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“Pink Politics”
Negotiation of LGBT Identity through Politics & Popular Media

Meg Hlousek

2010–2011 Penn Humanities Forum
Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellowship

Meg Hlousek

"Pink Politics": Negotiation of LGBT Identity through Politics & Popular Media

In her essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" Judith Butler exposes her readers to the paradoxical relationship between "being" and being. She begins her essay by expounding her disdain of manufactured identities that reflect neither a complete truth nor an entire fiction. Butler specifically draws from her personal dissatisfaction and anxiety associated with the lesbian identity. She illustrates the impossibility *to become* what one *already is*, while rebuffing the explanation that a lesbian identity conjoins with other self-descriptors in the fashion of many parts, one whole. In her opinion, when one assumes an identity constructed by society, one must inherently embody essentialist qualities and characteristics attached to that identity.

Butler rejects coercion into a strict, narrowly defined static identity she believes will be utilized as a political instrument. She instead contends that these "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (13-14). Butler acknowledges her strategic decision at times to utilize identity or to appear as a member of a community with common identifiers, but does not hesitate to describe the risk threatened in each of these instances. She does not allow for this risk to subtly enter her text but makes a bold comparison to colonization, a process through which an outside body dominates and exploits her. This battle of identity wages both inside and outside individuals as conflicts between who one *is* and who one *ought to become* tensely

percolate between personal internal stressors and societal external stressors. Butler does not hide her judgments about identity categories but explicitly proclaims, “I’m permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble” (14). At this juncture remains much to be lost but also much to be won, learnt, and discovered – for individuals and society.

Butler proposes a series of questions that probe the intersections of politics, theory, and identity. She questions the divisions between politics and theory while suggesting similar connections between politics and identity. In the eyes of Butler, politics, theory, and identity are inextricably bound together and shaped by similar forces. When individuals decide to “come out” or disclose their sexual identity to others a “locus of opacity simply shift[s]” (15-16). An individual moves from one sphere of the unknown, whether one identifies with a specific sexual orientation, to another region of the unknown, the undefined space outside of the closet. The reproduction of the closet through the reliance of being “out” on being “in” never allows for full transparency. Butler suggests this permanent confusion of the identity of “gayness” offers the political opportunity to unite “an oppressed political constituency” (Butler 16). Although Butler does not completely condemn the use of identity for political purposes, she points to the problems accompanying the use: ‘who determines what comprises the identity, how will the identity be utilized, and what will prevent identity from transforming into an instrument of regulation?’.

Butler continues by criticizing the efficacy of a common lesbian identity and

purports that the only true commonality among all lesbians is the experience of knowing how homophobia affects women. The insistence to outline the lesbian identity works to combat assertions that lesbian sexuality does not exist or is a bad copy of heterosexuality. Butler disagrees with that strategy and instead offers to reorder hetero- and homosexuality so as to derive the former from the latter. To prove this logic, Butler introduces drag as a series of repeated actions and behaviors that “constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation...a kind of imitation for which there is no original” but a quest by all toward a “phantasmatic ideal” (Butler 21). Ultimately, the essay concludes with an unstable system of inverted identities that depend upon the performance of one another for existence. By exposing the lack of foundation for any state identity on any reality and the dangers of a constructed identity, Butler discredits the insertion of identity into politics.

The conceptualization of the intersection of identity, theory, and politics did not begin with the work of Judith Butler but has been considered for as long as these three categories have collided – forever. The feminist motto, “the personal is political,” succinctly – albeit simplistically and drastically less problematically – captures the spirit of Butler’s argument and has been applied much more tangibly with clear objectives than the ideas of “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” that are tightly wrapped in exclusive academic language. Given current sociopolitical constructs, people consistently renegotiate their identities and politics. As new forms of media disseminate throughout the population,

the lives have become increasingly saturated with varying messages conveying disparate identities and politics.

In September of 2010, syndicated columnist Dan Savage began the “It Gets Better Project” in response to increased media coverage of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth taking their own lives as a means to cope with harassment predicated by school bullies on the basis of a gay or perceived to be gay identity. Savage and his partner, motivated by a desire “to create a personal way for supporters everywhere to tell LGBT youth that, yes, it does indeed get better,” recorded a message of their individual narratives and uploaded the video to YouTube. The Project has since rapidly expanded with over 35 million views and over 10,000 user-created videos produced by politicians such as President Obama and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, celebrities such as Justin Bieber and Janet Jackson, to corporations and institutions such as Google, Facebook, and the World Bank. Recently, the Project has expanded beyond the Internet in a commoditized form as the *It Gets Better* book has been released and other forms of merchandise have been produced and sold with profits going toward foundations assisting LGBT youth.

