

# APA Newsletters

NEWSLETTER ON PHILOSOPHY AND LESBIAN, GAY,  
BISEXUAL, and TRANSGENDER ISSUES

Volume 11, Number 1

Fall 2011

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**CHAIR'S CORNER,** TALIA MAE BETTCHER

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## NEWS AND NEW IN PRINT





# Philosophy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues

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William S. Wilkerson, Editor

Fall 2011

Volume 11, Number 1

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## FROM THE EDITOR

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### William Wilkerson

*University of Alabama, Huntsville*

Greetings! I expect this Fall *Newsletter* will find you closer to winter than fall, but as I write this in early November, Alabama has given us a crisp, bright day with the leaves blowing. Telemann plays from the stereo, and one wishes for a way to bottle up days like this and release them on a dreary January day or a suffocating July afternoon.

This issue of the *Newsletter* features homophobia as a topic, and I am pleased to present a very diverse collection of short essays that address this most vital issue. Themes range from Lillith Dornhuber deBellesiles's discussion of the proper moral framework for thinking the related issues of homophobia and the closet, to Hilary Malatino's investigation of whether our methods for addressing homophobia privilege "homonormative" queers at the expense of trans people, queers of color, and others outside the mainstream of GLB life. Ellen Feder summarizes her research into intersections of medicine and homophobia, and Cori Wong points out how discussions of homophobia often miss the difference between men's and women's experience of sexuality. Rounding out the collection, Nathaniel Coleman discusses sexualized racism and its impact on the spread of HIV through a thoughtful discussion of the viral Samwell YouTube video.

One unexpected theme that emerges in these essays, in fact, is the role of the Internet, particularly Dan Savage's It Gets Better Campaign. This is entirely unintentional, but fun. More importantly, I am pleased in this *Newsletter* to be presenting many new, young voices in GLBTQ philosophy: several of our contributors are in graduate programs or just starting their careers. Surely, GLBTQ philosophy is in good hands if these thinkers represent our future.

Finally, I would like to bid Talia farewell as chair. She has fought hard on our behalf, and will be missed. We finally had the pleasure of meeting in person at the most recent SPEP Conference, although I'm still not sure about those Philly Cheesesteaks... SPEP, I am pleased to report, has now constituted its own GLBTQ Advocacy Committee and had an inaugural panel on trans identity.

This issue on homophobia worked out well, but I think it best to alternate themed with non-themed issues, so as not to close out possibly interesting work that might not be timed just right for a newsletter. So, for the next issue, the sky's the limit: please send me any and all interesting proposals for articles, discussions, and ideas. This is a fine place to try out short pieces, ideas, or essays in development or transition, start a discussion, or share important news about battles with sexual oppression inside and outside our profession. Email: [wilkerv@uah.edu](mailto:wilkerv@uah.edu)

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## CHAIR'S CORNER

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### Talia Mae Bettcher

*California State University, Los Angeles*

This issue of our *Newsletter* is dedicated to the topic of homophobia. And I think that it is only appropriate that I begin by sharing a little bit more about our progress concerning the APA's nondiscrimination statement and advertisement in *JFP*. The issue, in particular, concerns institutions with sexual conduct codes. (For more background about this issue, see our Spring 2010 *Newsletter*).

At the November 2010 meeting of the APA Board of Officers, I made a report to the Board as the chair of the LGBT committee. I raised concerns about the Board's failure to clearly communicate their 2009 decision to adopt the new statement while allowing institutions in non-compliance with the non-discrimination statement to advertise in *JFP* (while "flagging" them) as well as the lack of clarity in the overall process by which the flagging would be executed and assessed. It seems that this decision had been adopted without any kind of thought about implementation.

More importantly, I indicated that since it is the charge of the Committee on the Status of LGBT People in the Profession to advise the APA of discrimination and unfair practices as it concerns LGBT people in the profession, we were obligated to advise the Board of Officers that the APA was itself engaging in an unfair practice by continuing to allow institutions with discriminatory policies to advertise in the *JFP*.

