

## Making “Space” for Suicide: Radical Depictions of Suicide’s Potential

Alison Parks

**Abstract:** *This article offers a close reading of the musical The Elementary Spacetime Show by César Alvarez, which, by subverting the dominant suicide discourses and providing a candid glimpse of the interiority of suicidality, creates the space for not only its protagonist to reframe her experience with suicidality, but also for broader conversations about reframing suicide, in general. The show follows a disgruntled teenage girl, Alameda, who, after her suicide, finds herself the unwitting star of a vaudevillian gameshow of the afterlife designed to help her confront her attitudes about the universe and mortality. The musical itself draws from feminist theories of staying with the trouble and mattering, and I argue that the process of competing in the gameshow engages Alameda in a form of schizoanalysis, giving her agency over her situation to an extent that suicidal persons rarely experience. The Elementary Spacetime Show presents an illustration of the transformative nature of being able to be with one’s suicidality, thereby confronting the common tendency to pathologize and criminalize suicidality and compelling audience members to confront their own instinctive reactions to expressions of suicidality.*

**Keywords:** The Elementary Spacetime Show; César Alvarez; queer suicide; schizoanalysis; Deleuze and Guattari



A suicidal person checks into a hotel looking for a place to die free of all stereotypes. The scene is not much different than a Japanese love hotel—the décor is “the most absurd,” the patronage, anonymous. There the person has “an indeterminate amount of time—seconds, weeks, and months perhaps—until the moment

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**Alison Parks** is Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science at Stetson University. Their research uses the frameworks of contemporary political theory and queer theory to examine the effects of a life lived in proximity to suicide.

presents itself with compelling clearness." Recognizable immediately, "the shapeless shape of utterly simple pleasure" (Foucault 1996, 297).

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A disgruntled teenage girl, recently dead—or, rather, not not-dead—by suicide, finds herself the unwilling participant in a musical gameshow in an absurdist version of the afterlife. She's greeted by an enlightened being who likes to make puns and a pro-death, vaudevillian M.C. who emphatically reminds her over and over: "If. You. Want. To. Die. You. Have. To. Play. And. Win. *The Elementary Space-time. Show*" (Alvarez and Orling 2018).

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In 1979, Michel Foucault published a short, now obscure, essay in the gay French rag *Gai pied*. Titled "The Simplest of Pleasures," he sets out "to see what there is to say in favor of suicide," after remarking that the contemporary discourse, which repeatedly notes the homosexual's tendency to self-destruct, makes both suicide and homosexuals look bad (Foucault 1996, 295). In the essay, he makes the argument that given the "extremely unique experience" humans have with regard to suicide, society ought to consider transforming it such that "you can make of it a fathomless pleasure whose patient and relentless preparation will enlighten all of your life" (267). He argues that by treating it as such—by removing it from the realm of "shady affairs" that subjects the suicidal person to harsh treatments and denies their agency—"lovers of humanity" may find that they actually see a reduction in suicide. Foucault proposes a place for suicidal persons, a place akin to a Japanese love hotel, where they can go to prepare for their suicide without the intervention of police, hospitals, autopsies, and the other gruesome details of a death by suicide. The essay concludes that after spending time in this fictional, absurdist suicide hotel, "the moment" that presents itself to the suicidal person "would have the shapeless shape of utterly simple pleasure" (297). While this ending is purposely ambiguous—the pleasure may be the release one experiences through suicide or the pleasure that one feels upon realizing that they no longer wish to end their life—the essay's message is clear: Western society's treatment of suicide as a pathological or police matter is harmful to suicidal persons, especially to those who are already the most vulnerable to medical and police violence.

Unfortunately, in this contemporary moment, over forty years after the publication of "The Simplest of Pleasures," Western society's treatment of suicide has changed very little, and imagining a treatment for suicidal persons that includes

pleasure and offers the possibility of resolutely choosing death seems impossible. Despite the free flow of self-deprecating/destructive humor deployed anonymously online by Gen Z and younger millennials— “me, a suicidal asshole, eating my 10th popsicle today and spinning my fidget spinner: you know what fuck depression i’m neurotypical now”; “sucks when you’re just sitting around having an okay day and suddenly a wave of I Wanna Die™ hits you”; “that feeling when ur kinda suicidal but not rly because ur not gonna kill urself u just wish u were dead”; “\*goes from depressed to anxious to affectionate to angry to suicidal to neutral in a grand total of 0.2 seconds\* life is beautiful”<sup>1</sup>—serious expressions of suicidality, even those that do not suggest a person is in imminent danger, are stigmatized and met with alarm. One impact of this unchanging treatment has been steadily rising rates of suicide across nearly all demographics in the US from between 1999 and 2016, with only a slight overall decline in the rate reported between 2018 and 2019,<sup>2</sup> and consistently high rates of suicide among vulnerable groups such as queer and indigenous youth. While “experts” and media outlets cite shock at these soaring numbers, it seems that even the most simplistic reading of Durkheim could have predicted them.

Foucault offered “The Simplest of Pleasures” in the context of his lifetime of work spent theorizing the grip of power over life, the disciplinary nature of clinical confinement, and the psychic toll of being an individual in a regime where social relations are defined by control. For this reason, it is difficult for the average reader, who is unlikely to come across the essay in the first place, to read and appreciate what he proposes. However, in this article, I argue that the theatre offers a venue for realizing a space as impossible as the suicide hotel. Though vastly different in terms of content, form, and timing, *The Elementary Spacetime Show* by César Alvarez with Emily Orling illustrates the possibilities that arise when a suicidal person is treated as the designer of their own experience. In this article, I discuss how *The Elementary Spacetime Show* subverts discursive norms in

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<sup>1</sup> A sample of posts I scrolled past on Tumblr in a single week in early 2018. Posted between 2016 and 2018, the posts had garnered 32,348, 160,898, 327,481, and 45,158 notes (likes or reblogs), respectively, as of the time they appeared on my dashboard.

