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LGBT IDENTITY AND ONLINE NEW MEDIA (*co-edited with Margaret Cooper*)

QUEER LOVE IN TELEVISION AND FILM: Critical Essays (*co-edited with Pamela Demory*)

# Queer Youth and Media Cultures

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## The It Gets Better Project: A Study in (and of) Whiteness – in LGBT Youth and Media Cultures

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The It Gets Better Project (IGBP) became a worldwide phenomenon, offering support for socially marginalized and oppressed queer youth who were perceived to be vulnerable to suicide. The project originally was comprised of a collection of first-person video weblogs created in response to gay male suicides, and this collection ultimately formed a type of social archive. Central to these video weblogs were messages of hope and that the viewer's lives would 'get better', though exactly whose lives were supposed to get better and what 'better' was supposed to mean was left to the imagination. The IGBP initially began as a single video weblog on YouTube in September 2010. It was later published as a book of the same title (Savage and Miller 2011). In the video the creators of the project, Savage and Miller, discuss their own experiences of teenage bullying, survival and escape. They 'created [it] to show young LGBT people the levels of happiness, potential and positivity their lives will reach – if they can just get through their teen years' (Savage and Miller 2011). The evolution of the IGBP has since translated into a registered 501(c)3 organization doing business in the United States as the 'IOLA Foundation' located at 8,315 Beverly Boulevard, Suite 101 in Los Angeles, CA 90048 (see IGBP 2014a).<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, since 2009 this non-profit organization has had a total of \$1,069,890 contributions, almost all of which have been expenditures on its web presence.<sup>2</sup>

Its subjects range from 'Favourite Videos' a category with the highest percentage of videos (2,642) to 'It Gets Better: South America' (7) and 'It Gets Better: Cities & Municipalities' with just four videos, the lowest among the categories listed at the time of this search. What's significant

about these categories is that the themes are not arranged exclusively according to *viewer* interest, but rather they are arranged according to categories with which the *speakers* tend to be most associated. From a viewer's first experience of the IGBP, one explicitly understands that its organizational principles are structured according to national origins and ethno-racial categories according to applicable languages, though inexplicably Puerto Rico is listed as its own 'country' (see IGBP 2014b) – itself a hopeless conflation of race, ethnicity and nationality given that Puerto Rico's Latino/a population are members of the United States of America by statute and historical practice. Indeed because the desire for recognition and the quest for social enfranchisement that is central to the IGBP cannot be divorced from what Herman Gray calls the 'crowded cultural and social spaces... and user generated content sties and distribution platforms', the messages which the IGBP inexorably promotes through increased visibility merit close examination.

This chapter argues that discourses of whiteness permeate the IGBP from its message, to its cast of official commentators who communicate that message. Consequently the project is also thereby communicating a message to queer youth of colour about their worth or lack thereof, within larger discussions of vulnerability and victimhood, escapism and homonormativity. The IGBP promotes archetypal myths that valorize homonormative constructions of adulthood. And yet, even within the constraints of these normative valorizations, queer people of colour (and queer youth of colour in particular) appear infrequently if at all, and rarely are such messages addressed to the unique plight that queer youth of colour face in American society (see IGBP 2014c; YouTube 2014a). The only noticeable exception to this argument is the proliferation of faces, voices and people of colour on the IGB project's *International* pages.

This is particularly significant given that the impetus behind the IGBP development originated from the multiple suicides of queer youth in the United States, considered as a nation with its own not insignificant and complex history of racial relations where contemporary debates about the relative worth of same-sex relationships in sociopolitical contexts continues unabated (and unresolved) today. Thus to reconcile the twisted narratives communicated to viewers, this chapter examines the IGBP through a critical lens that suggests that its mechanism of influence is critically limited in its ability to enact modern, assimilationist approaches to representation and visibility as technologies of power like YouTube proliferate that inadequately contest the social abjection queer youth face. Moreover, the IGBP's limitations further entrench the belief that superficially altruistic acts of support can functionally destabilize

powerful and near ubiquitous social structures of inequality for sexual minorities when the IGBP itself can't adequately address its own colour-blindness. To conduct this investigation, I reviewed the YouTube page viewers of the project, where viewers will find 26 playlists thematically organized, for a total of 3,925 videos (Youtube 2014b).

The IGBP's structural organization appears to reflect what I argue is a larger, more potent social discourse of dominant notions of queerness, universalized and embedded in whiteness. All too often mass media has reduced race and ethnicity or nation to mere niches within a broader, and unremarked global white hegemony (Soto 2010, p. 4).

