to tell him who he is. He is a soldier, and he has earned the gift of that identity through standing steadfast against the instinct to see another human being as a person. The human beings on the other end of that steadfastness have been pepper sprayed, stuffed into the makeshift cells of the Whipple Federal Building, secreted away to the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, deported without hearings, or killed. In the eyes of the subordinate, their personhood was revoked.

Operation Metro Surge was unique. Unlike past massive, militarized mobilizations in American cities, there was no inciting incident. There were no blazing buildings, no mass protests—nothing with which authorities might assuage the unease of everyday people. Instead, it was just suddenly the case that your morning commute might be interrupted by tear gas as masked men in unmarked vehicles stormed a local business on what had, moments prior, been a peaceful city street. These everyday people watched as their neighbors were assaulted and ripped from their vehicles. These everyday people navigated their way around cars left in the middle of the street, sometimes still running. These everyday people began picking up the 3D-printed whistles left at shops and restaurants around town. And then, having done so, they started seeing themselves in the rapid responders they watched on the news and saw in the streets. More importantly, they started seeing themselves in the eyes of ICE agents who looked at those rapid responders as NPCs. They came to see that, in the eyes of the government, they were not moral subjects. They, too, were NPCs.

At the same time, however, these everyday people deliberately chose to put themselves in community with their neighbors. The slogan "we keep us safe" popped up on wheatpastes and telephone pole posters across town,[4] and neighborhood after neighborhood hosted small gatherings. They shared food and drink, discussed the occupation, planned neighborhood watches, and built communication networks. For many, this was the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began that they held close company with their neighbors, breaking the atomicity that so often characterizes modern life.

This atomicity is enabled by what we might call the "statist" view of community: community safety is handled by state-designated authorities who delineate the boundary of your community and protect the people of your community. For those who view community safety this way, there is no need to know or be known by your neighborhood; so long as you are recognized as part of the community to be protected, you are safe. But *only* so long as that, as critics of policing have long pointed out.[5]

Dehumanization and deatomization are connected. For these everyday people, the occupation of Minneapolis during Operation Metro Surge disturbed the recognition assumed under the statist view. Even people who stayed away from the protests following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 could easily see their assumed recognition crumbling in 2026. One did not need to attend a protest or disobey an officer to be caught in a cloud of tear gas. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time was enough. And there were a lot of wrong places and wrong times. Asking a question was enough. Delivering food to a family was enough. Observing the actions of government officials was enough. It was easy to become an NPC. But, as Charles Taylor writes, recognition is an essential human need. As residents of Minneapolis were dehumanized by agents of their government, they found new recognition, new personhood among their neighbors. Minneapolis became a less atomized city as the weeks wore on, with more and more people finding their way to help. In doing so, the recognition in which they saw themselves was simple and humble: neighbor.

I think this experience has been profound for many. Traumatic, but also profound. Those everyday people who found themselves suddenly cut off from personhood in the eyes of authorities they trusted came to find themselves remade and renewed in community with the people they chose. In this way, many of these "everyday people" experienced a dynamic not altogether dissimilar to that of chosen family.

CHOSEN FAMILY AND QUEER KINSHIP

Chosen family, those we hold as dear as kin, though they do not fit the dominant, blood-bound paradigm of kinship, has a special place in queer culture.[6] The scouring that sometimes follows coming out to one's family of origin makes chosen family a necessary refuge. Even for those who are not rejected by their families of origin, the refuge of chosen family— finding a place of deep and lasting love among people who share an understanding of the anxieties, joys, and lifeways of queerness—can be lifesaving.

Coming to see these relationships as kin relationships requires the rejection of a conception of kinship that, like the conception of community discussed above, is entwined with the overwhelming power of the state. This is the conception of kinship under which it is laws, marriage certificates, medical records, and judges' signatures that determine our family, rather than the bonds these artifacts purport to record. Kinship, under this statist conception, often refuses to recognize queer kin, but nevertheless governs who may take up the most intimate privileges of our lives—making love with us, picking up our children, visiting us in the hospital, disposing of our affairs.[7] The omnipresence and inevitability of these effects lends the statist conception an air of verisimilitude and authority that reifies the place of the state in defining kin. (This is one of the many reasons that queer activists and philosophers often reject assimilation; advocating for gay marriage is advocating that the state be the issuer of *licenses* to the most intimate and central relationships of our lives.[8]) Here, too, a parallel with the statist conception of community: the notion that community is delineated and protected

by the state, the inevitability of police forces, the default reliance on police for conflict resolution, the "curation" of community through jails and prisons, and so forth, these serve to solidify the place of the state—rather than us—as that which defines community.

Finding chosen family is a transformative experience. Through it, we become the authors of our own understanding of family and identity; and this remaking opens us to possibility and creative potential within our lives. This is because kinship and family are among the first and most fundamental concepts we acquire, and we learn to treat them as givens of not just history and law, but biology and god. So, if we can remake these most fundamental concepts, and thereby remake ourselves, what else can we transform? I think enduring Operation Metro Surge was similarly transformative for many of those "everyday people" in Minneapolis.

The shared dynamic of these experiences is striking: revocation, transformation, and realignment. Residents of Minneapolis, citizens and non-citizens alike, experienced a revocation of recognition. In our case, it was recognition as persons—as moral subjects. Even if, as one might reasonably contend, these were *merely* assumed forms of recognition for many of us, belief in them nevertheless served as part of the cognitive furniture on which many rested their identities. (Of course, for many non-citizens and their families, the recognition of personhood was always precarious and its revocation always a possibility.[9]) Queerness often involves similar revocation. The queer person coming out to their family fears (and often finds) the assumed reality and permanence of natal kinship being revoked by those kin. These revocations of recognition uproot the source of our identities and, in their place, we—in both cases—must either find some way to appear worthy of recognition to those revoking it or find new anchors of identity. Return to the closet; ignore the masked men. Or find someone who will hold you as you are, as you wish to be, and as you are becoming.

In order to change whose recognition matters to us, however, we need to reconfigure how we understand who we are. In the case of queer identity, we need to remake our understanding of what kinship is and whose judgment determines family. In the case of community, it is understanding of what community is and does. Revocation matters in both cases because it is a catalyst for the interrogation of these received statist views. That interrogation, in turn, allows the transformation of our concepts. Statist kin becomes chosen family, statist community becomes neighborhood, becomes "we keep us safe." In both, we find realignment with the disempowered. Both are instances of recognizing hegemony and choosing the marginalized.