<sup>2</sup> An important caveat to the decline reported in the CDC’s *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* published on February 26, 2021 is that when broken down by racial group, “white persons were the only race for whom rates significantly declined from 2018 to 2019, declining 2.2% (18.1 to 17.7),” while “suicide rates did not significantly change from 2018 to 2019 for any other racial/ethnic group examined.” In addition, only five US states saw significant declines, while most saw none and a few saw an increase.

its treatment of suicide, its framing of the suicidal subject’s relationship to suicidality, and its (literal and figurative) construction of a space for suicide. Through its subversion, I argue that *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, enables revelatory points of departure toward new frameworks for understanding suicide and suicidality, which are necessary if one wishes to imagine a world in which rates of suicide decline. I begin this work with an account of how I arrived at thinking alongside the musical, and then move on to an analysis of the show in which I discuss its three modes of subversion in-depth alongside the theorizing of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as feminist thinkers including Ann Cvetkovich, Karen Barad, and Donna Haraway. I conclude by considering the ways in which the work done within the fictional realms of *The Elementary Spacetime* show might exist in this reality.

### Coming to the Text

In May 2017, I was well into a year and half long episode of depression marked by near constant thoughts of suicide. When I learned that *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, written by César Alvarez and directed by Andrew Neisler, was coming to New York I was both delighted—Alvarez’s work tends to draw heavily from political theory in order to imagine radical futures—and, based on the show’s description, aware that watching it in my then-current state could be a mistake. The official description for the show on Alvarez’s website as of November 2017 read:

A suicidally-depressed teenager named Alameda finds herself trapped in an absurdist musical game show after attempting to end her own life. By confronting a liminal vaudeville populated by incompetent avatars of cosmic truth, Alameda holds her hopelessness up against the enigmatic laws of the Universe.

The programs distributed at the show, performed at the Playwrights Downtown Robert Moss Theater in New York City, included the show’s tagline—“The universe doesn’t care if you live. It just doesn’t want you to die as a result of a false impression.”—which signifies that in this show there will be no imperative to live, no appeals to futurity, and no particularly caring sentiments. This already distinguishes the show’s treatment of suicide from typical narratives. When the doors to the theatre open, there is a trigger warning letting the audience know that the show depicts the suicide of a teenager onstage. Despite the subject matter, the tone of the show is queer and campy—a musical, after all—and, despite the tone,

the audience is mostly somber, particularly during intermission which followed a particularly harrowing scene in which Alameda tries to leave the game. The audience that files out of the show at the end has a great deal to process, for the show's seemingly grim tagline—"The universe doesn't care if you live."—is transformed into a bizarrely comforting reason to not die, at least for now. Why not?

During the performance, my own subjectivity put me in a perfect position to play the game alongside the show's protagonist and viscerally experience her highs and lows throughout, particularly the low moment she experiences when, after winning five out of the seven requisite challenges, she tries to give up on the game. In the scene before intermission, the audience witnesses Alameda meltdown; she screams into the void all the reasons why she still wants to die. The game has forced her to face the darkest parts of herself and she is done. The scene provided non-suicidal subjects a glimpse into the relentless reality of a suicidal subjectivity and, given my own positionality at the time, produced an unbearable affective resonance.<sup>3</sup> I experienced my own meltdown, unconvinced as Alameda that life was worth living. Although unlike the protagonist I had the option of quitting the game, I declined a friend's offer to take me home. Something had to happen. During the last two challenges, Alameda's suicidal subjectivity experiences a reflexive transformation. She wins the game and when presented with the choice between death and returning to the living, she chooses the latter, despite being warned that it probably won't get better for her, not for a while, especially given her recent suicide attempt. In the following months my own subjectivity underwent a similar transformation and, eventually, progress on the project at hand became possible.

When I began to revisit my early theorizations about the work I believed Foucault's "The Simplest of Pleasures" was doing, I realized it held significant creative and intellectual resonance with *The Elementary Spacetime Show*. I also realized that I could not recall a single moment from the second act of the show during which the transformation of the suicidal subjectivity truly occurred. I placed an inquiry with Alvarez's agent regarding the acquisition of the script in November of 2017, and by the spring I was designated "research consultant" on a production of the show that debuted in May 2018, again at Playwrights Downtown. I attended rehearsals and gained intimate insight into the show, while also providing

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<sup>3</sup> I use the phrase "suicidal subjectivity" as a broadly descriptive term describing the state of being a subject living/existing with and alongside suicidality. Though it resonates with the theorizations of Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari deployed in this article, it is not my goal to delineate different modes and sub-theories of subjectification and subjectivity.

guidance on its handling of suicide. I provide this context because despite my initial reaction to the show, and despite my commitment to the modes of theorization that began as a result of it, unless otherwise indicated, my analysis here will rely on the version performed in May 2018, which differs significantly from the earlier productions. A later version, workshopped during Vassar College’s 2019 Powerhouse Season, diverges from the initial script even more drastically. As this manuscript-in-development is being thought alongside a work of art also in development, its trajectory must account for fragments of each version, even if they do not make it into the final iteration. Furthermore, the ways in which I theorize about the show as a text now from a more purely academic standpoint cannot be removed from the initial affective responses that formed my relationship to it in the first place.

### ***The Elementary Spacetime Show: A Musical about Suicide***

In the 2018 version of *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, the protagonist, Alameda, is an explicitly queer questioning teen grappling with bullies from school, depression, and anxiety. When the show opens Alameda is alone onstage in her family’s kitchen. She sings a list of reasons why her life is no longer worth living and then swallows handfuls of prescription pills. She wakes up, alone again, on a dark stage where she is soon greeted by Frankie, a genderqueer guide-friend who also happens to be an enlightened being, although they are assuredly not God. “I’m dead!” Alameda responds to Frankie’s appearance. Frankie responds that Alameda’s not *not* dead, but that they better get a move on because the show is about to start and Alameda is the star! Alameda tries to refuse, but she cannot, Frankie says, because the audience—indicating the live audience—has already arrived. The moment is ruptured by the arrival of the M.C.—the reluctant ringleader of a vaudevillian circus and a foil to Alameda and Frankie—and a chorus of Avatars, each one dressed as absurdly as the one before it. Alameda is having none of it. Alameda wants to die and escape this purgatory she has found herself in. The M.C. is offended by the reference to purgatory—“We prefer, liminal.”—but she takes this moment to explain the game to Alameda with the aid of Frankie, a disgruntled nurse named Kathy, and a rousing musical number. The game consists of seven challenges that will require Alameda to battle the Avatars (representative of various parts of her subconscious), solve puzzles, and confront her reasons for wanting to die. In the game there are three rules:

One, if you give up ... you go back to the land of the living ... with severe repercussions from your suicide attempt.

