

SUBJECTIVITY/ LIGHT/ CELLULOID/ AFFINITY

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**Abstract**

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This thesis is written concurrently to an ongoing studio-art practice that aims to understand the relationships between technology, digital space, and subjective identity by examining notions of body, individualism, and change through an auto-biographical lens.

While the evolution of digital space within the last few decades has been essential to creation of community, it has also functioned as a key element of colonialism, capitalism, and overall systemic oppression. This paper seeks to explore the nuances of this type of space and the possibilities of functioning outside of the system that seeks to individualize and oppress in an inevitable digital future. These ideas of “identity” that concern how this space functions are abstract and widespread: to continue this conversation this paper aims to delve into concepts of subjective identity and ultimately, ideas of affinity between individuals.

## INTRODUCTION

I am young and I live my life digitally. My knowledge of the world primarily stems from digital images: from a young age there was an understanding that the internet could provide a framework and knowledge that parents could not begin to recognize. At twelve years old classmates would gather around a laptop to watch leaked videos of violence from the Iraq war, at thirteen I would spend long nights talking to men I (thankfully) would never meet. At fourteen was when I discovered blogs and youtube channels of people who had been living as openly queer and trans; while diverse in identity and physicality, I saw myself in their words and their faces.

When I was twenty four (last week) I showed my mother how to upload old photos onto a cloud service. She admitted to me during the process that her great existential worry revolved around losing a generations worth of family photos that had been stored on a singular flash drive in a closet for years. I had fixed it with an hour of my time and a laptop. It seemed absurd to me how great the gap in our connection to the digital space was; it was not a question of capability, but a difference in how the world has been framed. My mother only uses the computer to answer emails and take notes for her work. She doesn't have a digital identity. Both by my own doing and unwittingly by others, my personhood was constructed simultaneously online and in my in-person life. My face has revolved around the world through instant messages, social media, and videos on a Tumblr blog from 2014. Everything is my image or others, composed of pixels and a self-identification through text. Others see an image of me and tell me who I am. This is how I learned to be.

While identity has always been a present conversation, the contemporary idea of it has twisted itself into my life in presumably innocent but pernicious ways. Age fourteen, I am asked to fill out a diversity form while being enrolled in my public high school. Under the “Race and Ethnicity” section there is a box to check for white and a box to check for Hispanic (instructions: select the one that describes you best). My mother is white, raised evangelical in rural Pennsylvania where her family has lived for generations. My father is Latino, born and raised in Paraguay, and moved to the United States a few years before my birth. And his father isn’t even Latino, he is a German Jewish Holocaust survivor who moved to South America at the age of 5. He has no strong memory of Germany; while he retains his Jewish heritage and culture from his parents (my great-grandparents), he spoke Spanish and Guarani outside of the house. My father asserts that now, at the age of 91, my grandfather no longer really remembers how to speak German and considers himself Paraguayan, like I would call myself American.

So is my father *really* Latino? Of course, he’ll ascertain, it’s the culture you live in, not your skin. But am I Latino? He tells me to say it proudly, even though my ability to speak Spanish coherently is constantly in question and I don’t look like my friends who grew up similarly. This identity also seems to betray my equal connection to my mother, but often I am denied the opportunity to say that I’m “half” of anything. This notably American confusion perpetrates almost every aspect of my life: is my relationship with my assigned gender subversive enough to be considered transgender? Is my family poor or wealthy? And what does queer *really* mean? (I’ve only had one romantic

relationship in my life, evidence for other proclivities is limited to my testimony and not much else).