There is, of course, a disanalogy in all of this. The transformation that occurs in queer kinship exists largely within what Axel Honneth would distinguish as the sphere of intimate relationships[10]—family, friends, and the like—while the transformation I've recounted here involves shifting from the sphere of legality and rights to that of solidarity. There are many dimensions to this difference, but a particularly important one concerns the power relations in place. There is no doubt that many people we love have great psychological, emotional, financial, and legal power over us—power in the intimate sphere is not disconnected from the legal sphere. Even so, the apparatus of the state dramatically outstrips the power of kin relationships to negatively impact our lives. So, one might worry, individuals' willingness to nurture a transformed identity that separates them from the state may be limited. One can build a new family, but it is another task entirely to build a new state. Yet, this is not the task at hand. In both cases, the task is a conceptual one; it is about changing how one views family and community in ways that reverberate through how we understand ourselves and change the relationships within which we rest our identities.

One might also question the breadth of this sort of change. Many people have long since set aside the statist view of community, if they ever held it (even implicitly) to begin with—especially people of color long victimized by the agents of the state and especially in Minneapolis, where community trust in policing is low. Nevertheless, this is a transformation I have seen, and I think it is one that matters. Operation Metro Surge has waned, but neighborhood patrols have become walking groups, weekly grocery deliveries at the church have become Sunday mass, and so on. As we find chosen family, we reorient our lives around them; so, too, with neighborhood and community. This is the sort of realignment that allows us to continually reaffirm the conceptual transformation and reconstruct our identities.

The parallel between these cases suggests that the structure of identity reconstruction—revocation, transformation, and realignment—is not specific to any particular sphere of our lives. It occurs wherever we stake our sense of self in relations that prove contingent upon being someone we aren't. Rejection of one's identity, in fear or fact, runs deep. But it is a place where we have agency, and the resulting transformation can run just as deep. My hope is that this one will. We shall see.

NOTES

1. Unicorn Riot, "After ICE Agent Shoots Man."
2. Unicorn Riot, "After ICE Agent Shoots Man."
3. Walker, "Staff at Minnesota Deportation Hub."
4. Norris, *We Keep Us Safe*.
5. Emerick and Yap, *Not Giving Up on People*.
6. Weston, *Families We Choose*.
7. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 2000.
8. Card, "Against Marriage and Motherhood"; Caserio et al., "The Antisocial Thesis."
9. De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability."
10. Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*.

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Play and Playfulness as Queer Resistance: The Return of Trike Dyke

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As I silently pedaled a child-sized red tricycle into the lights and across the stage of CB's 313 Gallery, wearing many layers of variously gendered clothing and a black cat puppet named Pussy on one hand, and carrying a bag of phallic and vulvic foods, I realized how little I knew about what I was going to do in the next fifteen minutes. Having never rehearsed the show, I didn't even know how long it would take to ride the tiny trike from backstage, but the audience was supportive, laughing along with my clownish plight as I slowly struggled forward to start the show. My experience of performing this show, along with the work of Maria Lugones, C. Thi Nguyen, and Talia Mae Bettcher, shows that play and playfulness can aid in queer identity exploration, the development of new forms of agency, and the co-creation of resistant subcommunities. How can we chart a more playful path forward?

Lugones famously develops her thoughts about playfulness within her discussion of "world"-traveling and loving perception. Her focus is on the world-traveling that women of color in the US often do: she argues that playfulness can offer an antidote to the "failure of love" from White/Anglo women and to the indifference that leaves her feeling stranded in the Anglo "world."[1] While I lack the space to explore racial identity here, I see many parallels between Lugones's description and the feeling of isolation that comes from exploring a gender identity that diverges from the dominant world's constructions, and I see playfulness likewise, as a powerful antidote for the queer community. As Lugones understands it, to adopt a playful attitude is to be willing to make a fool of oneself, "not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight."[2] For her, playfulness involves an acknowledgement of one's limitations and openness to being corrected, not taking oneself too seriously, and remaining flexible and open to ambiguity. It is also by its nature "loving," providing a means of bridging divides and building solidarity. As I explore further below, this openness and lack of seriousness creates space to explore one's identity and support others' explorations, without taking norms as sacred.

While I focus primarily on the work of Lugones, Nguyen's *Games: The Art of Agency* is also useful in suggesting that games allow us to "take on a new agency, an agency designed by someone else."[3] As Nguyen puts it, "Games can help build our inventory of *ways of being practical*. And such an inventory . . . can support our freedom and autonomy," understood as "more options to plan about how I will cope with the world."[4] Nguyen builds off Bernard Suits's understanding of game-play as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" and develops an analysis of "striving play," in which we adopt winning as a temporary goal "for the sake of the struggle."[5,6] In other words, we "impose restrictions on [our]selves in the short-term as part of the long-term project of developing more freedom and autonomy," and different restrictions lead us to cultivate different abilities, traits, and virtues, which we can then draw on outside the game.[7] Thus, games allow us to develop and practice specific ways of being, such as new queer identities or resistance to oppression, which we can then draw on outside the game.

One might find the views of Lugones and Nguyen too disparate to be considered together: Lugones emphasizes that in playful activity, "[w]e may not have rules, and when we do have rules, *there are no rules that are to us sacred*," while Nguyen worries that "too much freedom, in the strictly negative sense, may simply lead to a repetition of one's own ruts and habits."[8,9] Lugones also disavows "agonistic" games, where the focus is on "winning, losing, battling," while Nguyen focuses on games in which one strives to win.[10] Nonetheless, I find it fruitful to consider the views together in the form of playful play, combining the openness and ambiguity of Lugones with the agency-building of Nguyen, along the same lines as Michael Ridge, who argues that playful play enhances "agential fluidity," imagination, and being open to opportunities.[11] As I see it, agential fluidity is essential for queer identity exploration, as one can fluidly try out different identities and maintain, as Lugones says, "openness to surprise."[12] I believe people are often held back from discovering or exploring queer identities due to fear, and the possibility of playing and having fun while exploring one's identity can alleviate that, as *Trike Dyke: Episode 1* helps illustrate.[13]

Trike Dyke was born in the early 2000s, when I was invited to perform in Kate Brehm's puppet slam called "Slutty Puppets and Friends."[14] As I conceived it, *Trike Dyke: Episode 1* was a live-action comic strip in which the titular character fights

restrictive norms and explores her identity with the help of her bright red tricycle and, of course, Pussy. After pedaling onto the stage, I performed a lengthy striptease of many layers of clothing through different gender presentations, ending in a tie, leotard, and red tights, while singing the *Trike Dyke* theme song *a cappella*: "Trike Dyke! You're my superhero! Trike Dyke! From gender ground zero. Trike Dyke! We have no need to fear, it's Trike Dyke!"[15] Those moments were the only parts of the show I had planned in any detail. The rest of the show was composed of stylized freeze-frames, imitating comic book panels, with improvisation between each. In *Trike Dyke: Episode 1*, I told Trike Dyke's origin story, involving a large number of pickles and other phallic foods being thrown at the audience, followed by the delightful discovery of cream pie. Because I improvised nearly the whole show, it relied on openness and interactivity that in turn reinforced a feeling of community. Within this space, I playfully explored the "dyke" label and the various meanings it held for me: sexy, aggressive, angry, joyful, ridiculous, masculine, feminine, and so on.