Before delving into further analysis, it is necessary to take a step back from the critiques offered and recognize the reality IGB attempts to address, which is that nine out of ten LGBT students have experienced harassment at school and are bullied two to three times as much as straight teens. More than one third of LGBT kids have attempted suicide and are four times as likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers. From the launch of the project, calls to the Trevor Project, a suicide prevention hotline have increased by over 50 percent. These numbers are brought to the reader’s attention to clarify that although this

project will be focusing almost exclusively on IGB, its intent is not to persecute Dan Savage, the participants of IGB, or its mission rather; the hope is to challenge the underlying and interwoven narrative that arises in IGB but can be detected across politics in general and LGBT politics or other categories relying on identity politics specifically.

The personal accounts, which almost all begin with a largely painful recollection of the creator's youth culminates with a growth toward happiness and success, revealed in the video testimonials operate within a realm of privacy policed by market forces that render individual sentiment publicly invisible by eliminating forms of welfare support. This invisibility of private struggles creates a public image of self-reliance and rugged individualism – two prized American cultural characteristics, therefore, compelling individuals to accept competition as a means to ensure economic prosperity. The words of Savage and his partner reproduce this consumerist compulsion as they propose “living well” as the ultimate revenge for LGBT adults who sustained debilitating abuse as youth. The underlying message aligns hope for future improvement in one's life with advancement in society marked by an increasing net worth. This advice places the burden of responsibility upon the victim and ignores intersecting identities of class and race among other categories that limit access to social, cultural, and economic capital required to gain mobility in an ostensibly fluid class system.

Most communities develop a system of organization that operates as a class system. Individuals feel compelled to assign a name to identify the ‘other,’ or simply anyone who differs from them. Those positioned at the head of the hierarchy extract and distill behaviors specific to the ‘others’ and turn these actions into an argument for subjugation.

This assignment of a hierarchy quells fears of the strange and the new as somewhat of a strange defense mechanism. The diversity of American society has resulted in the emergence of a cross-section of stereotypes and discrimination. The intersectionality of gender, race or ethnicity, class, religion, and sexual orientation maintains a system of oppression that subordinates anyone deemed inferior. At this juncture, one must ask: how do systems of categorization benefit the interests of the state and the market? How do we manage institutionalized economies of risk?

This research postulates that the “It Gets Better Project” fails to disrupt or transgress the dominant, aggressive, exclusive heteronormative American culture nor its gay homonormative counterpart. The message conveyed is ‘tough it out,’ echoing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ironic proclamation “it’s always open season on gay kids.” The privacy of the Project and neoliberalism threatens to depoliticize and disengage a marginalized community, LGBT youth.

When media depictions of gay or proto-gay children remain relegated to the limited sphere of maligned, “sissy” gender non-conforming behaviors, as they often are when offered through mainstream media outlets, the potential for the full development of a queer child stagnates and lingers within a narrowly restricted realm of behaviors policed by the prevailing standards of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. The acknowledgement of queer children falls outside the socially and culturally manufactured boundaries of “traditional family values,” a division reified at all levels of society from prominent authority figures to schoolyard bullies. “In the absence of a strong, explicit, *erotically invested* affirmation of some people’s felt desire or need that there be gay people

in the immediate world,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick warns of devolving into “trivializing apologetics or, much worse, a silkily camouflaged complicity in oppression” (79). The erasure of the current subjectivity of the IGB Project’s audience and replacement with a socially approved recognition of integration transforms a potentially successful narrative of a queer childhood into the apologetic, camouflaged complicity in oppression of which Sedgwick cautions.

Social theorist David Harvey proclaims neoliberalism “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). Throughout the past forty years, neoliberalism has permeated nearly every corner of the globe’s economic policies and strongly influenced interpersonal relationships as a rationale for the precarious position of some individuals in society. Individuals and classes of people who cannot or choose not to follow the principles of full participation in the market economy as dictated by neoliberalism are decried by some people, frequently those who have benefited through proper neoliberal behavior, as lazy and non-normative. The harm of these harsh labels extends beyond damage to one’s psyche but also affects public attitudes and social policy relating to these people.

