

Evan Atkins

Dr. Matthew Thomas-Reid

GWS 3600

May 2, 2025

“Your Components Are Showing”

Dice sighs as she leans back onto the worn couch, staring up at the ceiling for a long moment. She still can't tell if she loves or hates spring break. Her black hair, with a single blue stripe, falls across her face as she contemplates the synthetic skin on her right cheek, which catches the light differently than her warm, honey-colored natural skin on the left. On the one hand, five whole days without labs felt like torture. On the other hand, five whole days without undergraduates dropping beakers or having to explain, for the hundredth time, that yes, she can operate the spectrometer perfectly fine with her cybernetic arm felt like a blessing. Dice flexes her hands as she readjusts to the inactivity. Her cybernetic fingers move with precise mechanical whirs, the joint at her wrist creaking slightly from overuse and inadequate maintenance. It had been months since she had taken a break.

“Hey! No moving!” Audrina whines, attempting to scold but only making Dice and Duman laugh. Audrina, the princess of self-love, had insisted that since everyone had some free time, the trio should have a night of self-care. They stand with their hands on their hips, their slender frame draped in one of those flowing designer outfits that somehow never wrinkle. Their multiple ear piercings catch the light as they survey their self-care kingdom with pride. They had gone all out, buying special creams and scrubs, making a makeshift pedicure pool, and even attempting to make snacks. Snacks that had ended in nearly setting off the fire alarm. Duman took pity on them and made a quick trip to the store to gather the necessary ingredients for a

simple meal: charcuterie. Audrina had been over the moon, finding the finger food perfect for the evening, and now, their special serving dishes laid out on the coffee table, slowly being picked at. They had also managed to make tea despite being unable to boil water, which was the only reason they were allowed back in the kitchen that evening.

“Sorry.” Dice mumbles, shifting and trying to keep her organic fingers still in the moisturizing liquid. At least, that’s what Audrina claimed it was. “Not used to sitting this long.”

Audrina hums. “And whose fault is that?”

“Yours?” Dice asks with a grin.

Audrina makes a face of mock offense and pokes her synthetic wrist with the nail polish wand. “Take it back!” They whine again, Dice already laughing and Duman sighing fondly.

“You two... Couple of menaces.” He takes a deep sigh and leans back into his armchair. The gentle Southern charm in his voice never quite hides the steel underneath, a hardness earned through years of fighting systems not designed for bodies like his.

“You love us!” Audrina cooed in a sing-song tone.

“I do.” He smiles softly at both of them.

“I love you, too.” Audrina chirps, turning back to finish Dice’s nail polish. She had chosen black, which Audrina had groaned at because “it’s so cliché and boring!” They perked up immediately when Duman said they could do anything they wanted to all of his nails, which was the only reason Dice wasn’t getting a rainbow manicure. Duman would get one instead. Although, despite being given free rein, Audrina had still complained about him only having one hand for them to paint, given his refusal to have synthetic skin over his right arm.

“You really should take breaks more often,” Duman says, turning the subject back to Dice’s working habits.

She groans at them both. “I’m taking a break now.” She insisted, using her head to gesture around as Audrina held her synthetic hand with intense focus.

“Only cause you have to,” Duman responds with a sigh.

“You would live at the university if you could.” Audrina mumbles, biting their lip with intense focus as they aim the brush over her synthetic pinky.

“No, I wouldn’t.” Dice protested.

Audrina hums and considers. “You’re right. Then you would be surrounded by people asking if you need a wheelchair *all* the time.” They meant it as a joke, but the silence that fell between them didn’t feel it.

“You’re not wrong,” she grumbles softly, glancing around the decorated and accommodating space. Neither cyborg would pass up the home they had here, especially given how willing Audrina and their landlord were to work with their needs.

Duman flexes his mechanical fingers, the servos whirring softly in the quiet room. “Remember when that new lab assistant kept trying to help you carry your equipment?” he asks, a hint of amusement in his voice. “Even after you picked up that centrifuge with one hand?”