Exploring my sexuality and gender identity in community with the "Slutty Puppets and Friends" audience was notably *fun*, an aspect of playfulness that I believe underlies Lugones's central example of crashing stones, although she doesn't use the term.[16] Central to this fun was a feeling of safety. As Michael Ridge argues, fun requires three characteristic inputs, among them "a perception that one's environment is safe and a general sense of satiety/satisfaction" and "a lack of anxiety."[17] This requirement parallels Lugones's observation that she is only playful in worlds where she feels "at ease."[18] In turn, fun "functions to motivate experimental behavior in safe environments" and "broadens our perspective."[19] The "Slutty Puppets" event provided a safe context for several reasons: the audience was supportive and somewhat drunk, the physical layout of CB's 313 Gallery made it easy to interact with the audience, because the stage was low and the audience was seated cabaret-style, and Brehm, the emcee for the event, made it clear that this was a welcoming environment for experimentation. By producing this context, Brehm gave the performers freedom to explore and set expectations for the audience's appreciation and collaboration with the performers.

To broaden this discussion, I think discovering one's queer identity in general often requires play and playfulness. While some queer folks know their identity from a young age without any playful experimentation, it seems common to practice different forms of agency playfully before self-labeling.[20] If we insist that we should only engage with gender seriously and intuit our own gender identities through solemn self-reflection or innate self-knowledge, many of us might never have found our queer identities. One explanation for this need for playfulness is that it allows us to engage imaginatively with the possibility of changing our identity. In some cases, a change of gender is a transformative experience, as L.A. Paul describes, involving both epistemic and personal transformation and thus prohibiting knowledge of what life will be like after the change.[21] While Paul asserts that we cannot even *imagine* transformative experiences, several philosophers have defended our ability to imagine them, and I agree that imagining is possible, even if we lack knowledge.[22]

After the success of *Trike Dyke: Episode 1*, I began writing *Trike Dyke: Episode 2*, which I was invited to perform as part of Abarriss Culjack's *Gone Show*. In this episode, Trike Dyke's goal was to explore the butch/femme dichotomy and express her dissatisfaction with both options. The *Gone Show*, based on *The Gong Show* from late '70s television, was a series of performances that the audience could decide to gong off the stage, creating an antagonistic relationship between audience and performer. Additionally, the physical space impeded community building, as the stage was higher, bright lights made it difficult to see the audience, and they were seated behind long tables, and Culjack as emcee did little to encourage audience to be supportive. Like the first show, I had only a loosely planned outline, but it was much harder to co-create the show with the audience, and the show failed as a result. I was eventually gonged off the stage, which was humiliating, but most relevantly, it did not feel playful or fun, which in turn reduced my ability to explore my identity and to co-create a community where such exploration felt safe.[23]

One point that emerges from the contrast between *Episode 1* and *Episode 2* is that play and playfulness help us co-create and reinforce resistant subcommunities. You have to show up and engage with your subcommunities for them to persist, and doing so playfully allows for continued flexibility and greater solidarity across slightly different "worlds." On that note, playfulness, and the open-mindedness it helps cultivate, not only pushes back against rigid expectations and oppressive forces in the dominant society but also within one's subcommunity: some of the most important support I've received in my own exploration of gender has been from queer folks who let me know that it's OK to play around with gender identity and that I don't have to conform to a certain expectation to identify as nonbinary or queer.[24] Playfulness also helps sustain these communities by creating joy. As Bettcher discusses in a recent interview for this journal, she is returning to creative work as a way of "returning to joy just to keep myself going and perhaps keep others going through these times."[25]

So far, much of this discussion has been fairly broad, but the playfulness of *Trike Dyke* also illuminates more specific concerns within the topic of queer identity formation, such as the concept of playful self-labeling developed by Elizabeth Camp and Carolina Flores. Camp and Flores similarly draw on Lugones and focus on playfulness, describing it as a "higher-order attitude for engaging flexibly and malleably with whatever worlds or identities one encounters."[26] They understand playful self-labeling as follows:

- open-minded, because the self-labeler is "prepared to discover lurking but heretofore unknown or neglected traits within themselves"
- open-ended, inviting "creative performance . . . across contexts," and
- humble, embracing "uncertainty and a lack of sovereignty in the application of any given label."[27]

All of these ideas map closely onto my experience performing as Trike Dyke, where the playful uncertainty of improvising with that identity allowed me to engage in creative performance and discover lurking traits within myself. I could thus experiment with the label "dyke" and what it meant or could mean for me, rather than taking it to have a rigid, sovereign definition.

However, being Trike Dyke also involved *commitment*, and it is here that my intuitions differ from those of Camp and Flores. As examples of "playful labeling," they list (i) nonliteral and ironic, e.g., "my gender is Lumiere"; (ii) metaphorical; and (iii) multiple, fine-grained labels.[28] As Camp and Flores put it, irony engages in "simultaneously acknowledging and distancing oneself from the applicability of the label" and metaphor involves "seeing one thing *as* or through the frame of another" while being aware of the ways that some features of the metaphor fail to fit.[29] While these descriptions emphasize a lack of rigidity in labels, and the examples feel *somewhat* playful, my own understanding of playfulness is that it requires commitment, at least temporarily. In games, for instance, if someone plays ironically or treats the game as a metaphor, it ruins the game by disrupting the players' absorption.[30] Likewise, Trike Dyke needed my full commitment for the performance to work. Also, I find being open to making a fool of oneself to be central to Lugones's view, yet irony and metaphor feel like ways of *protecting* oneself from being a fool. While I find the third option of multiple fine-grained labels like "glitterslut" more playful, because the labels themselves feel fun and silly, Camp and Flores conclude that the narrow labels suggest "that can't be *all* you really are," which also seems distancing.[31] Instead, I think the more playful choice is to embrace the glitterslut label wholeheartedly.