Two, if you lose the game ... you also go back to the land of the living ... with severe repercussions from your suicide attempt.

Three, if you win the game ... you get to choose whether you live or die. (Alvarez and Orling 2018, 14–15)<sup>4</sup>

Alameda immediately receives her first strike for “givey-uppy” language when she reiterates that she does not want to play in some “stupid” game show, she just wants to die. The M.C. reiterates matter-of-factly: “If. You. Want. To. Die. You. Have. To. Play. And. Win. The Ele-men-tary Space-time Show” (17). Two more strikes and she will be out, back to the land of the living. With that, Alameda agrees to play and she plays well. She gets a second strike when she tries to leave the game after a meltdown triggered by a particularly violent challenge involving a mosquito. Eventually, Alameda completes all seven challenge and finds herself facing two doors. The M.C. explains that if she goes through the door on her right she will be dead and if she goes through the door on her left, she will be alive. Alameda chooses the door on the left, the Avatars return for one last somber number, and the show ends.

### Refusing Generic and Discursive Norms

*The Elementary Spacetime Show* is a show that makes its audience uncomfortable without necessarily offering them a resolution. In many ways, it is the show’s refusal to conform to the norms of suicide that create its resonance with Foucault’s essay. As indicated by Foucault’s essay, recent scholarship (see, for instance, Baril 2017; Baril 2020; Lim 20210; and Puar 2017), and widely circulating social media posts, there exists a dire need to reframe conversations about suicide, and about queer suicidality in particular, so that they focus not solely on individual pathology or tolerance within interpersonal relationships—both of which are, of course, important—but that they also take into account the ways in which life’s relationship to power continues to evolve in the contemporary era. Suicidality must be

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<sup>4</sup> In the original version of the script, the first two rules are “ONE. If you give up ... you go back to the land of the living ... and you will have lost something.” and “TWO. If you lose the game ... you also go back to the land of the living ... but you will have lost nothing” (Alvarez 2017, 12).

recognized as a naturally occurring (perhaps in the face of unnatural forces) consequence of existence in this moment. Reframing the conversations around suicide as such removes the notion of rationality from the equation, and recognizes that while contemporary power dynamics make this relationship exceedingly obvious across wider parts of the population, some populations such as queer and indigenous populations have been bearing the weight of this connection for much longer, often without witnesses from outside.

For the queer population, especially the queer youth population, recent decades have led to an increase of witness from the outside, thanks in large part to efforts like the Trevor Project and It Gets Better. Even more recently, youth suicide has become a topic of increasing interest among teens in the mainstream as evidenced, for instance by the popularity of Netflix's hit 2017 show *13 Reasons Why*, based on a novel of the same name by Jay Asher, and *Dear Evan Hansen*, which won the 2017 Tony Award for Best Musical. Both have received praise for the ways they force suicide as a topic of mainstream discussion, despite the fact that neither truly discusses suicide itself as a phenomenon, or spends much time contemplating the suicidality of the respective characters whose suicides drive the plots. Instead, each show relies on the suicide of one character to develop a protagonist's story arc. *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, however, is a musical *about* suicide, indicated by the show's 2018 tagline. The show opens with Alameda's suicide, and the rest of the show is a consideration of and a confrontation against not only Alameda's suicide, but Alameda herself, who she is and where she fits in the universe.

This discursive shift is important because presenting queer suicidality in this manner destigmatizes what it means to feel the way Alameda is feeling. That Alameda feels the way many queer youth feel highlights a collective suicidality, offering two simultaneous effects. The first effect is a reversal of the isolating impact of feeling suicidal experienced by queer youth subjects: if we are *all* feeling this way, then we are not the ones who are fucked up. The second is a candid glimpse for a non-suicidal subject into an unapologetically suicidal subjectivity. This confrontation and its effects are most evident in the opening number, "The Feeling of Void," and its reprise. Before and as she is swallowing the pills, Alameda faces the audience and sings in a manner that almost feels accusatory:

Haven't you ever been faced with the feeling of void, like  
 Every piece of your body ought to be destroyed, like  
 You would rather not exist, and



You would rather not exist  
 You wish you could die and it wouldn't make everyone so sad  
 [...]  
 It's not all right.  
 I'm not all right. (Alvarez and Orling 2018, 4–5)

During the song's first performance, Alameda's looking for understanding with the audience, but also addressing them — "haven't *you* ever" — suggesting that if you have not experienced this then you have no authority to tell her what do with herself. Alameda is also pushing back against the tendency, which Foucault also criticizes in his piece, to center stories about suicide on the survivors, and to try and put all the pieces together after the fact, which, not coincidentally, is exactly the plot of *15 Reasons Why*. Aware of this tendency, Alameda expresses her frustrations: "You wish you could die and it wouldn't make everyone so sad." Alameda places the onus on the audience at this point to not respond with any of society's conditioned responses to expressions of suicidality. This occurs both through the rage that is coming through her lines as she sings, as well through the setting of the theatre itself, and the fact that the members of the audience are separate from the action occurring on the stage and cannot intervene even if they feel compelled to, all while the song makes a point of their subjectivity and the expectations about suicide with which they enter the show. It is a show and they are bearing witness.<sup>5</sup>

Alameda begins a reprise of this song after she wins the show and finds herself faced with the two doors for life and death. It is in this moment that, in the words of the director, Andrew Neisler, the show breaks open. As she sings, Alameda is joined on stage by other teenagers who are meant to represent all the other teenagers standing in their kitchens, about to make the same decision she had made at the top of the show. In this moment, although the other teenagers are unaware of her, Alameda is able to see them all, and is able to experience a moment where her suicidality does not exist in isolation. None of them are all right. The imagery of this scene — Alameda, crying with staggered breath, facing the real choice between life and death, surrounded by harmonizing teens, each isolated in