Dice’s face twitches in what her roommates recognize as an annoyance. The synthetic skin on her right cheek doesn’t quite move in sync with her organic side. “*Five times*. I had to tell him *five separate times* that I *didn’t* need *help*.” She barely resists the urge to tap chemical formulas into the small pool her organic fingers are in. “And then he went to Dr. Merritt to express ‘concerns’ about my ability to manage the lab.”

Audrina looks up from their nail polish application, eyes wide. “He didn’t!”

“Oh, he did,” Dice confirms. “Elara shut him down immediately, but still. The guy saw me lift equipment twice his body weight and still thought I needed his help.”

“I can’t believe he went to *them* of all people. Especially given their stance on showing metal.” Duman rumbles, reaching for his tea with his free hand. “They are even less shy than me.”

Dice huffs in irritation. “Elara’s mobility stabilizers make more noise than both our cybernetics combined, yet somehow they’re the most respected professor in the department.”

“It’s the same every damn time,” Duman says, his southern accent deepening with emotion. “They see the metal and assume you’re broken.” He flexes his exposed mechanical arm deliberately, the components gleaming under the apartment’s warm lighting. “My photography professor failed me on a project because I ‘cheated’ by using digital processing instead of traditional darkroom chemicals.”

“Even though the chemicals were *literally* corroding your arm components,” Dice adds, familiar with the story but still indignant. The left half of her face scrunches up, the right refusing to cooperate, but the disdain for the behavior was apparent.

“Even though,” Duman agrees. “When I pointed out that my arm couldn’t handle the exposure, he said I should wear ‘protective covering’ during lab sessions.”

“Like you’re a piece of furniture that needs a dust cloth,” Audrina says, carefully finishing the last nail on Dice’s synthetic hand. “There! Perfect. Now, do not move until they’re fully dry.”

Dice examines her freshly painted nails. The deep black polish creates a strange uniformity across her mismatched hands, momentarily disguising where flesh ends, and machinery begins, an aesthetic integration that the world rarely allows her. Audrina always took special care to make them match perfectly, understanding without being told how much those small continuities mattered.

“You know what used to drive me crazy at school?” Dice says, settling back as Audrina moves to start on Duman’s organic hand gleefully and with a whole box of polish and tools.

“The way they’d separate me. Physically, I mean.”

“How so?” Audrina asks, selecting a bright purple polish for Duman’s thumb.

“After the accident,” Dice explains, her voice taking on the slightly detached quality it always did when discussing her past, “when I went back to school, they created all these ‘*special accommodations*’ that only served to further isolate me. A separate desk with ‘more space.’ A different gym schedule. Even my own lunch period for the first month, because they were worried my ‘calibration issues’ might cause problems.”

“Problems?” Audrina asks incredulously, pausing to look back at Dice.

“They do that with anyone who doesn’t fit the mold,” Duman nods. “It’s not about helping the student. It’s about making sure we don’t disrupt their pretty little systems.”

“Exactly,” Dice agrees. “The worst was science lab. I’d always loved chemistry, even before...” She gestures at her cybernetic side. “But after, my teacher wouldn’t let me work with the other students. Said it was for ‘safety reasons.’ So I’d do all the experiments by myself while everyone else worked in pairs or groups.”

“The ironic thing is,” Dice continues, “now I teach labs, and my cybernetic precision makes me better at it than most fully organic instructors. But every semester, there’s at least one student or faculty member who questions my capability.”

“Remember that department head who kept suggesting you might be ‘more comfortable’ doing theoretical work instead of hands-on lab instruction?” Duman asks.

“Dr. Halsey,” Dice’s mouth twists. “She still avoids eye contact when we pass in the hallway.”

“It’s like they try to make us feel grateful for the basics,” Duman says. “Like we should be thankful just to be allowed in the room. At my last job interview, the guy kept saying how ‘progressive’ they were for considering someone with ‘*my condition*.’” The contempt in his voice is thick. “Like missing an arm means I can’t stock shelves or run a register.”

“Meanwhile, they never ask what we need,” Dice adds. “Just assume and implement whatever makes them feel like they’ve done their duty.”