While distancing feels unplayful to me within a playful context, one could see irony, metaphor, and multiple fine-grained definitions as ways of maintaining *some* amount of playfulness within the dominant, oppressive society. For more deeply playful self-labeling to be possible, one needs to be in a safe context where one feels at ease and can commit to labels more fully, while maintaining a meta-awareness that labels are flexible and that we can surprise ourselves and invent new meanings. Distancing might also contribute to playfulness at the meta-level, as Camp and Flores suggest by calling playfulness a "higher-order attitude."[32] In other words, creating distance between the playful context and the real world could support exploration within the playful context. Many underworld subcommunities feel similar to game spaces, in which you can be whoever you want to be, even if you might not pass as that identity outside the subcommunity. As an unnamed speaker asserts about ball culture in *Paris Is Burning*, "Whatever you want to be, you be. . . . You can become anything and do anything right here, right now, and it won't be questioned."[33] There is thus a commitment to the label within that context, combined with a recognition that one is in a different world where one can explore, be surprised, and make a fool of oneself. In *Trike Dyke: Episode 1*, while I fully committed to the character within the context of the show, I also maintained a playful attitude at the meta-level toward both the performance and rigid gender and sexuality labels.

Thinking about play and playfulness as importantly involving *commitment* to labels within a playful context can explain how we create "multiple worlds of sense," where "terms such as 'woman' have different, resistant meanings; worlds in which there exist different, resistant gender practices," as Talia Mae Bettcher describes.[34] For Bettcher, the practices and meanings lead to ontological pluralism: one *is* a man in one world and *is not* in another (or is constituted as a man in one world but not another).[35] This pluralism is similar to games in which one *is* the character in the game world while one *is not* outside that world, and many players feel that their "second life" is continuous with their "real life."[36] My experience of *Trike Dyke* was similar: while her lesbian identity was more brash and in-your-face than my own at the time, and thus these identities existed in their own separate worlds, they were nonetheless both versions of me, or ways of experiencing how I could be.

Nonetheless, by drawing on game and performance spaces, I am perilously close to Bettcher's concern that trans folk are often seen as mere "make-believers" engaging in "make-believe, pretending, or playing dress up."[37] I worry that I might be trivializing queer identities by seeing them as often originating in a playful context and using a performance setting like *Trike Dyke* to illustrate the point. As Bettcher notes, it isn't enough to proclaim one's political stance, because even allies are often merely "playing along" with trans folks rather than taking their identity seriously.[38] However, I want to push against the idea that exploring one's identity in a playful context like games or theater undermines its real-world value. Instead, engaging in play can protect the person engaging in identity exploration from both external criticism and their own self-critique, allowing for more freedom, and then the new identity and discoveries about who they are become available for the person to draw on in real life. Just as new forms of agency developed in a game are *real* forms of agency, on Nguyen's account, a queer identity discovered and fostered in a playful context can be a *real* identity, not make-believe. Of course, in keeping with the idea of fluidity and openness encouraged by playfulness, one might *not* maintain that identity outside the game or for all time, but that's fine! The fact that some people might only feel comfortable adopting a queer identity within a playful context doesn't make it less real for those who adopt it outside of that context.

One might also worry that playfulness cannot contribute to queer resistance, if we can be fully playful only *after* we feel safe and supported. The answer, to my mind, is a two-step process: first, we need bold playfulness pioneers, such as Brehm of "Slutty Puppets and Friends," who create the playful context. Such pioneers might not experience as deep a feeling of playfulness, as they bear more responsibility, have to coordinate logistical details, and may not yet have the safety of a supportive subculture. However, even these pioneers must be playful to some extent, as in Brehm's emcee style, to create a community where it feels safe to play.[39] Once the context is created, playfulness contributes to the community's ongoing co-creation, as one can see in the improvisation and interaction of *Trike Dyke: Episode 1*, which created a momentary community with the audience.

A final worry is that playfulness is too lighthearted for the current political climate, in which the government is actively trying to erase trans people. "Be playful" might seem at best an inadequate response and at worst a distraction from very real problems. In reply, I believe playful play is not only essential for identity exploration and the co-creation of resistant subcommunities, as I've argued—it can also help us imagine alternate realities, provide a respite from oppression, and give us a way to call systems of power into question that is both conspicuous and, in some cases, harder to penalize. As the dominant society rolls steadily toward fascism and trans erasure, anything we can do to derail it, even slightly, is worth doing, especially if we can do so with our bodies and spirits intact.

As genderqueer, "gay-leaning demisexual" games designer Dietrich Squinkifer suggests, "Especially now, in the current political climate, holding onto things that make you happy is more important than ever. . . . It goes back to this idea of joyful resistance."[40] So, am I suggesting that you should go create a goofy, improvisational theater performance that lets you engage playfully with your identity, then perform it in a moment of co-creation with a group of supportive friends and strangers? No, but I'm not telling you *not* to!

NOTES

1. Lugones, "Playfulness," 7–8.

2. Lugones, "Playfulness," 17.

3. Nguyen, *Games*, 74.

4. Nguyen, *Games*, 83–84; emphasis in original.

5. Suits, *Grasshopper*, 43; as cited in Nguyen, *Games*, 5.

6. Nguyen, *Games*, 8.

7. Nguyen, *Games*, 96.

8. Lugones, "Playfulness," 16; emphasis in original.

9. Nguyen, *Games*, 96.

10. Lugones, "Playfulness," 15. To my mind, it's odd that she sees this emphasis in Huizinga, whose discussion of the "play element in culture" seems much broader than her description.

11. Ridge, "Fun and (Striving) Games," 412.

12. Lugones, "Playfulness," 16.

13. Although Nguyen argues against treating both games and theater as play in the model of Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*, I believe the two overlap considerably, especially games and interactive clown performances. The latter has many features Nguyen identifies as central for fostering agency: arbitrary obstacles, new "ways of being practical," and a type of striving toward temporary goals, and thus it can still foster agential development. However, I do not argue here that all games are performances or any other more general claim.

14. At the time of this show, I identified as a lesbian, and I now identify as bisexual, nonbinary, and queer. For full disclosure, I enjoy considerable hetero- and cis- privilege, because I'm married to a cisgender man and often pass as cisgender. While I no longer identify as a lesbian, *Trike Dyke* provides a fun example of the value of playfulness, and it's a part of my past that I hold dear. Thanks to Caro Flores for the encouragement to write a paper on it.

15. The idea for a striptease that starts with too many clothes on was borrowed from my friend Olivia Robinson's performance piece "Snowball," which began in a giant snowball costume.

16. She combines the ideas of fun and playfulness at only one point, when she discusses having the "fun constructed out of her" in worlds where she is not playful. Lugones, "Playfulness," 15.

17. Ridge, "Fun and (Striving) Games," 408.

18. Lugones, "Playfulness," 9.

19. Ridge, "Fun and (Striving) Games," 408–09.

20. Here I draw on personal experience experimenting with my gender presentation and identification, Jeffrey Marsh's narrative of self-discovery in their talk at Marist, Bettcher's description of trying on her mom's dress for Halloween at a book talk on *Beyond Personhood* at the APA, and the reports of various friends and acquaintances.