The common hypothesis for the overwhelming nature of white guilt and engagement in systemic oppression feels both personal and obvious; the incessant need to check boxes continues to separate a person from their infinite fluctuation of experience, and therefore separates a person from the people around them who may be able to identify with some experiences but not others. The human desire to categorize is both empowering and a downfall. Historical and cultural reasonings may advocate for the joys of *identifying* with others, but the noun of *identity* serves as a tool of separation by the systems that oppress us. When we are given the opportunity to check a box (or even multiple) we are not providing insights of subjective experience, rather we are providing quantifiable information that dictates how strongly we are criminalized, oppressed, or raised up within our society. Implies the type of ki

If identity separates us, what is it that brings us together? The term “affinity” in a social science context was first mentioned by German Sociologist Max Weber in 1904. While not explicit in its definition, Weber’s use of the term implies a type of kinship that could be found between religious groups despite differences that may otherwise set them apart.<sup>1</sup> The use of this term continued throughout the century and in 1985, Donna Haraway concluded through research of other feminist theorists that affinity, or “conscious coalition” was the necessary solution to combat the limitations of identification.<sup>2</sup> She urges us to find community with others for the sake of it. While it

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<sup>1</sup> Löwy, Michael. “The Concept of Elective Affinity in Max Weber.” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, no. 127 (July 1, 2004): 93–103. <https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.1055>.

<sup>2</sup> Haraway, Donna J. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” Essay. In *Manifestly Haraway*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Scholarship Online, 2017.

seems redundant to posit that no singular term of identity could define an entire group of individuals, structures of government and oppression assert that it is true. Whether through census survey or racialization as means to perpetuate capitalist interest, individuals and communities are caught in a game of identity politics that no one has been given the rules to. The only way out is refusal.

This text serves as an analysis of subjectivity and the limitations of identity within our current systems, however it is important to note its autobiographical nature as well. While systems of oppression must be confronted by every member of society to move closer to idealization, my own whiteness is certainly both complicit within this system, as well as a barrier to understanding. I strongly encourage any readers of this paper to engage in cited works (and any other texts) by individuals of color, as their direct experiences with Western systemic oppression provide first-hand accounts that I would otherwise not be privy to. I also encourage readers to consider that every individual contains their own index of experiences with oppression; to assume a singular view-point is conclusive is in opposition to the sentiment of this work.

#### LAST YEAR'S SEMINAL WORKS

As a predecessor to this research, my interests during my first year of school were nebulous but revolved around very vague notions of identity. The original exploration was through various projections of archival photographs from my family, situated within fabric and white rooms in the basement of the UW Art Building. While created on the basis of my interests, the work felt flat and disconnected. Poorly scanned photos of my paternal family would stare back at us during critique, emotive yet

incapable of truly explaining their presence or lives and what that translated into the 21st century. Discouraged, I moved onto even more reduced concepts of self and started situating my practice as exploration of the body, something I knew I could directly put my experience into.

In Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag provides a nuanced description of the human proclivity to describe the body in terms that alienate oneself from disease and suffering. The historical romanticization of tuberculosis and the terms of morality and complexity assigned to cancer have created a world in which disease and suffering become not only elements of the body's function, but enemies of the human themselves. Noted first in writings from Ancient Greece and continuing through the 18th century, illness was often seen as a punishment of character: a deserved fate that aligned with the mysticism and mystery of the body.<sup>3</sup> As the 19th century progressed, the Industrial Revolution realigned connections to the body outside of spirituality and illness became understood as an expression of self. This notion feels ridiculous to accept and yet, cancer today is still linked to the *feelings* that an individual experiences in reaction to approaching their mortality.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, illness is still in fact a metaphor for understanding the world. On a broader scale we can see that this historical train of thought has leaked into understandings of the body in general. Metaphors of the body that align with technological progress intrinsically fade in and out of obscurity as a means to understand ourselves as humans. During Ancient Grecian developments of hydraulics, the body came to be understood generally as a series of gasses and pressures, in our modern age the brain is often compared to a computer.<sup>5</sup> What is

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 50.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul Minda, "The Fluidity of Thought," John Paul Minda, PhD, June 11, 2018.

essential to understanding *why* we engage in these types of desires is the link to understanding productivity, capital, and power. Alvaro Pastor notes that the development of social and labor practices was specifically informed by concepts that relied on devaluing individuals into their functionalities, whether it be in an assembly line or through regulation of how humans would be permitted to take up space within buildings.<sup>6</sup> This depersonalization serves many functions, mainly as a way to exert power over individuals. With this in consideration, it is fundamental to understand conflation of human process and machine as a way to take away individuality of experience and instead become a literal piece of a capitalist system that then exploits the individual.