Audrina is quiet for a moment, carefully applying a sunny yellow polish to Duman’s middle finger. Their face takes on that thoughtful expression, with brows furrowed slightly, that both roommates recognize as Audrina processing their privilege. That journey began when they first moved in and continues with each new revelation. “I never realized how bad it was until I met you two,” they admit. “In design school, we had this whole unit on ‘accessible spaces,’ but it was always theoretical. ‘*Imagine* someone who needs accommodations.’ Never just *talking* to people who might use the spaces.”

“That’s why your designs are different,” Duman says kindly. “You ask questions instead of making assumptions.”

“I still get it wrong sometimes,” Audrina’s cheeks flush slightly.

“Yeah, but you adjust when you do,” Dice points out. “That’s the difference. You don’t insist that your original plan is the ‘right way’ regardless of how it really works for us.”

Audrina finishes Duman’s vibrant manicure with a flourish, capping the final bottle of polish. “What’s ironic is that my professors taught accessibility as something special or extra when, really, spaces that work for diverse bodies usually work better for everyone.”

“Like our kitchen reorganization,” Duman nods, admiring his rainbow fingers.

“Exactly!” Audrina brightens. “When we rearranged things to be more accessible for both of your cybernetics, it also made the space more functional for me. I don’t hit my head on that stupid hanging pot rack anymore.”

“That rack was a menace,” Dice agrees, cautiously testing if her polish was dry. “But the education system doesn’t think that way. It’s built around one kind of body, one kind of mind, and then reluctantly adds ‘accommodations’ that mark everyone else as different.”

Duman’s mechanical fingers whir softly as he flexes them. “You know what I always found strange? How school treated my arm so differently after the accident.”

“What do you mean?” Audrina asks, gathering empty Polish bottles.

“Before the accident, if I needed something, like a different desk height or extra time because my hand was cramped, it was a *hassle*, an *inconvenience*. After that, with this,” he raises his mechanical arm, “suddenly it became a *legal requirement*. Same need, different response.”

“Because before, you were just complaining, but after you became a classification,” Dice says with grim understanding. “A category they had to accommodate.”

“The system doesn’t recognize needs until they fit into predefined boxes,” Duman confirms. “And even then, they treat the accommodations like generous gifts rather than basic rights.”

Dice shifts on the couch, her cybernetic leg occasionally making a soft clicking sound that both annoys and comforts her. “I wonder sometimes what education would look like if it were designed for all bodies from the beginning, instead of creating a standard model and then reluctantly adapting for exceptions.”

“Probably a lot like this apartment,” Audrina suggests, gesturing around them. “Where the space evolves to fit the people instead of forcing people to fit the space.”

The trio falls quiet, contemplating this. Their shared apartment had indeed evolved over the years. Dice’s lab equipment was arranged for optimal use with her cybernetic arm, Duman’s photography gear had been modified for single-handed operation, and Audrina’s design workspace accommodated both their needs while maintaining aesthetic harmony.

“Speaking of education,” Duman breaks the silence, “how’s your research going? The one about the filtration system effects on cybernetic interfaces?”

Dice sighs, running her organic hand through her hair, careful of her freshly painted nails. “Stalled. Again. The department keeps saying my methodology is too ‘*subjective*’ because I want to include my *own experience* as data.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Audrina scoffs. “Your experience is literally the most relevant data possible.”

“Not according to academic standards,” Dice’s voice takes on a mocking, formal tone. “‘*Proper scientific inquiry requires objective distance between researcher and subject.*’ As if any science happens outside of bodies.”

“So what are you going to do?” Duman asks, already knowing she won’t give up.

“Reframe it. Again.” Dice’s determined expression is familiar to both of them. “I’m going to propose a broader study that includes multiple cyborg participants, which they’ll probably still reject, but at least the rejection will reveal their real issue.”

“Which is?” Audrina prompts, though they all know the answer.

“That they don’t want research that challenges their assumption that bodies like mine are anomalies rather than variations,” Dice says matter-of-factly. “It disrupts their categories.”



“They’re normal,” Duman adds quietly.

“Which was never normal to begin with,” Audrina finishes. “Just privileged.”

Outside, rain begins to patter against the windows, a soothing backdrop to their conversation. Dice finds herself relaxing further into the couch, the tension she carries in her shoulders, both organic and cybernetic, easing slightly.