21. Paul, *Transformative Experiences*, 11–12.

22. See, for example, Cath, "Transformative Experiences and the Equivocation Objection"; Daoust, "Transformative Experiences, Rational Decisions and Shark Attacks"; and Ismael, "Experience, Transformation, and Imagination."

23. Although *Trike Dyke* was never performed after *Episode Two*, I discovered while writing this paper that two more "scripts" exist: *Trike Dyke: Episode Three, Batting for the Wrong Team* and *Trike Dyke: Episode Four, Trike Dyke for President*. Please reach out if you'd like to bring Trike Dyke back to life!

24. Shout out especially to Emma G. Frederick and Ray Briggs. I also credit George and Briggs, *What Even Is Gender?* for freeing me from many of those rigid norms.

25. Bettcher, "'What Ever Happened to Joy?'" 3.

26. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1120.

27. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1120–21.

28. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1122–23.

29. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1123.

30. See Nguyen, *Games*, 10–11, for a similar point.

31. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1123.

32. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1120.

33. Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*, 6:40. I should note, though, that balls are both playful and quite serious. As Dorian Corey explains at 31:13, "They call them competitions but believe me they're wars. And they often do lead to fights."

34. Bettcher, "Trapped in the Wrong Theory," 403. The multiplicity of meanings is also a central topic in *Beyond Personhood*; see especially 61–75.

35. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 64.

36. For a helpful exploration of this phenomenon and a narrative account that can explain how both identities are real, see Schechtman, "The Story of My (Second) Life."

37. Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers," 50.

38. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 20.

39. Playfulness pioneers are similar to awesome people in Nick Riggle's *On Being Awesome*. I think there are also important differences, but I lack the space to develop that point further here.

40. Squinkifer, "Nonbinary Characters, Asexuality, and Game Design as Joyful Resistance," 37. Squinkifer is the creator of Trans Game Zine, a website that offers many playful trans games. Check it out at transgamezine.org.

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Toward a Queer Coalition for Climate and Environmental Justice

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Conservatives often pit queer people against nature. However, such an opposition is not self-evident. As figures like Greta Gaard have pointed out, LGBTQ+ people, along with people of color and the poor, have been exploited just as nature has. This essay aims to contribute to queer environmentalism, which acknowledges that environmental issues make marginalized communities such as LGBTQ people even more vulnerable. In doing so, it seeks to address this vulnerability and marginalization through strategies of alliance and coalition between queer and environmental struggles.

I will first demonstrate the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in the context of environmental and climate change. A possible response, in a second step, would be to form alliances or coalitions for environmental and climate justice. Consequently, in a third step, what specifically can queer activism contribute to environmental activism? I am going to highlight how traditions of resistance and resilience among queer communities can help support and redefine justice for all.

I. WHY INTERSECT QUEER MOVEMENTS WITH ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE?

LGBTQ+ people are particularly vulnerable to environmental and climate change (I will distinguish between these "environmental" and "climate" terms, following Pierre Charbonnier in *Coalition Carbone*, in that a political climate policy aimed at decarbonizing the economy can be environmentally costly). This stems from their relatively precarious and marginalized status, both from a socioeconomic perspective and in systemic terms. Access to employment, housing, and healthcare is already more difficult for LGBTQ+ people, regardless of environmental and climate issues. And they are disproportionately affected by disasters, not only because their homes are destroyed, but also because the relief provided can be both homophobic and transphobic, or discriminatory by failing to account for the specific needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. Governments, following neoliberal logic of gradual state disengagement, are increasingly relying on nongovernmental organizations to assist survivors of floods and other disasters. However, such organizations may be religious and, as a result, more prone to LGBTQ+-phobia, as Jeff L. Feng and David King point out: consider evangelist organizations who are "placing blame for disaster on LGBTQ people as God's punishment for sins,"[1] as it happened after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

These combined inequalities and forms of discrimination mean that LGBTQ+ people tend to be more vulnerable than cisgender and heterosexual people. This does not mean that these vulnerabilities should be treated as absolute, but they must be considered alongside other types of vulnerabilities related to gender, class, and race within an intersectional framework. Indeed, as the organization Queers4Climate points out, LGBTQ+ people of color are the first to face natural disasters. Therefore, the analysis of environmental injustices must be conducted through the lens of race, class, and gender, as well as sexuality.

Furthermore, LGBTQ+ individuals are often overlooked or marginalized in policies aimed at combating climate change. This is demonstrated in particular by Leo Goldsmith, Vanessa Raditz, and Michael Méndez,[2] who analyze the Robert T. Stafford Emergency Management and Disaster Assistance Act, signed in November 1988. While intended to be nondiscriminatory, the Act does not specify the assistance that must be provided to LGBTQ+ communities in particular. This assistance would provide home or shelters after catastrophes, for instance; many homeless people are indeed LGBTQ+, and are thus particularly vulnerable. As the Queers X Climate collective points out, "there have not been significant efforts to direct the attention of LGBT+ members toward environmental consciousness, and their voices are usually missing during key climate negotiations and debates."[3] The same is true of environmental protection policies, where heteronormative biases are at work in legislation aimed at creating nature reserves. Not only have these practices harmed indigenous peoples (Native Americans or Aboriginal peoples) in order to create the myth of pristine wilderness, but these are also spaces that reinforce gender norms, with masculinity expressed particularly through activities like hunting or hiking, as well as heterocentric norms in that rural areas are perceived as natural and thus "free from queer identities,"[4] in contrast to cities.

Finally, LGBTQ+ people often become scapegoats for these climate and environmental upheavals and face violence in post-disaster situations. There is also a risk that government policies will become more restrictive in response to environmental and climate change, potentially leading to

setbacks for LGBTQ+ rights. This is what Queers X Climate highlights: everything that has been made possible so far "could be erased within barely a decade by exacerbating resource scarcity and social unrest."[5]

II. HOW SHOULD WE WORK TOGETHER? AN ALLIANCE OR A COALITION

To address complex issues that intersect race, class, gender, sexuality, and the environment, we need more than to aggregate different interests. We need coalition politics. I define coalitions as a strategic formation between distinct movements that cooperate toward a common goal, without erasing their differences. A coalition could be described as an "assemblage"—an assembly—of several struggles (feminist and antimilitarist movements, for example). Taking the environment as a starting point may be precisely the way to find common ground among interests that may appear divergent at first glance, and to bring to light what connects them. Without suggesting that there is a single root cause of all forms of oppression or that all forms of oppression stem from a prior one, we are all affected by the destruction of the environment, biodiversity, and the climate. This can, therefore, serve as a stepping stone for a coalition.