The predictable and indeed inevitable consequence of these representational omissions and organizational deficiencies in the IGBP is a reproduction of a dangerous type of queer essentialism whereby viewers may authentically interpret the absence of explicit, racially sensitive messages to queer youth of colour as a strategy that attempts to distance 'queerness from what [some] seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference' (De Genova 2005, p. 114).

Methodologically, I utilize a textual analysis of both audiovisual and written texts combined with an approach that foregrounds the discursive context of the 'queer of colour', as the conceptual framework (Collins 1991; Combahee River Collective 1978; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1982). Roderick Ferguson describes this approach as one that 'interrogates social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices' (Ferguson 2004, p. 149). Furthermore, the notion of a 'queer of colour' critique 'draws on theories of intersectionality to explore multiple oppressions and identities in ways that do not elide the specificity of difference but resist the under-theorizing of identities by acknowledging their complexities in our analysis of the everyday' (Pritchard 2013, p. 324).

The reoccurring theme that one encounters with these videos is that they are generally motivated by a desire to demonstrate their concern for the plight of queer youth whom they perceive to be under the threat of violence or in danger of committing suicide. While this appears to be a laudable goal, the motivation of some contributors is less clear, especially when appearances do not necessarily correlate with intentions. Videos posted by white contributors (especially celebrities) do not mean that such actions are based purely on altruism; rather, they are often accomplished in the pursuit of what is socially expected from those who reluctantly succumb to or are actively pursuing the latest,

most fashionable cause célèbre. Indeed Erica Ciszek argues that it's precisely the appearance of intimacy stemming from the face – to – face communication between narrator and viewer and its deeply emotive character that

allows the story to be revolved around the narrator as the protagonist. However, it is important to note that in first person narration, the protagonist gives and withholds information based on his/her own viewing of events and thus the audience must ask what information is being withheld in the story and what is not being told.

(2011, p. 14)

In this dynamic, where the narrator is almost invariably white, the protagonist conveys an unambiguous message that racial discrimination is at best invisible and less ubiquitous (and therefore somehow less worrisome) and at worst occupies much less importance, poses less of a threat or danger than homophobia. The figuring of white speakers in non-international categories creates a dynamic where recognition becomes both a subtle and overt form of regulation of queer bodies (uniformly read as white) entitled to speak and whose collective voices merit attention, and those racially different queer bodies and voices which are in opposition to those dominant forms of universalized queerness.

A cursory examination of videos exclusive to the North American category reveals a racial homogeneity in its speakers, and racial tokenism is well personified amidst the plethora of white voices who uniformly extol the virtues of personal resiliency until, and if, their lives 'get [...] better'. The dilemma of this limited representation of people of colour, and especially queer youth of colour, is that these videos perpetuate the myth that same-sex desire is equated with whiteness. That is to say, the absence or marginality of queer people of colour suggests that (1) not only are there no or few LBTQ (lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer) ethnic minorities, but that the discrimination that they face for their sexual minority status is more dangerous to them than the racial hostility that they face and (2) the only way to achieve safety is to escape to safe locations or wait out the dangers of homophobia that queer youth of colour face (that they will somehow avoid through the passage of time into adulthood) while utterly failing to account for poverty which would preclude the financial ease implicit in such geographic escapism. Even more dangerous is the implicit logic behind the IGBP that stakes a claim to media activism's intrinsic value, despite the need for such efforts to petition media institutions (like YouTube) to generate a desire

for (even incremental) recognition. And although the state was once the primary site of struggle for social recognition and political enfranchisement, new media has achieved equal (and perhaps) more attention. Yet the IGBP (like other social justice efforts located in new media) falls into the same 'catch-22' where culturally valued technologies, distribution platforms (like YouTube) and social networking sites become indispensable to the promotion of their message, but such efforts also conflate user statistics (like page views, thumbs up, etc.), viewer traffic and popularity as a valid index of their impact on intransigent social problems like racial discrimination and homophobia.