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<sup>5</sup> In the original version of the script, this aspect is built into the signification of the gameshow's title. The M.C. explains to Alameda that "The Elementary Spacetime Show" is so named because it represents the liminal environment created for every suicidal teen that passes through: "Elementary ... for dealing with fundamentals," "Space ... for where you are," "Time ... for where it all takes place," "Show ... Because we know you need us to bear witness to your difficulties" (Alvarez 2017, 8–9).

a spotlight on an otherwise dark stage and unaware of one another or of Alameda—presents the problem of youth suicide more effectively than reproducing the climbing statistics ever could. It is a moment of reassurance for those suffering that they are not suffering alone, and it is a wake-up call for those not paying attention: It's not all right. More importantly, it's not all right, and there's likely nothing you can do about it. For the audience, the scene clears up "the obscurity of the connections between [personal] despair and the collective despair that is present in the places where we live [or, in the communities of which we are a part]" that "adds to our confusion and (political) depression" (Cvetkovich 2012, 81). In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovich begins with the simple premise "that depression should be viewed as a social and cultural phenomenon" (90). This moment in *The Elementary Spacetime Show* allows one to pose the question: What if suicidality were treated as an equally public feeling? An emphasis on statistics and risk factors makes suicide among certain populations feel like an inevitability, reducing each person's experience to an individuated datum. What would it mean, instead, to actually sit with the fact that so many people living in society want to die? To recognize that one is not alone in their experience?

The most extreme discursive rupture that separates *The Elementary Spacetime Show* from other works about suicide and from other suicide prevention narratives is that there is no concerted effort to convince Alameda to live, nor a conviction that anything will get better. The M.C., Frankie, Nurse Kathy, and the Avatars do push back against Alameda's destructive and suicidal thoughts, but—with the exception of Frankie, who genuinely wants Alameda to live—really they just want Alameda to win the game so that she can get what she wants, which is to die. The M.C., for instance, is actively pro-death, a self-proclaimed foil to the contestants who come through the show looking to gain some meaningful change through their death. Her cynical views that seeking meaning for one's life from external sources and expecting something different to come from one's death are pointless, lead her to the conclusion that if someone wants die they should be able to ... once they have confronted their misguided attitudes by playing the game. Her rationalization of death by suicide contrasts with the discourses derived from liberal biopolitical thought and psychiatric thought that pathologizes all suicides that cannot be otherwise deemed rational or attributed to a pre-existing psychosis. Liberalism's emphasis on the right to life combined with the biopolitical imperative states have to protect the biological life of their populations, produce a narrative that suggests a desire to end one's life is "crazy," unless one has exhausted

their value as a productive citizen-subject. An example of this discursive reproduction in the psycho-medical field can be found in the inclusion of "suicidal behavior disorder" in the *DSM-V* as a diagnosis under consideration. This diagnosis would apply to all suicidal behavior that cannot be attributed to the diagnosis of a terminal illness, political motives, or a pre-existing diagnosis of mental illness (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 803).

The critique of the pathologization of suicide in the musical is best represented by the character of Nurse Kathy, a ridiculous figure who is presented as irrational throughout and viewed as a nuisance by the M.C. Nurse Kathy's hysterical utterings of suicide statistics have a fear-mongering effect on Alameda so they are often shut down by the M.C., and her annoyance that the M.C. and Frankie are mismanaging the situation of a suicidal teen is palpable: Nurse Kathy fervently wants Alameda to not die, but the desire does not seem to come from any particular care for Alameda, simply from the fact that it is her job to keep people alive. I interpret Nurse Kathy's role in the show and the fact that she is frequently chastised or sent backstage by the M.C. to represent a reversal of what Baril argues is the tendency of "critical suicidologists and LGBTQ scholars" to "continue to speak for suicidal subjects" (Baril 2017, 213), thereby forcing an "injunction to live" that delegitimizes the voice of the suicidal subject. In this case, rather than the suicidal subject's voice being shut down in favor of the voices of psycho-medical experts, it is the psycho-medical voice that gets shut down in favor of the suicidal subject's voice. This is crucial because it gives the suicidal subject the opportunity to guide their own experience, and it places a trust in the subject that they will make whatever choice is right for them.

Not even Frankie, who desperately wants Alameda to live, attempts to force this agenda onto Alameda. After winning her first challenge, Alameda receives as a prize a "Biographical Retrospective" that forces her to relive all the good and terrible moments of her life that led to the moment of her suicide. Pushing through the song that accompanies the prize brings Alameda to her first meltdown. After she has had a moment to recover, she asks Frankie, "This is supposed to make me live?" Frankie replies, "No." After they talk for a moment, Frankie asks Alameda whether she is ready to keep going. When Alameda replies that she just wants to die, Frankie reminds her "Well the only way to do that is to keep going" (Alvarez and Orling 2018, 27–29). Alameda's first question to Frankie after the biographical retrospective is indicative of the fact that she also believes that the whole point of this show is to convince her to live because that is what is supposed to happen

to suicidal teens. It is disorienting to not find it in this space, but it is ultimately what gives Alameda the strength to make it through to the end.

While this particular suicide narrative had an impact on the show's protagonist, as well on the author, it is impossible to know the generalizable impact of a work like this that is still being developed. However, knowing that it is possible to produce alternative narratives and that such alternatives can have an impact is crucial if society expects to better understand suicide as a phenomenon. So long as suicide continues to be presented as a pathological event—a desperate choice to be avoided at all costs (literally and figurative)—without systemic investigations into the conditions of contemporary human life that make life unlivable, there is little reason to assume the numbers will but ascend in coming years.