Adaptation of a language appealing to the fundamentalism of human dignity and individual freedom allowed alienating socioeconomic policies to attain a position of dominance amongst rivaling conceptual apparatuses. Neoliberal thought thrives on the assumption “that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market,” or as

applied to collectives of people, LGBT-identified individuals are unrestrained from realizing their potential when integrated into a competitive, free market economy (Harvey 7). The liberation of individual freedoms promised by neoliberalism ignores and therefore sustains the existing social inequalities that prevent the realization of these freedoms for already marginalized individuals and maintains the systems through which inequalities arise.

What do participants in the Project actually say? A look at the video that started everything: Dan Savage and his partner, Terry Miller; unveils much about the undergirding philosophy and life outlook of IGB.

Dan begins the video with his history by introducing his family and the context of his high school: Catholic and devoid of openly gay individuals. He was picked on because he liked musicals and was “obviously” gay – at this point the viewer is prompted to make the same assumption made by Savage’s antagonizers that a teenage boy in a Catholic high school who likes musicals has to be gay. Here it is unclear whether or not Savage’s acknowledgement of his obvious homosexuality is an attempt to relate to what he believes to be a bold assumption or whether or not he has grown to accept the story’s assumptions as valid. The ambiguity intensifies confusion and heightens anxiety within the viewer who may be wrestling with a similar question. From a theoretical standpoint, the conflation of gender and sexuality presents itself as a never-ending task to be undone and yet the continual tendency for both concepts to be imaged together lends to a conjoined study.

Gender and sexual orientation are frequently perceived in relation to one another, although this complicated intersection generally employs and relies upon stereotypes.

Sedgwick's examination of the apparent replacement of homosexuality in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III with Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood reveals the voluntary stigmatization and marginalization of effeminate males by the gay movement as part of an effort to interrupt a history of conflated concepts of gender and sexual orientation, resulting in the opportunity to pathologize children who do not identify with their Core Gender Identity.

The central role played by the appropriation of a gender identity through gender performance in the 'consolidation of self' trope flattens the concept of self into essentialized characteristics. According to psychoanalytic theorist Richard Friedman, effeminate boys learn these roles through interaction in the male social world in order to live as "'healthy' (masculine) men" (Sedgwick 74). This progression of acceptance mirrors the progression predicted by Friedman of expanding definitions of acceptable masculine behavior and the transformation of effeminate proto-gay or gay boys into "healthy" men. The discourse surrounding queer childhood is saturated with value-laden judgments that positions proto-homosexuality as the "other" to childhood asexuality rewritten as presumptive heterosexuality.

Gayle Rubin's 1984 article "Thinking Sex" conveys the dire and immediate need for a public confrontation of the restrictions on sex and sexuality. According to Rubin, "sex is always political" but constantly renegotiated; occasionally wider conceptions of sexual behaviors and identities are permitted to rise but at other times punitive and social constraints on sex rise (267). After the ravaging effects of AIDS during the early 1980's, Rubin proposes the development of "an autonomous theory and politics specific to

sexuality” to prevent the placement of further social anxiety upon sexualities deemed deviant (309). Interchanging perceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality mire the borders around acceptable sexual behaviors, “good sex.” Rubin finds fault with the application of feminist theory to sexuality. Feminism’s interest in sexuality as “a nexus of the relationship between genders” is often misinterpreted and a source for the conflation of sex and gender.

While sex and gender cannot be fully separated – as no socially constructed categories for classification can be divided, for Rubin “they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice” (308). Borders are erected between ‘good’ sex and ‘bad’ sex to alienate sexuality that might bring chaos to disrupt the social order. Instead of appreciating sexual variation and celebrating plurality, society organizes to maintain sexual stratification that becomes mirrored in everyday interactions. Instead of consuming popular assumptions about sexuality, which are widely distributed throughout the general population by way of various regulations and social practices, the regeneration of sexual borders must be questioned and challenged.