Furthermore, the utility of these videos is premised upon a presumption of universal accessibility for their viewers. Thus this technological framework also presumes a certain level of socioeconomic status, which accompanies the assumed ownership of computers, notebooks, tablets and the broadband internet subscriptions necessary to access these messages of futurity where their lives will be 'better'. At its essence is a neoliberal presumption of a technological saviour whose audiovisual appearance often comes in the form of white voices and faces. Moreover, the presumption that one's personal liberty and freedom from oppression can be achieved through the commodification of mass mediated messages of hope belies the very real obstacles that queer youth of colour face on a daily basis. Many, but not all queer youth of colour also occupy the lower levels of the socioeconomic spectrum (particularly those who are homeless), thus making accessibility in inner-city and urban locations especially challenging. And this also presumes that queer youth of colour in economically depressed circumstances have both the disposable time and energy, to say nothing of the commodity fetishism implied by the consumption of IGBP messages of escapism. Even queer youth of colour in the upper and middle socioeconomic classes still face the same challenges as their socioeconomically disadvantaged peers, as they too suffer under the scrutiny of their friends and families, where rates of homophobia are disproportionately higher (Boykin 1997; Choi et al. 2013; McCreedy 2004), to say nothing of the racially discriminatory public eye of hegemonic white society.

Accessibility and intelligibility aside, the IGBP's commentary about the escapism afforded through perseverance and patience is one which is universalized as ubiquitously available to its viewers:

The inevitable, temporal moment of leaving school is depicted as the pivotal point at which 'it gets better' through the motif of escape,

in addition to it being the moment of a shift into young adulthood. That is, escape from school and simultaneously, escape from *being* a queer 'youth'.

(Cover 2012, pp. 64–65)

Unfortunately this message belies the facts of life for many queer youth of colour, who are incapable of escaping either their socioeconomic surroundings, or the deeply held relationships common to ethnic minority communities and families.

These messages also suggest that queer youth of colour either choose the purported freedom that is associated with a well assimilated, homonormative adulthood, generally read whitely, or remain trapped in an optionless adolescence, framed through sexuality as a commoditized identification construct, fully disregarding the adjacent antagonisms of racial discrimination that make such publicity particularly problematic. According to Rob Cover,

There is a tendency then to depict heterosexism as the natural outcome of heterosexual majority, with vulnerability and victimhood therefore the result of being in a queer minority. The majority/minority binary is thereby presented not only as natural and logical in terms of population numbers but as timeless and – most importantly – as impacting on all queer youth.

(2012, p. 70)

Fenaughty and Harré argue that *all* 'LGBT youth grow up in heterosexist societies, thus one could argue that *all* LGBT youth are "at risk". Resiliency enables the identification of L/B/G/ youth [sic] can be helped to survive a heterosexist world' (2003, p. 18).

In much the same way as most lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender and queer youth grow up in heterosexist societies, queer youth of colour grow up in a hegemonic white world, living on the periphery of a white, dominant society, ostracized both for their sexual desires and racial identity. Thus, the 'risk' that Fenaughty and Harré describe is complicated by the onerous burden of racial discrimination. And while Fenaughty and Harré make the case that queer youth of colour are indeed 'at risk' or 'vulnerable', those discourses of vulnerability come with a cost. Positing a sub-population as vulnerable because they are in a minority has the tendency to remove any sense of agency from that group as a whole, leaving the subjects at hand as knowable only through victimhood (Cover 2012, p. 71). As any queer youth of colour knows all too

well, learning coping mechanisms doesn't end with adjustments to the heterosexist norms to which they're regularly exposed; it also necessarily includes learning coping mechanisms to negotiate the racial bigotry that accompanies the homophobic currents of mainstream heterosexual society. Being white means not having to think about it.

### Racialized sexuality and queer youth of colour

Sexual and racial minorities have a lengthy and complicated history fraught with conflict and contradictions by virtue of their competition for legitimization, social value and equality. But one thing remains certain – queer youth of colour have distinctly different life experiences from those of their Caucasian peers and the obstacles and barriers they face are fundamentally different, and as a general rule more onerous and long-lasting (McCready 2004). Many queer youth of colour, for example, 'face what has been called a "tri-cultural experience" in which these students face the homophobia or transphobia that white LGBT students face, the racism that heterosexual students of colour face, and exclusion from both the LGBT and ethnic minority communities with whom they would normally identify' (Cianciotto and Cahill 2003, p. 217). Thus when Savage and Miller and others urge youth to consider that being LGBTQ gets better with age, their assertions overlook that race, class, geography, religion and other identities also inform experiences of bullying (Pritchard 2013, p. 323). Indeed, according to Rios, 'young people of color are constantly policed, surveilled, criminalized and severely punished' (2008, p. 99). Such criminalization of young people of colour occurs not only in relationship to criminal justice and incarceration but also within schools (Rios 2008).