### Constructing a Critical Suicidality

Although as a fictional character her experience is mediated by external forces including her creator and her various audiences, Alameda's experience of suicidality is entirely her own, and she is able to express it freely, without the risk of pathologization. Importantly, by providing Alameda with an audience and a soapbox (at one point, literally), *The Elementary Spacetime Show* represents a reframing of a subject's relationship to their own suicide and enables the suicidal subject to be the ultimate authority and theorist of their situation. By refusing the universalization of any one experience, Alameda's experience as a contestant on the show mirrors the method of schizoanalysis as elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari. As an alternative mode of psychoanalysis, schizoanalysis has political effects to the extent that it resists the temptation of a "universal context" and recognizes the extent to which, in traditional therapy, "certain assemblages are put in the position of 'analyzer' of the formations of the unconscious" who may or not "be conscious of their 'mission' or invested by other authorities in order to occupy this position." (Guattari 2009b, 207). In other words, at a micropolitical level it disrupts the relation of force that exists between the patient and the analyzer, and carries with it the possibility of being adapted into "other systems of modelization" (205). The schizoanalysis of Alameda's suicidal subjectivity is made possible by two factors: the understanding shown by the "experts"—in this case the M.C., Frankie, and the Avatars—and a fixed audience that cannot react or runaway from Alameda and who, perhaps most importantly, cannot send Alameda away. Together, these groups serve as de-facto schizo-analyzers as they are not fixed (the audience will presumably be different at every showing, and stage lighting prevents Alameda

from making out individuated audience members) and "don't appear as pre-established systems" who "claim to institute themselves as legitimate structures of enunciation" (208). Indeed, it is suggested that each time a new teen enters the show it "reboots itself," and the Avatars appear to each contestant in the beginning as an indistinguishable blob, only becoming distinct as individuals as the contestant moves through the show and gives them their meaning. This enables Alameda to reframe her suicidal thoughts and re-contextualize the role they play in her constitution as a subject.

The reactionary response to expressions of suicidality, feeling suicidal, and the topic of suicide in general reinforces the stigmatization of suicide and thus of suicidal subjects. In the case of *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, however, those bearing witness to Alameda's struggles, especially the remaining cast of the show, engage her in such a way that enables her to reveal her truths about what is happening and formulate her own reactions and needs. At this point, I return to Frankie's engagements with Alameda as someone who genuinely wants Alameda to continue living and who, despite this, provides an analysis of Alameda's situation that focuses around her choice to die. Frankie's guidance does not reinforce any liberal or biopolitical injunction to live, and does not diminish or pathologize Alameda's mental state. In particular, it relies on frames of physics and "staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016) to produce a generalizable message without universalizing the experience of the subject.<sup>6</sup>

The scientific natures of matter/mattering are a recurring theme throughout Frankie's engagements with Alameda. In the first instance, returning to the moment following the biographical retrospective, Frankie reminds Alameda that even when she feels inconsequential, she matters, because she's matter and "matter literally matters...because it's matter." (Alvarez and Orling 2018, 28). In response to Alameda's assertion that her suicide would make her matter, Frankie continues:

When you leave a room, and slam the door behind you, it makes a big boom. Everyone in the room feels it. They feel the air rush. The vibrations shake their whole situation. They feel the space made by your absence. But when

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<sup>6</sup> The switch to a Haraway-inspired messaging is a difference between the 2018 production and the original production, which wrestled with existential debates. At one point, another character refers to the avatars as "the oddkin," stinky, sexy, and bound together and to all else by "wet strings."

you leave you give up the chance to be in the room. You give up the ongoingness. The possibilities. You can't matter as much in the room anymore because you took your matter elsewhere. (28)

Barring the "ubiquitous puns on 'matter'" (Barad 2003, 801), Frankie aims to reanimate the physical organizing matter comprising Alameda's body—matter that has weight by virtue of its existence in the gravitational field surrounding it. The matter that comprises Alameda, then, is more than a "passive and immutable" vessel for her subjecthood, overwritten by language, culture, and representation (801). It effects in its mere existence. In her work on matter/mattering, Barad argues that Western culture places an "asymmetrical faith in our access to representation," offering a "performative understanding" that "den[ies] that there are representations on the one hand and ontologically separate entities awaiting representation on the other" (807). According to this performative understanding, Alameda matters by virtue of her "being part of the world in its open-ended becoming" (821). Her materiality has an ongoingness, as Frankie points out, that is constantly in relation to and reconfiguring the world around her: "*matter comes to matter* through the iterative intra-activity of the world in its becoming" (823). What does any of this *matter* to a queer suicidal subject like Alameda who certainly did not sign up for a lesson in particle physics? What work does this theorization of mattering do that typical appeals to the suicidal subject do not?

Reminding a suicidal person, especially if they belong to a marginalized population, that their life has intrinsic value, a property theoretically attributed to one as human, is meaningless when compared to the reality of how some life in liberal society is so thoroughly devalued. Special or unique qualities attributed to the suicidal person to remind them of their value are also heard as hollow, external representations attributed to that person's character that they are not likely to believe because their brain has convinced them otherwise. While a rumination on physics may not ultimately convince someone to not die, it does, for Alameda at least, offer an alternative way of looking at the present situation that does not invalidate her feelings or experiences as a suicidal subject. This alternative approach also highlights the importance of the growing demands for more therapists and psychiatric professionals from marginalized backgrounds who recognize the psychic trauma caused by living in a society founded on white-supremacy, patriarchy, and heterosexism, and whose epistemological frameworks extend beyond those of their traditionally white, male colleagues.

*The Elementary Spacetime Show* also indicates how Haraway's framework of "staying with the trouble," which she argues involves straddling the "fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of indifference" (Haraway 2016, 4), may adapt well to conversations about suicide and suicidality. The sublime despair that may accompany the Foucauldian realization that only death is "beyond the reach of power" (Foucault 1997, 248), in addition to one's personal struggles and a view that humankind in the West seems set on a particularly destructive—suicidal, even—course, lends itself easily to the mindset of "Well, I'll just kill myself then." Recognizing that suicide is a "rational" choice to managing one's present situation, is not the same as offering an uncritical greenlight to those who express suicidal thoughts or plans. Instead, it calls for a close examination of what conditions have created this situation and a recognition that those conditions are making life unlivable. Further, while imagining new futures is an important part of justice-oriented political work, appealing to the suicidal subject with abstract notions of futurity—"It gets better."—only perpetuates indifference regarding the conditions that perpetuate endemic suicidality within certain populations. Things do not, typically, get better organically, at least not within a short period of time.