Construction of the border between heterosexuality and homosexuality begins at birth with the enforcement of a binary gender system. Little blue bows for little boys and little pink bows for little girls, the amount of time a child is embraced – less for little boys to protect their manliness and heterosexuality, and wardrobe options all instill the foundations of heteronormativity. These practices confuse sexuality with gender performance (Schwartz 81). Both men and women are trained to associate their physical appearances and typical roles with suitability for romantic attraction. Nothing about the

self-help and self-improvement industry implies heterosexuality is natural, instead being a successful member of the sexual majority appears to require countless hours and dollars. The performance of heterosexuality is inextricably bound together with homosexuality as individuals who can claim both identities underwent the same socialization.

Just as much as wardrobe and performance become attached to gender and sexuality identity, bodies themselves develop similar associations. When a body's gender identity cannot legibly be read from immediate physical appearance, that person's gender presentation is considered a failure and their sexuality declared queer (85). Without clearly delineated rules of gender, the task of distinguishing between heterosexuals and homosexuals becomes complicated and open to mistakes. Additionally, the borders built around sexuality eliminate the possibility of heterosexuality allow any straying from strict opposite sex attraction. All of these restrictive practices grow from the stability sought in and enforced by heteronormativity. Once one's heterosexuality is established, it cannot venture into queer realms (89). The rigidity of a heterosexual identity ignores proven and researched human responses and sexual behaviors. Sexual identity cannot be constructed in a vacuum despite societal attempts to rely on immutable heteronormative characteristics as a way to permanently define individuals. Savage's unchallenged presentation of gender performance as an indicator for sexuality ostracizes viewers who find this association problematic.

Savage's partner, Terry, similarly begins his narrative describing that he grew up in a "mid-size town with a small town mentality." He faced physical and emotional abuse at

the hands of his classmates and school administrators but for him “things got better the day [he] left high school” when he no longer had to face his tormentors on a daily basis. But the tormentors do not disappear and the motivations fueling their actions do not dissipate. Just as a queer youth grows toward a virtual promise of happiness, the figure of a bully – referring to everyone from those who perform microaggressions of heterosexism to those who inflict violent acts of homophobia – also grows up, but toward an understood commitment to incorporate heteronormative structures into the fabric of society. Although the promise of “life instantly getting better” may sound erroneous and unrealistic, when better becomes synonymous with a change of a geographical setting, instantaneous improvement may seem possible. But many queer teens encounter the uncertainty of this promise when they leave their “small towns” for progressive college campuses or cities. Savage tells his viewers high school will most likely be the worst time of their life but this is an untenable promise with no accountability and possibly dangerous ramifications. How does one feel when you have been waiting for utopia and find your roommate taping your same-sex encounters? Michel Foucault argues for the development of a methodological approach to history, which does not require the past to secure the stability of the present. Life does not progress according to a smooth logic but proceeds illogically with fits and starts.

IGB devotes its attention to a specific temporal moment for a specific audience, a potentially life-saving intervention in the lives of queer youth. Viewing the videos situates the message into a limited timeframe, however, to prevent the strength of a heteronormative

society from driving youth to kill themselves, the project must be conceptualized to not intervene on a singular event of a suicide but the underlying cultural ethos that make suicide an attractive option. This perspective reveals an uncomfortable and disheartening reality – the solution cannot be found in a three minutes video as the videos simply give voice to the problem. The bodies of queer youth, solely based on their embodied sexual orientation are marked as the other, available for attack – disabled from full, unhindered citizenship.

Disability theory grounded within the framework of feminist thought rejects an understanding of disability as “a pervasive cultural system that stigmatizes certain kinds of bodily variations” and instead asserts a definition that repositions disability as “a culturally fabricated narrative of the body.” In order to construct this narrative, disability must be seen as a source for bodily discipline, a relationship between bodies and their environments, a set of practices that produce both the able-bodied and the disabled, and a way to describe the inherent instabilities of the embodied self (Garland Thomson 5). Notions of disability cover disparate ideological constructs that benefit from privileged status such as beautiful, healthy, normal, or fit. Just as race or gender exist through negotiated power structures rather than biological facts, disability materializes from the beauty of human variation and precariousness through interactions. Most remarkably, disability theory lends an understanding of identity as continually in transition. Humans have a propensity to situate the body as ballast for stability but the infinite possibility to join the ranks of the disabled undermines this security and instead inserts an uncertain element of fluidity into identity. The relationship between the disenfranchised body of a queer youth and disability, although

initially appearing to further remove young queers from agency actually offers a promise for a different future.