Consequently, as Pritchard (2013) tell us, the 'victimization of these youth tends to be ignored, for on the spectrum of violence, these youth are racialized as always and already criminals, not victims' (p. 333). Although the IGB project does include voices of queers of colour critiquing white celebrity privilege, that inclusion is marginal and does little to adequately address the overwhelming white racial hegemony of the narratives offered. Moreover, this type of inclusivity functions as a type of racial tokenism, where the targets of their critique (justified as they are) remain directed to mostly white celebrity figures (Goltz 2013). 'Within the context of the narrative, the LGBTQ community can be seen as a hero figure and a safe haven where one can find refuge' and yet this image is an illusion that belies the fact that the LGBTQ community is rife with internal racist and classist politics that make it a

sometimes dangerous place even for adults of colour with a lengthy history of already being out (Ferguson 2004; Giwa and Greensmith 2012; Muñoz, 1999). Moreover Ciszek contends that 'The setting of the narrative is the present, the utopia of life after high school' (2011, p. 17) in which the 'narrators convey the need to "just hang in there" long enough to reach this utopic period of their lives'. Of course the fact remains that college is a place where many hate crimes occur and where physical attacks are frequent, hardly making it the utopia that many narrators suggest. As Phillips (2013) tells us 'Sexual orientation-based harassment and discrimination commonly continues into the college years as well, and certainly harassment and bullying is not limited to peers' (p. 36).

In examining the range of sample material, 85% of the speakers in these videos were Caucasian, despite research that finds both Hispanic and black people index higher than whites on social networking usage, and more specifically on video sharing sites such as YouTube. Thus the 'projected IGB project image is that of gay men telling viewers of all sexual orientations, gender expressions and gender identities that their lives will get better' (Phillips 2013, p. 45) without possessing any personal knowledge or experience of the viewers' lives, making such assertions easily dismissed. No offers are made about how to survive the daily assaults and indignities that accompany the *racial* discrimination that accompanies the homophobia that queer youth of colour must endure and navigate. It is easy to lay the blame for this on Dan Savage. Blaze (2011) observes that Savage is nothing more than 'a white cis male [who possesses] uncritically assumed privilege... and claims to speak for the entire LGBTQ community'. Though this criticism is appropriately directed to Savage, given his lack of critical reflexivity in making claims that queer life ultimately 'gets better' by virtue of his racial and class status, some scholars (Buday 2012; Harding 2012) and media observers (Doyle 2010; Eichler 2010) have ultimately pointed out that social privilege doesn't guarantee immunity from attack, nor does it guarantee happiness.

But exactly to whom are the IGBP messages directed? If one were to examine the website for data, one finds some revealing and instructive evidence about what the founders expected and presumed their audience to be. The timeline of the IGBP starts in July 2010 and continues to September 2013, and notably begins with the listing of queer youth suicides which was the impetus behind the project. However, as time passes this timeline reveals a progress narrative of inevitable improvement, utterly free from the continuing suicides of queer youth. The

impression one is left with is that such incidents are decreasing in frequency and that, much like the title of the page, one can 'See How It's Gotten Better' (IGBP 2014e) despite well-documented evidence to the contrary (Hatzenbuehler 2011; Liu and Mustanski 2012; Mustanski and Liu 2013; Mustanski et al. 2010; Phillips 2013). Indeed, Jasbir Puar (2012) poignantly notes, the premise of the IGBP is the belief that 'things are indeed, better, especially for a particular class of white gay men... IGB is based on an expectation that it was supposed to be better. And thus IGB might turn out to mean, you get more normal'.

Moreover, Philips conclusions reveal that IGBP participants

made gross assumptions about their viewers' racial, class and sexual identities, overwhelmingly presuming viewers to be Caucasian and of middle-or upper class status and that racial/class differences would have little to no impact on viewers' lives improving according to the matrix of domination...when participants fail to explicitly mention their identities and explain how their multi-dimensionality impacted both the bullying they received and how life got better, they were likely to project an overly simplistic, limited-value and in some instances blatantly false message of life getting better for everyone, regardless of individual circumstances.

(2013, p. 3)

The resulting consequence of the IGBP participant's imposition of their assumptions onto their presumed viewers may ultimately restrict (rather than free) their targeted viewers either by alienating them or hopelessly homogenizing them as racially indistinct and meriting no attention to the potent discourses of social colour-blindness.