I think this point is important because it can somehow easily disappear from sight: The most powerful argument in favor of allowing noncompliant institutions to advertise is that we would hurt potential job applicants. But the argument needs to be made clearer: In fact, it would hurt *heterosexual* job applicants. That is: The most powerful argument in favor of a weak enforcement is actually a heterosexist one.

Following the November meeting (at the request of the Board), we drafted a statement to the Board that summarized the concerns expressed at the meeting. The letter was unanimously approved by the full LGBT committee. It was then sent to the Inclusiveness Committee where it was also unanimously approved. It has now been sent to the Careers Committee for feedback. It will be presented to the Board of Officers this coming November.

We are hopeful that the Board will act from a commitment to the values of fairness and non-discrimination. But in the event that it does not, I would encourage LGBT people in the profession (and those who are allies) to continue pressing for what is right. I am afraid that our commitment to the values that define who we are can easily slip from sight in the interest of

being “good professionals.” Philosophy, in my view at any rate, should help us set our sights higher.

I have included, at the end of my remarks, the letter sent to the APA.

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In other news: The APA LGBT Committee held sessions at both the Central and the Pacific Division Meetings. At the Central, we co-sponsored a symposium on transsexuality and personal identity. Chair: Mindi Torrey (Michigan State University); Speakers: Talia Bettcher (California State University–Los Angeles) “Trapped in the Wrong Theory”; Miqqi Alicia Gilbert (York University) “Esse Est Interagere: To Be Is to Interact, Or, There Is No Intelligibility without Visibility”; Christine Overall (Queen’s University) “Transgender, Cisgender, and Aspirational Identity”; Commentator: Loren Cannon (California State University–Humboldt).

At the Pacific Division meeting, we sponsored a session entitled “Regenerating Queer: The Ethical Challenges of Recent Biopolitics.” Chair: Loren Cannon (California State University, Humboldt); Margaret Denike (Dalhousie University) “Homonormative Collusions and the Subject of Rights”; Kimberly Leighton (American University) “The Dis-assembly of Genetic Meaning: Countering the Bio-normative Valuation of Genetic Relatedness: A Strategy for Queer Politics?”

This is my third (and final) year serving as chair of the APA Committee on the Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People in the Profession. (Next year, Alasdair Norcross will be starting his tenure.) I certainly have enjoyed serving very much!

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our outgoing members, Margaret Denike and Kim Leighton, for their dedicated service to the Committee. I would also like to welcome our newest members, Alasdair Norcross (University of Colorado), Richard Nunan (College of Charleston), Alexis Shotwell (Laurentian). I would especially like to thank our new *Newsletter* editor, William Wilkerson (University of Alabama, Huntsville) for all of his hard work on the *Newsletter on Philosophy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues*.

I hope that you enjoy the current issue of the *Newsletter* and I wish everyone the best for the coming academic year.

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November 15, 2010

Letter to the American Philosophical Association Board of Officers

We applaud the Board of Officers’ decision last year to endorse a non-discrimination statement which rejects as unethical any discrimination on the basis of conduct “integrally connected to status.” In particular, we commend the Board of Officers for identifying sexual conduct codes prohibiting same-sex behavior as an unethical form of discrimination.

That said, a central charge of the APA Committee on the Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in the Profession is to “identify unfair or discriminatory practices which affect LGBT philosophers in their professional work and to apprise the Board and members of the Association of ways in which such practices may be rectified.” So it is our duty to make plain why the Board’s decision to adopt only a weak enforcement policy which allows non-compliant institutions to nonetheless advertise in *JFP* and avail themselves of APA placement services is unacceptable. While the weak enforcement policy requires that non-compliant institutions be “flagged” in *JFP*, this does not undo the core difficulties which plague the decision to continue providing services to non-compliant institutions. There are several difficulties.