“You know what’s funny?” she says after a moment. “In all my years of education, this apartment is the first place where I’ve never had to explain myself. Where my body isn’t treated as a problem to solve or a curiosity to study.”

“Same,” Duman agrees, his southern drawl soft and warm. “No one here has ever suggested I should ‘upgrade’ to synthetic skin or hide my arm to make others comfortable.”

“Because your components aren’t separate from you,” Audrina says, settling on the floor between them. “They’re just... you. Dice is Dice, not ‘Dice and her cybernetics.’ Duman is Duman, not ‘Duman despite his mechanical arm.’”

“That’s it exactly,” Dice nods, her synthetic side moving with only the slightest delay. “The education system, hell, most systems, can’t seem to grasp that concept. They’re always trying to separate the person from the parts as if that’s even possible.”

“Your components are showing,” Duman says suddenly, a wry smile on his face.

“What?” Dice and Audrina ask simultaneously.

“That’s what my high school principal used to say when my arm would make noise during assemblies. ‘Mr. Turna, your components are showing.’ Like it was *obscene*.” He laughs without humor. “As if I could just turn off the mechanical sounds or the occasional recalibration clicks.”

“As if you should have to,” Audrina adds fiercely.

“Exactly,” Duman nods. “It wasn’t about the disruption. It was about making visible something they preferred to pretend didn’t exist, that bodies are diverse, complicated, and sometimes mechanical.”

“Your components are showing,” Dice repeats thoughtfully. “I got that too, but it is more about behavior than sounds. ‘Ms. Calen, your integration seems to be ‘slipping’ whenever I don’t perform exactly as expected.’”

“As if being fully human means never revealing the mechanisms that make you function,” Audrina observes.

“But that’s true for everyone,” Dice points out. “Organic bodies have just as many mechanisms and maintenance requirements. They’re just less visible.”

“Unless you count the medications half the administration was on,” Duman adds with a slight smirk. “Nobody told the principal his anti-anxiety was showing when he popped pills before giving speeches.”

Dice snorts, an inelegant sound that makes all three of them laugh.

“You know,” Audrina says once their laughter subsides, “maybe that’s what educational spaces need to acknowledge, that all bodies have components showing in different ways. And instead of trying to hide them or fix them, we should design spaces that expect and welcome that reality.”

“Revolutionary concept,” Dice comments dryly, but there’s genuine warmth in her voice. “Simply treating differences as variations rather than deficiencies.”

“Imagine that,” Duman agrees, stretching his mismatched arms above his head. “A world where your components can show without comment or correction.”

“I think we’ve created that here,” Audrina says softly, looking around their shared space with obvious pride. “A tiny model of what could be possible.”

Dice follows their gaze, seeing their apartment with fresh eyes: the modified kitchen tools, the adjustable furniture heights, and the absence of decorative but impractical items that could interfere with Duman’s arm or her occasional balance issues. None of it stood out as “accommodations.” It was simply their home, designed for the people who lived there.

“Maybe that’s enough,” she says, surprising herself with the sentiment. “For now, I mean. Creating spaces where we can exist fully, even if the larger systems haven’t caught up yet.”

“It’s a start,” Duman agrees. “A model for something better.”

“Speaking of models,” Audrina perks up, “What color should we do your toenails, Dice? I’m thinking electric blue to match your hairstreak...”

Dice groans dramatically but doesn’t protest as Audrina begins rummaging through their polish collection again. This, too, is part of their shared language, the teasing, the boundaries, the knowing when to push and when to step back. Another kind of component showing, she realizes. The visible mechanisms of their friendship are constantly adjusting and recalibrating around each other’s needs.

“You know,” Dice says after a thoughtful pause, “I’ve been trying to change things from the inside, at least in my own lab sections.”

“How so?” Audrina asks, looking up from where they’re organizing the nail polish bottles by color family.

“Small things at first,” Dice explains, flexing her cybernetic fingers absently. “Like making sure all lab stations are at adjustable heights. Providing multiple ways to complete the

same assignment.” She smiles slightly. “And I never, ever ask a student if they need help unless they specifically request it.”