### What does 'better' look like?

Individuals derive a part of their self-concept from the social groups and the categories they belong to. Tajfel defines social identity as an individual's 'knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership' (1972, p. 297). An important distinction exists between one's personal identity and one's group identity. An individual's status in a social group can affect not only how one is perceived by others, but also how one perceives oneself and the behaviour one actually manifests (Swan and Wyer 1997). Perhaps it goes without saying that 'better' ultimately means to possess the capability to live in a world where one is free from abuse, ridicule or antagonism. Also safety may be seen as

the objective or at least one aspect of what 'better' might mean, to those addressed by contributors to the IGB project.

Unfortunately, the discourses of safety found in these messages are generalized. Pritchard makes clear that 'one way that this definition reflects the discursive limits of safety is that it conceives of a bully as a child. The definition does not acknowledge the reality that some children bully with complicity *from* adults while others are just bullied *by* adults' (2013, p. 337). In an era where, if the IGBP's messages are to be believed, perceptions of inequality are receding amid the popular discourses of post-racial society, then subtle and insidious new forms of homophobia may appear, much as the newer forms of racial micro-aggressions have increasingly made their presence known. And those who are in the best position to immunize themselves from accusations of such conduct are precisely those who are closest to queer youth and queer youth of colour in particular, such as parents and teachers. The collusion of adults in the subjugation of queer youth, particularly when the adults are their parents, has been well documented. And yet despite the extensive rhetoric of improvement that attempts to address myriad sources of homophobia, not once does the IGBP look closer to home to find that the sources of bullying and social ostracism originate much closer (and thus are much more problematic for the IGBP to adequately address, no doubt) to the victims.

This phenomenon is especially important to queer youth of colour whose sociocultural foundations make same-sex desire especially unpalatable for more traditional households and the parents who head them (Mays et al. 1998). Mays et al contend that 'ethnic minority groups may view homosexuality as antithetical to issues of family, ethnic identity, and the preservation of minority communities [...] As a consequence, lesbian and gay children are often reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation within the traditional Black family' (Mays et al. 1998, p. 75). Moreover, given the contentious racial history in the United States and the civil rights movement, the position of queer black youth makes such disclosures especially problematic:

Upon disclosure, the family may struggle to understand and to accept the new identity. In some circumstances, because of the routine assumption that homosexuality and family roles are antithetical, the family may foreclose the process of constructing a new role and completely negate the validity of the previous family-role identity (e.g., brother, daughter, uncle, aunt). Under some circumstances, families may engage in a process of mourning for the lost role or identity of the gay/lesbian-identified family member... The inability



of the family to accept this new role, however, potentially results in the rejection of not only the role itself, but also of the gay or lesbian family member.

(Pritchard 2013)

Often safety is construed as an idea in which adulthood assumes a personal investment in the welfare of children, without recognizing that some adults are hostile to notions of difference and diversity. We know that the perpetrators of violence can be both peers and other adults and the incidence of violence can occur at just the same frequency and rates among both demographics. And as Maggie Gallagher (2012) notes,

Gays and blacks are not separate groups. They overlap. And not just within society, but within families as well. NOM has committed up to \$5,000,000 to fanning hostility not just between gay and black constituencies, gay and black neighborhoods, or gay and black churches, but between straight black parents and their young gay teens.

So not only do parents post a threat, but organizations and institutions populated by adults exist that are bent on inciting hostility between queer youth and their parents.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the ability of the IGBP and other social justice efforts which construe the erasure of racial inequalities in the headlong pursuit of social, political and cultural enfranchisement as a mere inconvenience jeopardizes the entire purpose of such efforts. As the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once famously said, 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to Justice everywhere' and it behoves those of us in social justice movements to seriously and more complexly consider the consequences of both our actions and, as is the case here, our inaction to act appropriately with a judicious concern for not only those who we collectively deem worthy of voicing their discontentment with the status quo, but also for those whose voices go muted, either by our own action or the inaction of others.

## Notes

1. The most recent financial statement found on IRS form 990 in June 1, 2012 reflects a total income of \$303,066 and expenses of \$337,429 under the leadership of Executive Director Mr. Ed Farley (see IGBP 2014a).

2. With the exception of one employee who acts as organizational office and whose modest salary has earned the organization a Silver ranking with the non-profit tracker GuideStar (2014).

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