First, a non-discrimination statement is presumably an articulation of core values. While we can imagine cases in which such values might be trumped by other important values, we do not see any such overriding considerations in this case. We also believe that core values are evidenced by concrete actions and policies. This means that the endorsement of a weak enforcement policy either provides evidence that APA does not take discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation especially seriously, or else the weak enforcement policy is at odds with the APA’s own basic values. Indeed, on the assumption that the APA takes its non-discrimination statement very seriously, the fact that it continues to provide services in exchange for money to institutions which avow (in writing) their *non-compliance* with the statement surely casts a troubling shadow on the integrity of the APA.

Second, a weak or conflicted commitment to the non-discrimination statement makes it less likely that the APA will be able to implement effectively even the weak flagging policy. It is plain, for example, from the minutes of the Board of Officers’ 2009 meeting that no implementation process was ever articulated, nor was any process of evaluating the success of the implementation ever outlined. The consequence of this is that since the Board of Officers’ decision last year, there has been no real communication with the LGBT committee on any implementation process while both the 2010 October and November issues of *JFP* continue to list the non-revised non-discrimination statement. In our view, the only way to get to the bottom of such practical concerns is to address the fundamental problem: The Board of Officers must affirm a strong, unconflicted commitment to the non-discrimination statement.

Finally, the practice of providing services to institutions which discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation/same-sex conduct *is itself an unfair practice*. By advertising job positions which are not available to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals (*due to unethical discrimination*), the APA is unfairly providing opportunities to non-LGBT individuals.<sup>1</sup> This means that the practice of weak enforcement is in very serious tension with the non-discrimination statement itself. By providing an unfair advantage to non-LGBT individuals, the APA (at the very least) runs against the spirit of its own statement of values.

Are there any concerns that might trump such considerations?

One thought is that the practice of merely flagging institutions is superior to the practice of refusing to let such institutions advertise since the former can provide important information to LGBT job-seekers. However, the practice of flagging is not incompatible with the practice of refusing to let advertise. The *JFP* already includes a list of censored institutions. There is no reason it can’t likewise include a list of institutions in violation of the non-discrimination statement. It is unclear, however, why such institutions should still be allowed to *advertise employment opportunities*.

Another possibility is that the interests of the job-seekers (and the interest of the APA in assisting job-seekers) ought to trump the value of refusing to countenance discriminatory practices. Even if this is true, however, it is actually irrelevant to the case at hand because the interests of job-seekers *in general* are not prioritized. Instead, only the interests of *non-LGBT* job-seekers are prioritized. As we argued earlier, this is unfair and can scarcely trump the importance of the non-discrimination statement.

A third consideration is that there are some LGBT individuals who work at non-compliant institutions and who are working to change these institutions from the inside out.

By refusing to provide services to such institutions, progressive individuals who work there will be further marginalized and attempts to change these institutions will be undermined. As was pointed out at the 2010 meeting of the Board of Officers, however, there is actually no conflict here. It is possible to provide a process whereby institutions working in good faith to bring themselves in compliance with the statement are brought back “into the fold.”

A final concern is that by not allowing non-compliant institutions to advertise in *JFP*, the profession will be divided and, in particular, two distinct job-markets will arise. To some extent, the proposal above mitigates this worry. However, it doesn't cover cases in which institutions are recalcitrant in their non-compliance with the non-discrimination statement. Two points are in order. First, it seems to us that this consideration is less important than the considerations we presented at the outset – considerations of commitment, integrity, and fairness. Second, it is not clear why the APA would be accountable for such a division. Rather, it seems that the difficulty lies with non-compliant institutions themselves. That is not the fault of the APA.

In light of these reasons, we strongly urge the Board of Officers to adopt a strong enforcement policy at the next annual meeting. We also ask that the LGBT committee be apprised of the on-going efforts to implement the current policy. Regardless of whether the Board endorses a weak or strong enforcement policy, there needs to be a process by which institutions indicate compliance/non-compliance with the statement, a complaint procedure, and a strategy for making this information readily available to all APA members.