With this research in mind, my first work that informed my current practice was formulated. My background of 16 millimeter filmmaking lent to the purchase of a somewhat run-down vintage Singer projector a year ago as a means to animate and digitize old reels I had been collecting. While mostly in good shape, the cheaper-than-usual price I paid for it resulted in some necessary fixing of small parts and cleaning of others. Finally running, I was taken aback by the machine itself. It was so simple yet so transfixing in what it could do. Friends would gasp as if watching a magic show while we experienced 50 year old film reels flicker to life with nothing but a light bulb and motor. The consideration of this machine in particular felt so indicative of early 20th century ideas of production. Such simple systems and parts could be broken down within it and produce an experience that seemed to far outlive the machine itself.

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<sup>6</sup> Pastor, Alvaro. 2021. "Human as Machine: A Discussion on the Transformations and Exhaustion of a Metaphor." OSF Preprints. August 29. doi:10.31219/osf.io/d9pr6. 3.

Interested in exploring this concept further, I decided to create my own study of metaphor with the piece *Organism Study I*.

The intended primary function of the projector (producing image) was eliminated from this study by using a looped piece of black film leader, thus letting the machine function without engaging in production. The film leader, scratched on the audio strip to emulate the rhythm of a heartbeat, became another organ, simply functioning as part of its system. I would describe the performance of the projector itself as jarring and harsh. The sound, while mimicking the rhythm of a heart, was unpleasant to listen to. The projector would continue to run until the tape holding the loop together finally snapped after a few hours, either from the friction or heat or both. As the torn film tangled in the mechanisms and started to fall apart, the projector was turned off in interest of fire safety.



FIG. 1: *Organism Study I*, Installation View, May 2023, Work and Photo by Author

The emotional reactions to the projector were, in my opinion, the most interesting byproduct of this performance. Some viewers felt a sense of sympathy for the machine, feeling sad that it was put on the ground in a corner, made to run and eventually break itself. Others were put off by the intensity of the noise, both of the simulated heartbeat and the intensity of the motor running. While not resolved, the multi-layered identities people were forming with the experience and the object itself intrigued me and led me to work on a similar piece, titled *Organism Study II*.

The ideas of productivity and its relationship we are forced to engage in connect with identity on a multitude of levels. *Organism Study II* provided me the opportunity to examine the role of the state in a very low-stakes way. The work was another iteration of sculpture and performance: a 2011 Macbook enclosed in a broken glass display case processed text, a visualization of neurons firing, and a webcam that recorded whatever was in front of it. As the older laptop processed these functions, the glass enclosure trapped in residual heat. About an hour into the performance, the laptop's safety function kicked in and shut off the computer to preserve the hard drive. While similar to *Organism Study I*, this work aimed to create a more legible reading of human processes to the viewer and in turn, question the contemporary metaphor of the human brain being conflated with the processes of a computer. On a secondary level, I was interested in interpretations of productivity and non-performance. To what extent do we feel inclined to emotionally sympathize with a machine? As it performs labor that eventually wears itself down, why do we identify with it despite knowing our human experience cannot be replicated? Knowing that we are not machines, yet letting capitalism dictate our life

experiences as if we are empowered me to understand the importance of non-performance as resistance.