In the *Elementary Spacetime Show*, the effectiveness of this approach is made particularly evident in Alameda's final challenge and the Avatars' farewell number. In her final challenge, Alameda is forced to confirm that she understands the situation in which she finds herself. In the 2017 version of the production when pushed to describe her situation she finally replies,

I understand that my decision is going to be painful to a lot of people. I understand that they might never forgive me. And they might never be able to heal. I understand that I'm flawed, and that I might be making a decision based on a narrow point of view. I understand that my point of view, narrow as it may be, is the only one I have. [...] I want to heal or be gone. Nothing in between. (Alvarez, 69)

This is an acceptable answer, a gong chimes, signaling that she has won the final challenge, and she has made it through *The Elementary Spacetime Show* victoriously. In this scene, the show offers unprecedented agency to the suicidal subject. Alameda knows exactly what she is doing. While Alameda has an indeterminate amount of time for self-reflection during her stay in the liminal soundstage, she is

not coerced into any opinions regarding her mental state, even as her interlocutors adopt implicit or explicit positions on her decision. In their farewell, the Avatars remind her "No one will require that you choose this way or that, and no one will demand that you explain. We only ask that you observe the simple eerie fact of the spacetime that you make before you go and rearrange" (Alvarez and Orling 2018, 65). Left on her own to make her final choice, Alameda is aware she will have to face the consequences of what she has done if she chooses to live. She understands conditions may not improve. She understands that if she chooses death, she is released from this. She understands, too, however, that being part of the mess, "enmeshed in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, and matters, and meanings," even though it may be, as Haraway puts it "a hot compost pile," will at least be more interesting than nothing (2016, 1–4). She chooses to stay with the trouble, this time with the tools required to "navigate the inky black infinity of spacetime" (Alvarez and Orling 2018, 67–68). Reflecting on the broader implications and questions raised by this work, what are some tools, available in "real life," that can help the suicidal subject stay with the trouble in a way that offers non-judgmental harm reduction and the potentiality of a critical suicidality?

### "Space ... for where you are"

The soundstage for the meta-gameshow that takes place within the musical represents a space of [im]possibility for exploring alternative approaches to suicidality. It exists, in the audience's reality, within the fictional setting of the show, and, in Alameda's reality, within a liminal space between life and death that can only be accessed by one's suicide. The show's staging—the literal space of the theatre—creates the illusion that the audience has entered the void along with Alameda. In the 2017 staging, the set was left bare, while in the 2018 staging, Orling in her role as production designer cited a cosmic junkyard as the inspiration for the set, which entailed neon netting webbed around the black box theatre. The lighting effects reproduced for the audience the sensation of being a live-studio audience for the taping of a televised game show. *The Elementary Spacetime Show* is not real in this sense, nor have the audience members killed themselves to arrive at this space as Alameda has. The theatrical staging, in other words, offers an exclusive, immersive experience of suicidality, albeit with an extra layer of artificiality to maintain a potentially comforting distance. For example, in 2017, Alameda's breakdown—stage directions read "becoming hysterical, increasingly alone, each



statement is [a] cry or accusation into the emptiness" as she screams "I never wanted to be like this/I couldn't take it anymore/I couldn't feel anything anymore except for the hurt and the hopelessness/everyday was a hell/I wish I had never been born/I WISH I HAD NEVER BEEN BORN!" (Alvarez, 50)—is followed by intermission. The audience that filed out into the lobby was silent. There was no comfortable distance. The audience was forced to enter the space of suicidality with Alameda. Those who have ever asked "Why?" after a suicide—which Foucault reminds his readers is the most useless question to ask after a suicide—finally are provided with an answer. In the 2018 production, in lieu of an intermission, after Alameda runs off after her meltdown, the M.C. and Frankie return to the space and argue about whose job it was to handle the contestant, before breaking into a cheerful song about tactics for managing a panic attack. The addition of the scene after the meltdown represents a moment of self-awareness for the show. It recognizes that it has effectively forced audience members into the headspace of Alameda, a suicidal subject, and that headspace is an unbearable place to rest. In doing so, it provides—through the setting of the theatre, the script, and the attention to sound and lighting effects—otherwise impossible, visceral access to what it is to experience suicidality, which is a useful tool for understanding Alameda's composure and decisions throughout her time as a contestant. It is also a tool that the audience members may carry with them beyond the theatre.

Most obviously, the liminal space in which Alameda's finds herself can be regarded as impossible because it is only accessible in death, but it is not a heaven or a hell or a purgatory reflective of any religiously-backed notion of an afterlife. Alameda is as Frankie reminds her "not not dead," which if one takes "not dead" to mean "alive" and "not alive" to mean "dead," then Alameda is "not 'alive,'" or "dead." Yet, Alameda receives this answer from Frankie in response to her assertion "I'm dead." After all, she must win the game if she wants to die. The unresolved confusion over Alameda's state of being within this particular envelope of spacetime contributes to its impossibility. This impossible space, however, is one of possibilities that inspires Alameda's experience of a schizoanalysis, breaking open all that she knows regarding her own subjectivity and defying the boundaries of traditional psychoanalysis.

The Avatars begin Alameda with an "elementary" definition of liminality. According to them:

Liminality is a quality of ambiguity that occurs in the middle of a ritual when the participant is undergoing metamorphosis from one original form to a

brand new state of being. Individuals in a state that's liminal are incapable of rationality because in the ritual the system of reality has rearranged and a liminal state makes a person temporarily deranged. (Alvarez and Orling 2018, 13)

Alameda's liminality after her suicide, transforms the act from an event into a ritual, just as Foucault suggests one ought to in "The Simplest Pleasures." This creation of ritual provides Alameda space to process her suicidality in such a way that is foreclosed by the Western psycho-medical apparatus' emphasis on rationality and curing madness. She is also expected to make her decision regarding whether she lives or dies, while she is in this state of temporary derangement.

Once the concept of liminality is explained to Alameda, the M.C. goes on to further explain the concept of *The Elementary Spacetime Show*. *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, she concludes, is a space of "utter schismogenesis," "a word describing permanent liminality/when you can't go back to the old reality/you can't move into the new modality/you're stuck within the uncomfortable in between" (11). Although the M.C. admits that she and the Avatars will be in this space forever—and thus, by their own definition of liminality, exist in a constant stage of derangement—Alameda is just "a tourist, a day tripper" getting to witness and rest with the madness. In some ways, the notion of schismogenesis presented here offers a view of what it is like to exist in the "real world" with a suicidal subjectivity, except that in the real world the normatively enforced impulse is to move as quickly out of that subjectivity as possible: The in-between is not a place to be. Discomfort should not be tolerated. Wanting to die is madness. Madness has a cure.