Nevertheless, the alliance or coalition between LGBTQ+ activism and environmental activism is by no means a given, as Cy Lecerf Maulpoix exemplarily demonstrates in *Écologies déviantes. Voyage en terres queers*. Indeed, he explains that when a manifesto calling for such an alliance was launched in 2015, criticism emerged from both sides: environmentalists worried about an excessive focus on minority issues, while some queer activists seemed to think that "environmentalism is the struggle of those who have time, those who have no other struggles to defend, no other oppressions to resist."[6] Given this, how can we ensure a fruitful convergence between these two forms of activism?

This is a curiously neglected issue in theories of coalition or alliance. For instance, in the central work *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler makes no mention of a possible intersection with environmental struggles, even though such an intersection already existed—think, for example, of the Queers for the Climate or Out for Sustainability initiatives. This omission reinforces the prejudice that LGBTQ+ struggles are disconnected from or unconcerned with environmental and climate issues. Yet, taking these issues into account could actually enrich Butler's theory of precariousness by highlighting that we are all vulnerable—albeit to varying degrees—to environmental disasters and climate change, and must therefore find a way to unite in the face of these challenges. There is thus a genuine, shared interest here, a common ground on which to forge new alliances.

So how can we build an environmental coalition or alliance that takes LGBTQ+ issues and concerns into account? Attempts to form alliances or coalitions must not result in a homogenization that erases the specific issues central to LGBTQ+ struggles. In fact, the environmental struggle would be enriched by drawing inspiration from queer struggles, both in their forms of resistance and in their resilience.

An alliance with environmental and ecological struggles can be "an opportunity for creative resistance."[7] What does this queer and ecological activism look like? As Cy Lecerf Maulpoix shows, it creates a powerful image through its staging—from provocative slogans inherited from the struggles against AIDS to music, dance, and costumes designed to make a bold statement. Admittedly, this carries the risk of falling into a race for representation and visibility and remaining superficial. However, this does not mean that these strategies are necessarily superficial. They can enrich the repertoire of militant, disruptive, and destabilizing actions, "in a particularly violent repressive context."[8] This implies that these coalitions and alliances must question their own use—or non-use—of violence. Here, a measured approach may be necessary, without directly condemning all forms of violence or sanctifying it. The possibility of violence must also be analyzed through the lens of each activist's vulnerabilities and privileges; some will have precisely the kind of agency that others lack—due to structural domination, in terms of race or class, for example.

Forming an alliance means acknowledging that "our struggles are connected, and our survival depends on our solidarity," as stated by the Netherlands-based organization Queers4Climate. Many view this coalition or alliance as intersectional—that is, deeply connected to antiracist, decolonial, anticapitalist, and antipatriarchal issues. The alliance or coalition can therefore be a way to fight against femonationalism (a term coined by Sara R. Farris that describes the exploitation of women's rights for nationalist or conservative purposes), homonationalism (a concept developed by Jasbir K. Puar to describe how LGBTQ+ rights discourse is co-opted by these same nationalist or conservative streams), or what Jeff L. Feng has identified as a form of ecohomonormativity, i.e., the fact that "queer & trans climate organizers align with the state by taking neoliberal, rights-based LGBTQ frames to the climate movement."[9] The goal is to ensure that these struggles are not co-opted to justify military actions or hostility toward migrants or states of the global South, or to distract from the way other groups are deprived of fundamental rights. Advocating for LGBTQ+ or women's rights should not mean alienating others' rights. Alliances and coalitions, because they allow for the consideration of diversity (of class, race, culture, language, or religion) and a shared precarity, take into account this risk.

III. WHAT CAN QUEER ACTIVISM CONTRIBUTE TO ENVIRONMENTAL STRUGGLES?

The LGBTQ+ community has both a long tradition of resistance against intersecting forms of oppression and a remarkable resilience in the face of the tragedies it has endured—whether we think of the AIDS epidemic or the attacks and violence that are, unfortunately, all too common. A parallel between government inaction regarding AIDS and the environmental and climate crisis was notably drawn by the organization Queers for Climate in a statement for the People's Climate March in 2014,

with the aim of encouraging LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations to join this fight. Friends of the Earth Scotland underlined the fact that LGBTQ+ communities have learned how to survive, when they explained in 2020 "Why Climate Change Is an LGBTQ+ Issue" and how queer people can help build environmental or climate coalitions with this experience of advocating and mobilize themselves for their rights. These practices can be particularly valuable to ecological resistance movements. As a result, groups such as Out for Sustainability in the United States are working to build this resilience, through advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights, fundraising, and building a community.

Defining environmental justice from an LGBTQ+ perspective would be relevant not only to this group but to everyone. As Feng highlights, queer environmental justice builds upon pre-existing analyses—particularly, anticapitalist and antiracist ones—and seeks to expand this framework of justice. By making these connections between different structural injustices, activists highlight that "climate change is an intersectional issue."[10] This could lead to strengthening coalition or alliance strategies, in that the environmental struggle must be complemented by a struggle against capitalism, structural racism, and sexism, as well as against LGBTQ+-phobia.

Finally, perhaps in a more theoretical sense (though with practical implications), queer activism and theory can help us reflect on the notion of "nature" and its definition as a normative concept. This is one of the central concerns of queer ecology, which seeks to reconcile queer theory and ecology by highlighting the biophobia inherent in the former and questioning the central concept of nature in the latter, which can be seen an oppressive tool.

A concept developed, notably, by David Bell, is that of "queernaturecultures" (see, for example, Chapter 4 of *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*), which seeks to highlight the arbitrary and socially produced nature of the nature/culture distinction at the intersection of gender and sexuality. This queer ecology seeks to rethink the concept of nature and our relationship to it beyond two paradigms: that of nature as the Other, and that of nature as something to be exploited.

Important works such as those by Catriona Sandilands or Greta Gaard have thus drawn parallels between dualisms such as "white/non-white," "heterosexual/queer," "male/female," and "culture/nature"—oppressive frameworks to be deconstructed—but have also linked processes of colonization to the development of homophobia.[11] She highlights systems of oppression or domination such as colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and exploitation of nature are connected.

The aim is not only to transform ecological or environmental theories, but also queer theory—and to do so in a significant way. As Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson notably write in the introduction to *Queer Ecologies. Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, it is not merely a matter of making ecology more queer, but also of making queer theory more ecological: "The extension of queer into ecology is not, then, simply a question of making nature more welcoming to gay inhabitation; it is also an invitation to open queer theory to ecological possibilities."[12] Therefore, reconceiving allows us to abrogate the false opposition between queer activism and environmentalism activism, and to overcome debates around the naturality or antinaturality of LGBTQ+ identities, if, at the end, nature and culture are profoundly intertwined.