## TRANSITIONARY SUMMER

Inspired by these ideas of non-performance, my summer research began to delve into more subjective understandings of identity that operated outside of the body. Legacy Russel's *Glitch Feminism* became a cornerstone to my understanding of gender performativity; her anecdotal history of being placed outside the system as a queer woman of color combined with theory and research of previous cyber-feminists solidified a both theoretical and aesthetic venture into the idea of a "glitch". Russel defines glitch in this context as an intentional non-performance, or a refusal to perform to the expectations of society.<sup>7</sup> What is particularly distinctive about Russel's exploration of this concept is her inclusion of the digital space as part of the conversation; her optimism lies within the already occurring practice of individuals exploring and choosing identity online outside of traditional Western systems. I certainly am no stranger to the appeal of internet anonymity: much of my understanding of my own gender and sexuality was formed in my teenage years in online communities, where there was no predisposition of how I must act or appear. This freedom gave me the opportunity to define myself on my own terms, something that, while more daunting, I hoped to bring to my non-digital life.

The visual concerns on how to interpret the idea of glitch became the most prevalent over the summer, and most of my practice between the first and second year of the program involved rounds of experimentation, both in technique and form. Visually

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<sup>7</sup> Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism* (Brooklyn, New York: Verso Books, 2020), 8.

inspired by filmmaker Naomi Uman's *Removed* in which the image of a female performer is physically bleached out of a pornographic film, my initial goal was to find ways to show my subjective self and remove the objective body. The first completed work that reflected these new ideas were a series of self-portraits taken over the month of August in my sparsely yet specifically furnished apartment. These images were titled *Self- Portraits (503 E Thomas Street, Seattle, WA 98102)* as a reflection of where they were taken. By overexposing my nude body with a flashbulb in an otherwise dark room, my figure became ghostly and devoid of identifiers while the background remained clear. The focus then became the domestic space and objects that surrounded myself. While my practice tends to only engage in self-portraiture for a variety of personal reasons, this series is currently being continued with other individuals in their apartments and homes. We become unified in almost matching figures, the distinction of portraiture lies within the backgrounds that have been chosen and carefully curated over years of domesticity and lived experience.



FIG 2: Still from Naomi Uman's *Removed*, 1999<sup>8</sup>



FIG 3: From *Self- Portraits (503 E Thomas Street, Seattle, WA 98102)*, August 2023, Image by Author

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<sup>8</sup> *Removed*. (1999). United States. Retrieved February 5, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2LuqpirHI0&t=277s>. Independent experimental 16mm film, digitized for Youtube

After this initial series, I felt compelled to return to video and the traditional idea of “glitch” for my next work. Datamoshing and “glitch art” have been around for decades at this point, however my previous experience with the idea of glitch art stemmed from a primarily visually aesthetic interest. Returning to this specific video medium with understanding of the metaphorical implications of glitch resolved what had otherwise been lacking before: the systemic destruction accrued by glitching the pixels allowed a freedom or “nonperformance” that otherwise would be dictated by image. In *Identification Photo (Self-Portrait)*, I am sitting in front of a white background, facing forward, my face framed within the third between the top and bottom of the square frame. In video format, I am replicating a process that I have done multiple times over throughout my life to ensure I can travel to see family. I am not sure to what extent my image has been recorded by the US government (or any other government for that matter) but I do know that this image and at least four others depicting my child and teenage self have been designated as representations of myself, born May 6th, 1999. These representations were only of that photographed moment, the last time I left the country, my new hair cut and hormonally induced bodily changes led to intensive consideration if the image in my passport was me.

*Identification Photo (Self-Portrait)* has given me the opportunity to reclaim autonomy in the process of state-led identification. As I sit and look into the camera, my face and background start to clip away at each other, the movement of my eyes and lips morphing into new shapes and colors. I no longer have to engage in performance, a misplaced p-frame has made it impossible for the video player to understand how a face

must be constructed. My image is now transitioned, in transit. I have separated myself from my body.