Respectfully,

The APA Committee on the Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in the Profession

#### Endnotes

1. While these practices primarily target LGB individuals, we note that transgender individuals can also be negatively impacted by such practices since some may identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual and others can be wrongly considered to be gay or lesbian when gender identity is misunderstood or disrespected.

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## ARTICLES

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### *Care to Come Out?*

**Lilith C. Dornhuber de Bellesiles**

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Prevalent the world over, homophobia<sup>1</sup> socially and personally challenges the lives of homosexuals and heterosexuals. Homophobia splits families and friendships, destroys careers and reputations, incites violence and suicide, and impedes our flourishing as individuals and communities. Society needs protection from homophobia and to heal from its damage. While an effective campaign against homophobia is a complex proposition, a first step queer<sup>2</sup> individuals can take is coming out of the closet. Coming out may be an ethically good action in the battle against homophobia, yet does that reason suffice to qualify coming out of the closet as a duty?

The 2010 Spring *Newsletter* article by Dennis Cooley, “Is There a Duty to Be Out?” makes the case that queer people coming out of the closet combats homophobia, citing a Gallup poll correlating personally knowing a homosexual to having more accepting views on homosexuality.<sup>3</sup> Yet Cooley questions whether coming out is a powerful enough weapon against homophobia to justify a *duty* for queer individuals to come out. He argues against a duty for *all* gays and lesbians to do so, attempting to establish a benchmark weighing the agent's potential sacrifices to determine whether coming out is appropriate given a particular situation.

Like other approaches using a traditional ethical framework, Cooley's solution falls short of a satisfactory resolution, which I believe we can find in the ethics of care. A successful system should account for the situation of individual agents who might find themselves facing ethical dilemmas. One such agent is Alia, a Bangladeshi psychology student and closeted lesbian. While her family is not extremely religious, they are traditional in their behaviors and their expectations for Alia. If she were to be out of the closet, she could face negative consequences. Her family, colleagues, professors, and friends might ostracize her, and given current societal attitudes towards homosexuality, there could be social costs. However, were Alia to be out of the closet, she could have a positive influence on her community and in her personal relationships. Acquaintances would have a positive example of a successful lesbian to counteract society's negative stereotypes, and within her community, Alia could serve as a role model for queer youth who hope to lead successful lives while acknowledging their sexual identities. By combating homophobia and contributing to the acceptance of queer individuals as an out lesbian, Alia could improve her own potential for flourishing in the long run in a society that accepts homosexuality.

Below, I lay out the problem with the benchmark solution of setting an abstract threshold between actions that are obligatory and those that are supererogatory. Using Alia as an example, I demonstrate how the ethics of care constructively answers how far our responsibilities extend in fighting homophobia, while considering two limitations of a care perspective: insufficient demandingness and the limited scope of relationality. To conclude, I propose strengthening ethical expectation to overcome the weaknesses of the ethics of care.

Dominant ethical frameworks such as deontology and consequentialism take a godlike stance, seeking to evaluate ethical issues from an objective, omniscient perspective that is abstracted away from mortal imperfections like bias and irrationality. Ethical judgments in these systems are universal, intended to apply to all agents, detached from their relationships and situations. Although Cooley is working within a traditional framework, he does not wish to bestow a universal duty to come out of the closet upon all queer individuals, preferring instead to defer to “the circumstances.”

Given cases such as queer Ugandans who risk death in their countries by coming out, it is difficult to disagree with Cooley's objection that the potential sacrifice is too demanding for coming out to be a duty. His solution is to establish a benchmark that differentiates circumstances in which one has a duty to come out of the closet from those cases in which coming out would be supererogatory. One has no duty to come out when doing so demands a significant enough sacrifice: “if the injury suffered is undeserved, and greatly reduces or prevents a gay or lesbian agent's life's flourishing.”<sup>4</sup> What constitutes “greatly reduces or prevents”? If Alia's family disowns her upon learning that she is queer, does that injury prevent her flourishing sufficiently to absolve Alia of a duty to come out? If her family leaves Alia homeless and hungry, without the means

to finance her education, does that sacrifice greatly reduce her flourishing? What if Alia has a trust fund that she can still access to finance her lifestyle and university? How large must her trust fund be in order to set Alia over the threshold of having a duty to come out? The benchmark is unhelpful, merely displacing the question with another threshold on which the initial benchmark depends, neither measure yielding a clear cut-off for when an action demands too much sacrifice to be a duty.