To critique this impulse of a cure is not to downplay the pain and trauma that one incurs through a relationship to suicidality. Rather, it is to suggest that this pain and trauma is misunderstood because, in large part, the notion of suicide makes people so uncomfortable that they would rather not discuss it. Suicide's association with pathology, madness, hospitalization, sin, criminality, etc. (all of which, were once, and to some extent continue to be, associated with queerness) makes it an impossible subject to talk about, especially for the suicidal subject who must brace themselves for a battle with the above forces if they wish to seek help. In the world of *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, however, these forces only exist to the extent that Alameda had internalized them before her arrival.

Accepting the madness within *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, as well as her own temporary derangement, Alameda undergoes a sort-of schizoanalysis.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of schizoanalysis challenges contemporary forms psychoanalysis, which they accuse of "*completing the task begun by nineteenth-century psychology*" by "develop[ing] a moralized, familial discourse of mental pathology" (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 50). This approach, they argue thwarts genuine liberation by "taking part in the work of bourgeois repression at its most far-reaching level ... keeping European humanity harnessed to the yoke of daddy-mommy" (50). This approach of psychoanalysis also lends itself to the simultaneous process of pathologizing moral/ethical issues — homosexuality, suicide, etc. — that had previously belong to the realm of philosophy and religion, further entrenching liberal ideology and its Christian counterparts in society. Under such a regime, the psyche of divergent subjectivities experiences incredible strain. To counter the Oedipal impulse of psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari develop a practice of schizoanalysis, the goal of which is to "rediscover a transcendental unconscious by the immanence of its criteria" (74), by "de-oedipalizing the unconscious," by "reach[ing] those regions of the orphan unconscious," in an attempt to uncover "the real problems" (82). In the case of *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, the critiques of the oedipal approach become evident when, in Alameda's absence during her attempt at escape, the show enters "The Mobius Mode ... an interminable hellscape of absurd projections from the depths of the contestants subconscious" (Alvarez and Orling 2018, 52). During this scene, the Avatars witness a preacher delivering a nonsensical speech about sin and sweet potatoes, as well as cameos from Alameda's parents who exaggeratedly harp on how difficult it is to raise a depressed child. The Avatars find the show-within-the-show hilarious and the M.C. reminds Alameda upon her return that attempts at rationalizing her problems through traditional wisdom on the matter represent true madness.

If *The Mobius Mode* represents psychoanalysis' attempts to grasp at oedipal straws within Alameda's unconscious, then the rest of the show represents Alameda's schizoanalysis and her return to the body without organs. To illustrate this point, I compare Alameda's experience to that of the narrator in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the example used by Deleuze and Guattari to illustrate their concept. Deleuze and Guattari argue that in writing a series of involuntary memories triggered by mundane activities, Proust's narrator, a pseudo-version of himself, puts on display the murky, winding nature of unconscious development, an auto-schizoanalysis. Of pseudo-Marcel, Deleuze and Guattari write:

[He] sees nothing, hears nothing, and that he is a body without organs ... responding to the slightest sign .... Everything begins with nebulae, statistical wholes whose outlines are blurred, *molar* or collective formations comprising singularities distributed haphazardly .... [...] Next, everything becomes blurred again, everything comes apart, but this time in a *molecular* and pure multiplicity, where the partial objects ... enter into aberrant communication following a transversal that runs through the whole work; an immense flow that each partial object produces and cuts again, reproduces and cuts at the same time. (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 68–69)

If *In Search of Lost Time* is pseudo-Marcel's schizoanalysis, then *The Elementary Spacetime Show* can be read as Alameda's. In the case of the Avatars, in particular, they first appear to Alameda as a messy, blurred clump of undulating bodies in garish clothes and makeup who taunt and tantalize her throughout the show's opening numbers. The show's original script and productions emphasized the nebulous nature of the avatars by referring to them as simply "players" and dressing them in uniform red jumpsuits. Eventually, they reveal themselves—as a mosquito, a robot, Camus, Alameda's parents, her double, and more—but the process, which feels throughout the first act as entirely haphazard to Alameda, ends up becoming too much, as evidenced by her attempt to exit the show after she defeats the mosquito. In other words, just as things are becoming clearer, just as she's beginning to win challenges, Alameda's unconscious collapses in on itself again. When she resumes, the show takes on a different tenor and Alameda's relationship to the players/Avatars shifts as she begins to recognize their multiplicity as the multiplicities contained within herself. Alameda is reminded of this before she enters the final challenge. In their farewell song to Alameda, the avatars remind her: "There is a world of energy invisibly entwined that hints at the infinity unfolding in your mind" (Alvarez and Orling 2018, 65). Frankie, again, reminds her, "You are made of over seven billion billion billion atoms ... [and] every atom in your body used to share a tiny home with every other atom in the universe ... [and] the atoms that comprise 'you' began and continue to be in a state of oneness with all things" (67). It is with these reminders that Alameda enters the final challenge, "The Death Ritual," during which she experiences the absolute destruction of her physical self, the tearing apart of each one of these atoms. It is through this experience that Alameda comes to realize what Deleuze and Guattari reveal is unfolded within pseudo-Marcel, the "transversal that runs through the whole work" (69). Alameda finds her body without organs.