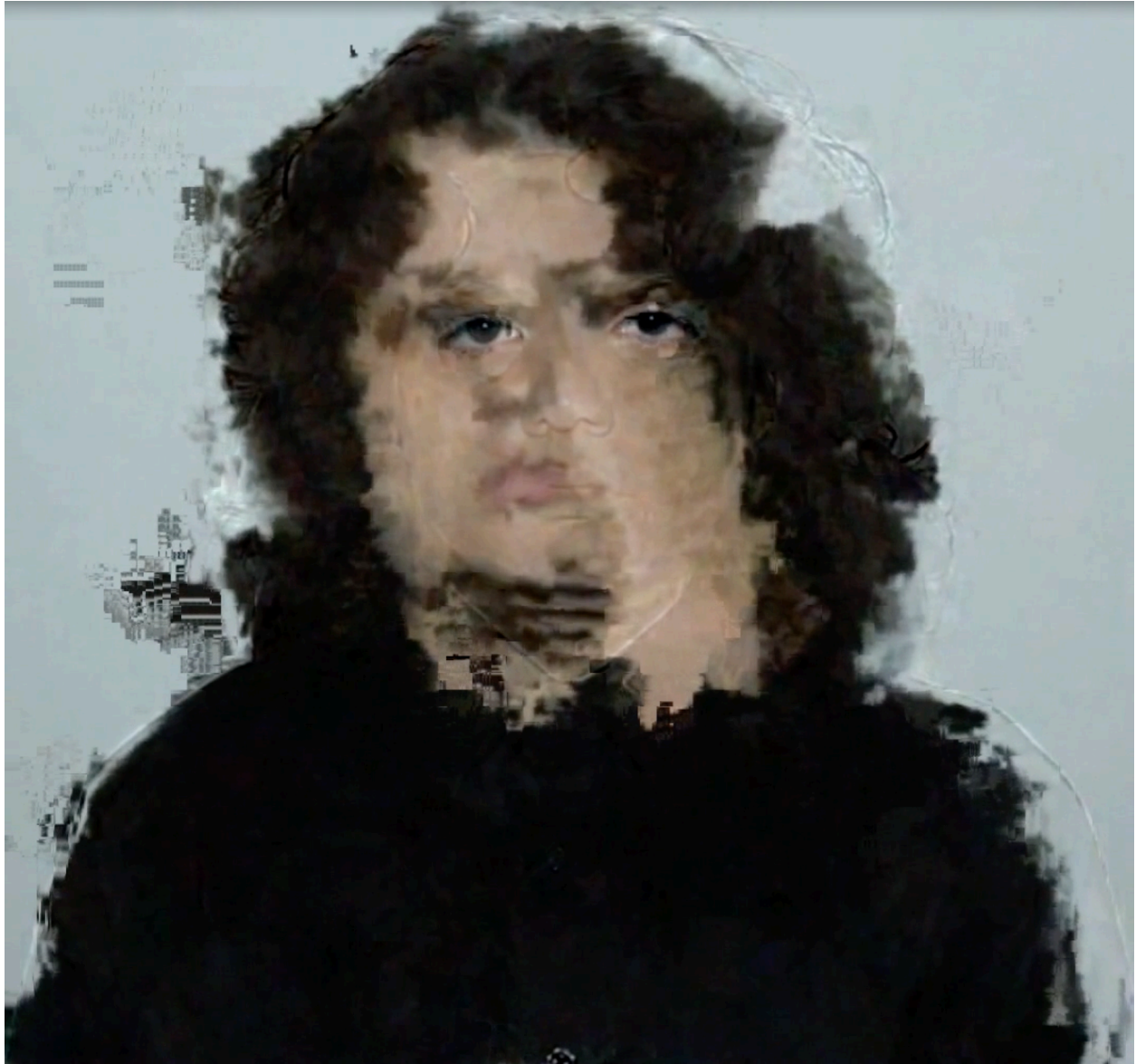


FIG 4: Still from *Identification Photo (Self-Portrait)*, November 2023, Image and Work by Author