A coalition between LGBTQ+ and environmentalist activism is not only a strategic opportunity, but also politically transformative. LGBTQ+ people are not only more vulnerable to environmental and climate risks, but are also marginalized within environmental policies. To address this, I proposed the model of coalition and alliance as a framework for devising a collective response to the environmental and climate crisis, drawing inspiration from past LGBTQ+ struggles, particularly against LGBTQ+-phobic violence and AIDS, and the redefinition of nature by queer studies. Both theoretically and practically, queer activism has much to contribute to ecological struggles.

NOTES

1. King, "Hearing Minority Voices," 13; see also Feng, "Framing Queer Climate Justice."
2. Goldsmith, Raditz, and Méndez, "Queer and Present Danger."
3. Diego de Leon, "The Economic Importance of the LGBT+ on Climate Change," *Queers X Climate* (2019).
4. Foster and Kerr, "Queer/Green Collaboration," 76.
5. Unknown Author, "About," *Queers X Climate*.
6. Maulpoix, *Ecologie déviantes*, 188.
7. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*, 236.
8. Maulpoix, *Ecologies déviantes*, 199.
9. Feng, *Toward Queer Climate Justice*, 11.
10. Feng, *Toward Queer Climate Justice*, 532.
11. Mortimer-Sandilands, "Unnatural Passions?"; Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism."
12. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*, 22.

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THE QUEER AGENDA

Here you will find recommendations of two types by the participants in this issue: recent work in or relevant to queer philosophy, and questions that the authors think merit closer philosophical attention.

READING RECOMMENDATIONS

- Elizabeth Barnes and Dee Payton, "Emancipatory Methodology" (*Ethics*, 2025). Barnes and Payton draw out and critique a methodological thread in feminist theory according to which a theory's ability to serve feminist political ends is among its success conditions. Review essays, this one focusing on Katherine Jenkins's *Ontology and Oppression*, sometimes get missed, but this is provocative and well worth the time. (Cat Saint-Croix)

- Marquis Bey, "Not the Same, but Almost, but Not—but Almost: Reflections on Black Trans Feminism, Black/Trans/Feminism, and Queer Theory" (*The Routledge Companion to Queer Literary Studies*, 2025). This text offers an important opportunity to think through the convergences and divergences that exist between different forms of Black feminisms. This is necessary, at least in part, because of the ways that queerness emerges in complex ways within Black communities, given histories of colonial assumptions of Black sexual deviance. (Shaeeda A. Mensah)

- Robin Dembroff, *Real Men on Top* (2026). I loved this book. Much of feminist theory abandoned the concept of patriarchy as an oversimplified relic of less sophisticated times. But *Real Men on Top* dusts the concept off and reforges it, alloyed with past criticism, to a sharp edge and mirror sheen that is well-suited to cutting through our looksmaxxing moment. (Cat Saint-Croix)

- Lauren Guilmette and Ada S. Jaarsma (eds.), *Feminist Making, Doing, and Sensing: Experiments in Philosophy* (2026). This collection features more than thirty feminist philosophers using experimental methods to shape the future of the discipline. Full of prompts, scores, illustrations, narratives, and other non-traditional entryways into feminist philosophy, this is the book I am most excited to teach in the fall. (Qrescent Mali Mason)

- Quill Kukla, *Sex Beyond Yes: Pleasure and Agency for Everyone* (2025). This book is such a refreshing and insightful feminist take on sexual ethics—a rare one that does not center straight women, instead drawing on rich resources for intimacy, fun, and pleasure developed by queer communities. The criticism of the consent framework and the emphasis on sex as a good and not a threat are on point. (Carolina Flores)

- Bonnie Ruberg, ed. *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (2020). This book is a fun and informative read for anyone interested in queerness and games. It's a collection of interviews, not heavy on theory, but rich in insight and first-person experience. (C.R. Muller)

- Sarah Schulman, *The Fantasy and Necessity of Solidarity* (2025). A lovely book on solidarity as an aspirational concept that considers a variety of historical case studies of solidarity both from the perspective of the oppressed and that of the bystander. She has a lovely construction of the political realities of solidarity and the individual and social costs that it can carry. (Cal Howland)

- Alexis Shotwell, "Building Complicity with Another World" (*Parallax*, 2023). A lovely paper on the relationship between solidarity and world-building. Shotwell argues that solidarity requires embracing imperfection, and that waiting for perfect allies or perfectly coherent political frameworks prevents action. (Cal Howland)

- Anika Simpson, *Single Black Mother: Queer Reflections on Marriage and Racial Justice* (2025). This text offers a critical examination of the intersections of queerness, race, and contract theory with attention to the legal institution of marriage. Of particular interest to me is the uptake of the notion of Black matriarchy and the ways it reflects the relationship between Black womanhood, kinship, and queerness. (Shaeeda A. Mensah)

- Amelia Wirts, "Mixed Messages: How the Criminal Law Fails to Express Feminist Values" (*Criminal Law and Philosophy*, 2025). Wirts brings together social philosophy and the philosophy of criminal law in a genuinely novel way. The article challenges the assumption underlying many tough-on-crime feminist arguments—that expanding criminal statutes can express or advance feminist values. Wirts argues this view is mistaken because the

criminal law is poorly equipped to introduce new social schemas, and in practice operates according to deeply entrenched and morally pernicious racist ones. A sharp and timely intervention for anyone thinking about how and whether the law can be a tool for social change. (Lauren Lyons)

- Audrey Yap and Barrett Emerick, *Not Giving Up on People: A Feminist Case for Prison Abolition* (Bloomsbury, 2023). This book grounds the case for prison abolition in a simple idea: we should not give up on people by reducing them to the worst thing they have ever done and warehousing them in institutions cut off from society. Most discussions of abolition operate at the level of political philosophy and institutional design, but Yap and Emerick make a powerful and accessible case rooted in interpersonal morality, specifically in how we ought to treat people who have acted wrongfully, and why we should leave open the possibility that people will act differently in the future. (Lauren Lyons)

- Robin Zheng and Nils-Hennes Stear, "Imagining in Oppressive Contexts or What's Wrong with Blackface?" (*Ethics*, 2023). While blackface is their central example, the ramifications of their theory go far beyond it and are relevant to anyone interested in the ethics of imagining. (C.R. Muller)

- Katie Zhou, "Verbal Disputes, Social Totality, and Trans Politics" (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 2025). What is the dispute about whether trans women are women (and trans men are men) really about? Zhou argues that it is a disagreement about what kinds of social narratives we will grant legitimacy and recognition to, about whether to give salience across contexts to biology or to social and psychological facts about people. I found this paper extremely illuminating, as well as a tour-de-force combination of technical tools with humanistic insight. (Carolina Flores)