The threshold approach fails to bring us closer to an understanding of what degree of sacrifice justifies removing the duty to perform the action. In other words, how much sacrifice is “too much”? This inadequate solution is part of the weakness of dominant ethical frameworks seeking to establish universal rules by which to evaluate ethical questions and pronounce a right action. In their abstract approaches, such frameworks become mired in distinctions between duty and supererogation, sacrifice and benefit, never reaching the level of real-life ethical problems such as individuals’ decisions regarding whether or not to come out of the closet.

Even in cases where they offer solutions, universal formulas overlook individual scenarios in attempting to apply a rule to all people. Cooley proposes that individual circumstances inform the duty, yet he uses a consequentialist strategy that does not account for individual circumstances. Ethical frameworks premised on universal judgments for discrete, detached agents allow no room to consider the relationships that inform an individual’s situation. Our families and friends, colleagues and community members have little place in a traditional ethical assessment. How does a universal approach account for Alia’s circumstances, from her community’s values to her personal needs? Describing Alia being out as her duty or a supererogatory choice does not recognize situational influences on her actions, including pressure from others, precipitating actions, and compromises. Assigning a right action in a dilemma as calculated against a threshold can only take into consideration limited factors such as sacrifice, benefit, or capacity to flourish. A Ugandan lesbian’s homophobic society or a transman’s supportive friends do not figure into a judgment of their respective duties to be out in a system that seeks to apply the same criteria to every case. Further, in the quest to formulate a normative rule, dominant ethical frameworks presume that a rational system can dictate the right action to take, rather than recognizing the uniqueness of each situation. Presented with real ethical dilemmas, do traditional ethical frameworks sufficiently adjudicate a situation that is more complex than stylized thought experiments?

We can look to the ethics of care for a system that addresses actual ethical questions by focusing on humans as understood relationally, rather than abstracting problems to universalized rules. This approach reframes duty in terms of the need for and the ability to care. Leading ethics of care philosopher Virginia Held explains, “the focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility.”<sup>5</sup> Care encompasses both the need for and ability to care. Michael Slotte<sup>6</sup> illustrates this element of care through empathy: one feels empathy for another person in need and then responds with care so far as she can. Held gives the example of a parent caring for a toddler by preparing the toddler dinner. The toddler exhibits the need for care by being hungry but incapable of preparing food for him- or herself, while the parent has the ability to care by cooking the meal and feeding it to the toddler.

In the case of the queer individual’s charge to come out of the closet to combat homophobia, the ethics of care sets aside questions of duty and sacrifice to frame the question in terms of a responsibility to care for one’s community. According to

ethics of care, one might ask whether a queer individual should be out as a means of caring for her community, whether Alia should be out in order to fight homophobia and support queer youth who might face social stigma. Rather than abstracting an isolated action of coming out as a single decision that can be addressed with a right-action approach, the ethics of care allows us to assess the ethics of being out, a recurring choice reflective of an agent’s varying circumstances. The suffering of queer individuals in a homophobic society indicates a need for care, while in response, being out of the closet to fight homophobia is a way of providing care to other queer individuals, and indeed the entire society.

Caring incorporates in its definition the needs of those requiring care, and the carer’s ability to fulfill those needs. This framework allows for circumstances that might require an undue sacrifice, and for how interpersonal relationships figure into a queer individual’s decision to be out. Since the definition of care itself in this approach delineates those cases in which care is appropriate, ethics of care changes the perspective in such a way as to remove the need for a debate on duty, supererogation, and sacrifice. Further, rejecting the universal principles of traditional frameworks allows each case to be individually considered, making the elusive thresholds redundant. Unlike conventional benchmark solutions, the ethics of care structures ethical analysis around the given dilemma, deriving a solution from the situation, and offering an individualized code, rather than a universal rule. This relational approach is sensitive to an agent’s circumstances, while upholding the responsibility of queer individuals to care for their communities as well as for themselves.