## SUBJECTIVITY/ LIGHT/ CELLULOID/ AFFINITY

A significant point of medium specificity that I had not really engaged in yet over the course of school was my original interest in 16 millimeter film, specifically direct animation and physical film manipulation. While the projector used in *Organism Study I* served an explicit function of sculpture and performance, I had struggled before to justify the use of this antiquated technology within a contemporary gallery setting to show film work. No matter the project, the focus became the projector's presence in the middle of the room. As I developed other work, an obvious oversight in my film practice raised its head through a return to an old interest in the Structuralist Film movement. Originally coined by film scholar P Adams Sitney in 1969, Structuralist Film was defined by him as a multitude of formal elements within experimental filmmaking, including "...a fixed camera position (fixed frame from the viewer's perspective), the flicker effect, loop printing (the immediate repetition of shots, exactly and without variation), and rephotography off of a screen."<sup>9</sup> Despite Sitney's scholarship and authority on this novel movement, actual structuralist filmmakers such as Paul Sharits saw their movement outside of the classifications of film theory and formal construction. The real focus in much of this work was the materiality, not only with consideration for manipulation of film but a holistic understanding of the relationships between physical film, image, light, and spectator.<sup>10</sup>

This desire of touch and subjectivity within the medium seemed poignant, considering my continual exploration of identity. If understandings of ourselves are

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<sup>9</sup> Sitney, P. Adams. "Structural Film." Essay. In *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*, 347–70. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Elwes, Catherine. *Installation and the Moving Image*. Columbia University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.7312/elwe17450>.

constantly in flux, changing through experience and perception of others, why shouldn't we also consider both the objectivity and subjectivity in our desire to find identity? Film thus serves as the intangible and tangible existing in tandem. As we experience light and emotion, we are also experiencing something physical and visceral, manipulated by careful hands and directly changed by the individual. Ultimately, we as spectators of film find ourselves in affinity with the artist and art. We have made an active choice to identify with what we see, with the understanding that our experience is unreplicable and inaccessible to those around us.

My work continued to evolve with this new found understanding of material and I began to experiment with combining digital and analog projection in installation settings. While similar in their intentions, digital and film projection utilize and process light in two very different ways, thus leading to a tension that felt interactive and symbolic when layered on top of each other. *Obscured Identity* served as mainly means of exploration within this realm. Utilizing a digital projection of a still from *Identification Photo* in shades of blue and a loop of clear film leader painted with red and blue alcohol ink, the two projections layered on top of each other. As color and light began to interact, the double projection also served as a way for a spectator to block one or both projections, choosing to reveal or obscure different parts of the image.



FIG 5: Installation documentation of *Obscured Identity*, December 2023, Work and Photo  
by Author

This chosen obscuration within self-portraiture continues to be a point of interest for my practice. There is a sort of violence enacted by the audience in these scenarios, they begin to dictate what my image is and when I am allowed to be present. As this form of my practice continues, I seek to find the tensions of presence and how a spectator can manipulate my identity. These ideas of transit and erasure in my day to day life are certainly not things I have exclusive control over: I wish to explore my power within the artistic space and learn when to give and when to take on my own terms.

## CONCLUSION

As an effort of scholarship, engaging in academia, theory, and feminist literature seemed to be important to my work throughout the last two years. What also now feels important is engaging in the world and understanding the living practice that comes with

being an artist. While many of these concepts came from intensive research and theorization, the realities of this have a tendency to falter and stay within the minds of young, educationally privileged individuals who are ultimately at the whim of the institutions they choose to reside in. What is most apparent is the intensive need and desire to be in the world, truly, fully, and in conversation with self and others.

While truly understanding the push and pull of identity/ affinity still feels unresolved for myself, two important points of interest dictate my future practice and my understanding of the world. First, my concerns with perception of gender, ethnicity, race, or any other identifying factors are fluid and in transit. Any resolution or exclusive definition within these concepts is inherently in conflict with progression, community, and critique of state or institution. Second, using subjective experience as a tool of affinity is a powerful disruption of identity as objective truth. Choosing to experience, live, and love with others will always be more powerful than categorization of lives and experience into simple definitions. I encourage the reader to find affinity in their own lives and communities, after all, we are not much more than tangibility and light.

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