- Perry Zurn, *How We Make Each Other: Trans Life at the Edge of the University* (2025). Given my own current writing, I have been encouraged by a growing trend of feminist philosophers incorporating archival materials into their work, developing alternate philosophical histories. Here, Perry Zurn uses the archives and interviews to offer a portrait of trans world-building in the "Five Colleges" of Massachusetts. (Qrescent Mali Mason)

TOPICS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

FAMILY, KINSHIP, AND REPRODUCTION

- What are the normative costs (across epistemology, ethics, and politics) of the nuclear family? What features of the family ground those costs? This is severely underdiscussed in analytic philosophy. (Carolina Flores)

- Kith and kin. LGBTQ+ philosophers (particularly of the analytic bent) have worked on kinship shockingly little. (Cat Saint-Croix)

- The ways that certain properties are associated with heteronormativity, resulting in them being presented as outside of the scope of queerness. For example, the debate about whether having children is a practice of heteronormativity. (Shaeeda A. Mensah)

- Feminist approaches to intimate partner violence and abuse in LGBTQ+ romantic relationships. (Qrescent Mali Mason)

GENDER AND HETEROSEXUALITY

- Heteropessimism: For decades the dominant cultural narrative cast queerness as a site of crisis and dysfunction, but it's actually heterosexuality as a social institution that's in trouble, and philosophers have had surprisingly little to say about it. (Lauren Lyons)

- Gender abolition: What would it mean not just to multiply or destabilize gender categories, but to get rid of them altogether? And which conceptions of gender are most friendly to that project? (Lauren Lyons)

- The relationship between demands for productivism and assimilationist narratives of gender transition. A cornerstone of our culture and economy is the idea that productivity and growth are the purpose of work. I would love to see more research on how this ideology shapes societal expectations around what gender transition should look like. (Cal Howland)

- Thinking more about the metaphysical proposals in both Judith Butler (on subjecthood) and Talia Mae Bettcher (on personhood) and their wider ramifications. (C. R. Muller)

COMMUNITY, POWER, AND INTERNAL HIERARCHIES

- How do LGBTQ+ communities fall prey to elite capture? How do we inadvertently deploy tools developed for resistance to reinforce systems of oppression? (Carolina Flores)

- Hierarchies that exist within the LGBTQ+ community. For example, the growing boundaries around what is acceptable as queer. And the divergences between understandings of gender that sometimes emerge between trans individuals and non-gender-conforming individuals. (Shaeeda A. Mensah)

- Queer/ing pedagogical approaches in philosophy. (Qrescent Mali Mason)

EPISTEMOLOGY, LANGUAGE, AND PEDAGOGY

- Attention. The experience of stepping outside of heteronormativity makes queer people alive to the mutability of attention in ways that are more difficult for people who lack similar experiences, and I think this is a valuable perspective. (Cat Saint-Croix)

- The role of discomfort in shaping communicative norms. I would love to see more work in feminist philosophy of language on the way that minimization of social impropriety shapes our foundational Western communicative norms that leads to the ubiquity of acquiescence and tacit agreement in nonidealized theories of conversation. (Cal Howland)

- Representation of trans and nonbinary folks in art, literature, and pop culture. (C. R. Muller)

CALL FOR PAPERS

The APA committee on LGBTQ people in the profession invites APA members to submit papers, book reviews, or professional notes for publication in *APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy*. Submissions may examine issues in the areas of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, gender, and sexuality studies, or address issues of concern for LGBTQ people in the profession. The committee seeks quality paper submissions for anonymous review by committee members. Reviews and notes should address recent books, current events, or emerging trends. Members who give papers at APA divisional meetings are encouraged to submit their work by the deadlines below.

DEADLINES

Spring issues: December 15. Fall issues: May 1. These deadlines are based on the deadlines set by the APA national office for submitting materials for publication. Decisions will be made within 30 days of the deadline, and authors will be notified shortly thereafter.

FORMAT

Papers should be no more than 7,500 words. Reviews and notes should be limited to 3,000 words. Submissions should use endnotes rather than footnotes or parenthetical citations. All papers must be prepared for anonymous review.

CONTACT

Submit all manuscripts electronically (in .doc, .docx, or .rtf format) and direct questions to the editor, Lauren Lyons, at lyons@ucsc.edu.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Carolina Flores is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Lisbon. Caro mostly writes about resistance to evidence in its many guises. They are working on a part-family-history, part-philosophy book proposal about ignorance during Portuguese fascism/colonialism. Caro loves copying the haircuts of teenage boys, alternating between flamboyant outfits and dressing like a mid-century Marxist academic, obnoxious pop music, brutalist architecture, ranting about housing justice and what the internet should be, and parading an analog camera around, among other irritating pursuits.

Cal Howland (he/they) is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Rutgers University where they work on communication, gender, disability, and legibility. They are a partial quadriplegic wheelchair user, who spends much of their time gardening with their spouse and driving the tractor with their two-year-old. They are currently working on projects on transgender renaming and on de-emphasizing the role of speaker intention in meaning and communication.

Lauren Lyons is an itinerant bisexual (or should I say lesbian socialist; both true) and Assistant Professor at University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research focuses on institutions she thinks we'd be better off without, like the prison and the police. She is also working on some new projects about the ethics of technology. Beyond philosophy, she likes hosting big, fabulous parties, going on harrowing hikes, and listening to disco.

Qrescent Mali Mason is a Black feminist philosopher in her middle age who spends much of her time complaining about the discipline of philosophy. She is currently working on her first book, *Seducing Simone: A Memoir for bell hooks*, based on the unpublished journals of fellow curmudgeon, bell hooks.

Shaeeda A. Mensah is a Black queer feminist philosopher. She is the mother of two sons, an avid crocheter, and a lover of reality TV. Her teaching and research embody a deep commitment to interdisciplinarity with particular emphasis on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and state violence.

C. R. Muller is an accordion-playing, puppet-making weirdo who started out in metaphysics of fiction but has recently realized it's much more fun to think about play and playfulness all the time. They also philosophize about puppetry, racebending, and cheap art, teach at Marist University as a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, and walk on stilts.

Maëlle Roussel is currently studying contemporary philosophy in Lyon (France) and writing a master's dissertation on John Rawls's theory of justice in relation to climate and environmental crisis.

Cat Saint-Croix is a philosopher and vegan cannoli artist at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. Their research interests include feminist logic and epistemology, social identity, and attention. Outside of philosophy, they spend time climbing, playing D&D, and cuddling with their cats, Tycho and Galileo.