“That’s more important than people realize,” Duman nods. “The number of times someone has grabbed things out of my hand thinking they’re ‘helping’...”

“Exactly,” Dice agrees. “I also pair students differently than my professors did. Instead of isolating the ‘different’ ones, I create teams with diverse abilities. It forces them to figure out how to work together.”

“Does it work?” Audrina asks.

“Not always,” Dice admits. “There’s resistance. Some students complain about having to ‘accommodate’ their partners. But I’ve noticed something interesting: by the end of the semester, most teams develop systems that work better for everyone, not just the student with visible differences.”

“Like our kitchen reorganization,” Duman points out, referencing their earlier conversation.

“Precisely,” Dice nods. “They discover that adaptations aren’t special favors; they’re just different ways of accomplishing the same goal. And sometimes, those adaptations make things better for everyone.”

“I’ve been thinking about that a lot in my design work,” Audrina says, their expression thoughtful. “After living with you both, I’ve completely changed how I approach spaces.”

“How so?” Duman asks.

“Before, I treated accessibility as a separate checklist item to address after the ‘real’ design was done. Now it’s part of my initial concept,” Audrina explains, their voice animated with genuine passion rather than their old performative enthusiasm. “My last client wanted an

open-concept living space, and instead of designing it for some imaginary ‘standard’ user and then adding accommodations, I started by asking: What if the users have different mobilities? Different heights? Different sensory needs?”

“That must have thrown them for a loop,” Dice says with a smirk.

“Actually, they loved it,” Audrina says, a note of surprise still evident in their voice.

“Because the design wasn’t about making special exceptions, it was about creating a space where multiple ways of moving and interacting were built in from the beginning.”

“That’s what’s missing in education,” Dice says, her expression growing more determined. “The understanding that difference isn’t something to manage; it’s something to expect and design for.”

“So what do you do when the system pushes back?” Duman asks. “Because it always does.”

“Documentation,” Dice says firmly. “I keep records of everything: every time the department denies a reasonable modification, every time a student reports feeling excluded. It’s harder to dismiss patterns than individual complaints.”

“And allies,” Audrina adds. “Finding the Dr. Merritts who get it, even if they’re rare.”

“I’ve also started something new this semester,” Dice says, a slight smile playing on her lips. “A mentoring group for students with cybernetic enhancements or other non-standard bodies. Not official, nothing the university could co-opt or control. Just a space where we can share strategies and support each other.”

“Like our apartment, but bigger,” Duman says with understanding.

“Exactly,” Dice nods. “Because sometimes surviving a system means creating spaces outside it, places where you don’t have to explain or justify your existence.”

“But isn’t that letting the system off the hook?” Audrina asks, their brow furrowing. “If you create parallel spaces instead of changing the existing ones?”

“It’s not either/or,” Dice replies. “We need both the small daily resistances within the system and the alternative spaces that show what’s possible. One sustains us while we work on the other.”

Duman flexes his mechanical fingers thoughtfully. “I’ve found that simply refusing to hide helps, too. When I stopped covering my arm or apologizing for the noise, it forced people to confront their assumptions.”

“Visibility as resistance,” Audrina nods.

“Components showing on purpose,” Dice agrees with a wry smile. “Making the system see what it wants to ignore.”

“It’s exhausting, though,” Duman adds quietly. “Being the walking embodiment of resistance every day.”

“Which is why spaces like this are essential,” Dice gestures around their apartment. “Places where you can just... be. Without having to represent or educate or resist.”

Audrina looks between their roommates, a new understanding dawning. “So, a better educational system wouldn’t just be about accommodations or even inclusion. It would be about creating environments where different ways of being are expected from the start.”

“And where no one has to hide their components,” Duman adds.

“Whether they’re mechanical or not,” Dice finishes.

Outside, the rain continues, washing the city clean. Inside, three bodies, varying between organic, mechanical, and somewhere in between, create their own ecosystem of acceptance, a small but significant challenge to systems that would separate, categorize, and correct them. At

this moment, at least, all their components are showing, welcomed, and celebrated. And perhaps that's the most revolutionary act of all.