Individuals and groups define themselves in opposition to other identities; however, this structure is predicated on an imbalance of power. In a binary, one primary exists and its “other.” One side of the binary, the primary – in this case, bodies perceived as able or normal; receive more power and agency while the “other” – bodies displaying various degrees of ability; are abject and erased. Jacques Derrida’s concept of *différance* makes a distinction between two facets of the production of textual meaning: deferring, always defining a word on terms of other words and thus infinitely masking the true definition of the original entity, and differing, marking a word in opposition to others and therefore highlighting a binary relationship with inherent hierarchies. The balance between identities falls far short of equitable; rather the fulcrum rests close to one end in favor of another. These inequalities proliferate through society and shape nearly every aspect of life. A ‘normal body’ cannot exist without a ‘non-normative body.’ Queer bodies, especially of youth, struggle against a culture that consistently equates bodily difference with inferiority. Their bodies teeter precariously in the liminal space between straight and gay, masculine and feminine, abled and disabled.

Certain theorists posit a wound – a visibly perceived aberration – as cause for one to become objected to stares and an intensified, objectifying gaze. Cassandra Jackson classifies these stares as essentially erotic (4). Bodies previously considered off limits and undesirable become available for an intimate examination. Deeply exploitative, the gaze

not only transforms queer subjects into desirable objects but also into entities to be controlled; “the power to look is also the power to police and govern that body, imbuing it with an erotics of control” (Jackson 5). Neither images of queer youth nor adults appear inherently sexualized nor erotic – in fact queer youth are often depicted as desexualized while queer adults may be depicted as hypersexualized, the interest in which the viewer examines the images grounds the perverse sexuality encrypted in the viewer’s excessive attention. But just as a disability does not implicitly relegate one to a life of less worth, representations of embodied difference can concurrently sustain and disrupt the conquering, exploitative gaze (Jackson 5). Unexpected visual depictions command impressive power to interrupt a viewer’s calculated predictions of what will ensue. When expectations are broken, one takes small steps to challenge the status quo that leads to assumptions. IGB challenges the capacity allotted for queer youth and operationalizes queerness “as a machine of capacity” (Puar). Instead of promoting queerness into a realm of unlimited possibility, however, youth are directed into one mode of being queer – that of a neoliberal subject who emphasizes self-transformation and care of the self as non-traditional forms of consumption that will lead to assimilation and acceptance into broader society.

The normalization of bullying and suicide among queer youth resembles the status of a slow death, the “wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience” (Berlant 754).

Within the parameters of a society that functions according to the demands of neoliberalism, new understandings of able bodies and debility arise that relate physicality to regimes to capitalism. To be disabled, as Harvey observed, removes one from the spheres of work or

of producing more generally. Queer subjects have been systematically denied traditional heroic and productive roles championed by society, including: openly serving in the military (until this year and there are still some holes to fill), donating blood, raising children either through adoption or other means, replicating sites reserved for reproduction – namely, marriage, teaching young children, or comfortably protecting citizens as a member of the police force or as a firefighter. Some of these restrictions were once codified and are no longer, others persist as law, while others are unspoken yet understood but all restrict queer subjects from producing as able-bodied citizens. Together with bullying, these pillars constitute the disease of a slow death. Their assaults do not resemble the contained trauma of a militaristic genocide but prosper “in temporal environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself” (759). Under this framework, the suicide is one environmental element of a long, slow death.

What made each of these early experiences “bad”? Bad being the catchall descriptor used by Savage to encompass all that precedes “better”? Does a family devoid of gays or a small town necessarily constitute an inhospitable environment for gay youth? Can a queer child overcome feelings of estrangement from one’s heterosexual family within a society operating under the influence of what Adrienne Rich terms ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ without complementing feelings of isolation with shadows of shame? While drawn to argue against essentializing a negative social context, there may be more utility in finding the political potential of injury and shame in this situation. Michael Warner declares “an ethical response to the problem of shame should not require us to pretend that shame does

not exist” instead we should interrogate shame to discover its hidden energy to inspire change or reimagine the status quo.