While her entire time playing the gameshow may be regarded her undergoing schizoanalysis, I read Alameda's atomic dismantling during the death ritual as a nearly literal representation of becoming the body without organs, which Deleuze and Guattari argue can only be found when one has "sufficiently dismantled [one's] self" (1987, 151). It can be understood through its two phases: becoming the body without organs, and what comes to pass on the body without organs. Because in the case of Alameda, the process by which she becomes the body without organs, by which everything is taken away—"the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole" (151)—occurs conveniently through the fictional mechanism of the death ritual, I focus on what occurs while Alameda is in this state. As a body without organs, Alameda *herself* becomes replaced by fields of intensities, she experiences the energies effected by the matter of which she is comprised, as alluded to in the previous section. As a body without organs, Alameda is opened up to an exploration of what she can be/become beyond the external interpretations of her signifiante, as well as to experiencing "potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight," and the "continuum of intensities" along which we are all residing (161). This act is politically significant in the case of the suicidal subject because it offers a mode of resistance to subjectification, a respite from existence among unequal force relations. It can also signal rhizomatic possibilities that are foreclosed via Western society's emphasis on sublimation and individuated responsabilization. Riding waves of intensity and navigating deterritorialization can be a messy, painful, process, but it is a process that involves experiencing all that one's consciousness has to offer with abandon. When Alameda wins her last challenge, her first choice is to stay in the liminal envelope of spacetime that houses the show and its hosts. Doing so would allow her to avoid the re-inscription of normalizing social codes that drove her to her suicide in the first place. While it is not an option for Alameda to eternally remain in *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, and certainly not an option for the average suicidal person to enter the space, it is possible to examine the ways in which the tools she gained may apply upon her return to the living, and therefore, to her live theatre audience.

First, I argue that the ability to recognize the most harmful scripts impacting ones subjectivity is a useful device for those grappling with suicidality. It may not offer much comfort to realize that one feels like they are not meant to survive in "this world" because the conditions of this world are becoming increasingly hostile to life itself, but it removes the level of personal blame often forced upon those

who are suicidal. Secondly, just as *The Elementary Spacetime Show* reveals to Alameda that she is not alone in her suicidality, the musical itself, can lend itself to more open conversations around suicidality and its relationship to present conditions of power. In doing so, micropolitical acts of resistance, such as becoming the body without organs, can come together in macropolitical movements for systemic overhaul. However, this can only be done if one makes space for suicide and suicidality in everyday life.

### Toward a New Model of Suicidality

If one supposes that, for now, a suicide love motel and a metaphysical gameshow hosted in [some version of] the afterlife are spaces impossibly inaccessible to suicidal people in this moment of spacetime, what significance do they have for those of us here? Reflecting on his time at La Borde, an experimental clinic opened in France in 1953, Guattari writes that with an eye toward creativity and a commitment to "desegregating the doctor-patient relationship" (2009a, 179), the institution not only revealed psychosis for what it is — "a different relation to the world" (176) — but was also aimed at "produc[ing] a new type of subjectivity," as opposed to the typical goal of psychiatric intervention which is to "remodel existing subjectivities" (180). This subjectivity, he argues, would ideally be directed toward "permanent internal recreation," toward futurity, rather than toward repetition, and he imagined it could be applicable to broader swaths of socius (180). For my purposes in this article, I argue that the "space" opened up for Alameda in *The Elementary Spacetime Show* offers a display of suicidality for what it really is: "a different relation to the world." Just as a willingness to get creative and be experimental was the key to success at La Borde, as a musical, *The Elementary Spacetime Show* is able to offer this perspective on suicidality through its willingness to eschew discursive norms around suicide, allowing a suicidal subjectivity to speak candidly about their own experience without "expert" intervention, and by simply making space for suicidality to exist openly within a collective setting. Further, by making the space a campy musical one constructed on a stage, *The Elementary Spacetime Show* invites its audience to grapple with their own instinctive reactions to expressions of suicidality and to push past them in order to recognize the reality of the person standing before them without judgment.

In Alameda's case, her expressions of suicidality reveal that they are, in part, tied to her queerness, and the show, in turn, reveals that her experiences with suicidality impact how she moves through the world, offering her a perspective

shared by no one else. This invokes, what I call, a notion of queer suicidality. Queer suicidality, I argue, is marked by a history of ambivalence and by a hidden politics that hints at a critique of power and a desire for futures otherwise. It is a concept entwined with the histories of pathology, sickness, and criminality that have followed the queer subject and the suicidal subject, and which have marked the queer subject as suicidal one. It is a collective concept that resonates with the fact that for those in the queer community, a relationship to suicidality is a very proximate one. It is also, like the word queer itself, a concept that may, perhaps, “signify only *when attached to the first person*” (Sedgwick 1994, 9). The importance of naming queer suicidality as such is not to reinforce the old narrative that queer people kill themselves, but rather to reduce the isolation of feeling suicidality by highlighting its normality, especially in certain communities. Normalizing conversations around suicide, recognizing its place in the fabric of existence, makes having conversations about one’s own suicidality more normal. Those who have never dealt with suicidality themselves may ask why this is a good thing: Why make suicide normal? The simple answer is, as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes: “Because it is normal. This secret. That so many of us wrestle with suicidality” (2018, 175).

Finally, creative works like *The Elementary Spacetime Show* help make the work being done by mentally ill and disabled activists in the queer community to develop transformative justice approaches to suicide more accessible to broader audiences.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult for many not already involved with or inclined toward transformative justice movements to get over the fear that comes along with not quite being able to imagine what a world otherwise would look like, especially as it involves exposing so many previously shut away “deviant elements.” A world without prisons? What about murderers? An approach to suicide that doesn’t involve coercion, surveillance, and teams of doctors? But what if people kill themselves? What about people who don’t have access to community? Arriving at satisfactory answers to these questions to the extent that change is able to occur on a broader systemic level is going to be hard, but imaginative approaches that encourage people to see things differently may help pave the way for future change.




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<sup>7</sup> For further information, visit the websites of The Fireweed Collective (<https://fireweedcollective.org/>) and Trans Lifeline, which operates under a policy of no nonconsensual active rescue (<https://translifeline.org/>).

### Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must extend gratitude to César Alvarez, Emily Orling, and the cast and crew of the New York University Tisch School of the Arts Department of Drama at Playwrights Horizons Theatre School's production of *The Elementary Spacetime Show* for opening up their show and their creative processes to me. Many thanks as well to everyone who has read and provided feedback on earlier drafts of this piece including Sumru Atuk, Alyson Cole, Emily Crandall, Paisley Currah, John McMahon, Be Stone, and the members of Nancy K. Miller's Fall 2017 Dissertation Workshop. Finally, thanks to the editors and staff at *Liminalities* for supporting the manuscript through the publication process.

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