“Shame,” Heather Love writes, “like betrayal, is important because it resists the kind of idealist affirmation that is so attractive to a marginalized and despised social group” (258). The cultivation of gay pride excludes feelings of shame and the individuals who embody such sentiments. Instead of perceiving shame as a material manifestation of deeper problems – specifically, homophobia, shame is posited as the last frontier for an individual to render obsolete before reveling in pride. Love resituates shame, revealing that “feeling bad about being queer can serve to remind us that looking on the bright side is only effective up to a point: it cannot replace the work of making sure that there is, in fact, a brighter side to look on” (258). IGB falls into the trap set forth by dwelling on the theoretical bright side while disengaging from the work that might help realize a “better” tomorrow. Eve Sedgwick further complicates one’s understanding of shame: “the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” can be unclear: the burden of individual stigma is quite salient but shame’s ability to draw a community can be obscured.

What is better? Popular romanticizations of “better” disseminated in the Project predictably equate better to ideas of happiness. However, happiness is not limitlessly defined but instead is found within specific, pre-existing narratives. Therefore, situations in which queer youth encounter happiness are often accompanied by expressed sentiments of affirmation. Recognition of queers can be narrated as the hope or promise of becoming

acceptable to a world that has already decided what is acceptable and pushing queer happiness into a space predicated on an increasing proximity to social forms that are already attributed as happiness causes, such as: the family, marriage, class mobility, and whiteness.

The Poject highlights one exceptional class of aspirational gay citizens at the expense of others by promoting a narrow version of a gay identity that risks marginalizing those who refuse or cannot mimic homonormative standards. ‘It gets better’ a lot faster if you are white, cisgendered, and from the middle class; move to an urban gay enclave, gain an education, and settle into a monogamous relationship with plans for children.

Promotion of this pathway to happiness has previously been inserted into recycled story that encourages one to ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps,’ a long discredited motto churned out to entice immigrants to work. Particular claims to happiness validate certain forms of personhood. In fact, in this video Terry and Dan discuss their parents’ embrace of their partners as a gift of “love and respect [they] deserve as members of the family.” This anecdote illustrates how mobility and value are situated within social institutions – the family. Promoting happiness connotes promoting specific lifestyles. The couple reinforces this relationship during a discussion of their happiest moments, which include roaming Paris and skiing down mountaintops with their son.

Happiness cannot be implicated without inciting social forms from which queers are excluded. IGB invokes public feeling to reproduce neoliberalism by funneling private sentiments toward individual choices that affirm the very institutions of power from which queer people are excluded. Simple exclusion from institutions, which are socially endowed

to legitimate power and existence, inspires struggles for inclusion. The unrelenting desire to access forbidden power transforms the very institutions into objects of desire, apparently beyond dissent. By mobilizing feelings of exclusion and manipulating the abject, the dominance of these institutions is strengthened and secured.

At the conclusion of the clip, Savage extends the lyrics of “Somewhere” from West Side Story as a gift to queer youth. The song promises, “somewhere there is a place for us/ somewhere/ we’ll find a new way of living.” For Dan and Terry the possibility of “somewhere” is a specter for a future virtual utopian community composed of queers happily living alongside straight people.

So, how does it get better? Social and cultural analyst, Lisa Duggan recommends, “rather than invoking fixed, natural identities and asking only for privacy or an end to discrimination, we must expand our right to public sexual dissent. This is the path of access to public discourse and political representation.” However, Duggan’s radical perspective, which faces institutionalized barriers to enactment, does not present a complete answer. Sara Ahmed’s vision of an unhappy queer provides a much more realistic yet perhaps less satisfying answer. What if we suspended the belief that happiness constituted better? Not that happiness should be rejected but one should allow room for a wider range of experiences or as Ahmed says, “freedom to breathe.” Maybe then we could separate images of a better life from the historic privilege afforded heterosexual conduct expressed in romantic love and coupledness, as well as the idealization of domestic privacy.

An Alternative:

Public installation artist Candy Change primarily works in New Orleans to transform downtrodden, desolate districts into sites to envision a different future. The motivations of her work closely mirror that of the It Gets Better Project but do not limit the participants to a particular narrative. Her specific work, “Before I die...” was erected on the side of an abandoned building waiting in ruins to be torn to the ground. Black chalkboard paint covered the side of the building with bold white letters screaming, “Before I die...” were etched across the top. Across the board were smaller words, “Before I die I want to _____.” Participants in this project used available chalk to insert their wishes. Adapting this model maintains the user-generated aspect of IGB but it’s geographic centrality limits it’s outreach, however, a virtual model could be developed. Instead of telling youth to discount their current situation by demonstrating the success of another person, this model depicts the ongoing dreams available for queer youths and adults.



Images from “Before I die...” *Candy Chang, 2011*





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