Without thresholds, however, the ethics of care is liable to be insufficiently demanding insofar as it relies on the agent to regulate demandingness. Since care is impulsive, a care approach does more than displace the question of what an individual’s ethical responsibilities are by expecting any person who can care *to* care. Recognition of the need for care or empathy triggers care, offering an individualized rather than universal code that any agent can follow, without the need for a threshold. Yet because the individual provides care in response to “reading” another’s need for care, the decision to care, or not, is up to the individual. That individual may not “read” the need for care properly, or may decide that some need is not sufficient to warrant care. Nel Noddings believes that agents suffer when they do not perform the care they should, that those who fail to care when another individual is in need “break something in themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Yet self-punishment does not ensure that individuals care. If Alia stays in the closet, and is pained every time she hears a homophobic slur or witnesses bullying on the basis of sexual orientation, her pain at not caring for others by being out does not lessen others’ need for care. A need for care should evoke care rather than simply making us feel badly.

A further weakness of the ethics of care is that it is not broad enough in scope. Premised on performing caring actions through interpersonal relationships as moral good, the ethics of care only enforces responsibility to individuals with whom the agent has relationships, by the gendered implications of care in most societies, and insofar as we are better able to “read” the needs of people similar to ourselves, and feel empathy for others like us. Partiality may not be the intent of the ethics of care; however, the framework does not sufficiently control for agents limiting their care to those with whom they are closest, nor provide incentive for care to be extended more broadly. It is not enough to only care for those with whom we have relationships. If Alia does not know anyone homophobic or who suffers due to homophobia, then she will not perceive need through any of her relationships, and will not respond with care

by being out. By broadening the scope of “relationships,” Alia could extend her caring relationship to anyone who is affected by her decision, from other queer individuals coming out of the closet to neighbors whose assumptions her identity challenges. Embracing ethically founded relationships between all agents has the potential to model a cosmopolitan yet realistic ethical approach.

The need to extend the scope of relationality and demandingness in the ethics of care leads me to propose a slight reframing of the system. The answer is not stricter frameworks, higher thresholds, or more demanding universal rules, but rather higher accountability. We must teach children to be more caring, and expect adults to do the same. If “uncaring” had the same chastising force as “immoral,” then we could hold people to existing standards of kindness. Perhaps the greatest advantage of the ethics of care is that it makes ethical action accessible and practicable. Care is an innate response to the needs of other human beings. Seeing someone running for an elevator induces the caring response of holding the elevator doors open. Watching an elderly pedestrian fall induces the response of helping the individual up or phoning for a doctor. Such actions are simple forms of care, requiring little sacrifice. Increasing our expectations for others to care is the solution to the limited demandingness and scope of care.

The capacity to care in an ethical sense does not arise naturally. Rather, it is subject to socialization.<sup>8</sup> Female children are not born with an innate impulse to care; caring is a taught response. The degree of care that adults perform can increase through the level of care that we socialize children to practice. By socializing everyone to be more caring, society can raise the bar on innate responses to the need for care from holding an elevator door or helping an elderly neighbor to a wider range of circumstances of care. Parents and communities should socialize children to care not only in those situations in which no great sacrifice is required, but also in more demanding cases, and not only for those with whom they have intimate relationships, but also for people they will never meet.

Extending the expectations for care is a direct answer to the demandingness critique’s concern that the ethics of care does not require agents to act to their full capacity, raising the expectation of care without setting a threshold. An emphasis on socializing children to care more fully accounts for the further charge that caring depends on “reading” others’ need for care, which one may not be able to do. Further, the extended socialization to care can broaden the scope of the system by teaching children to care for all humans, or ideally, for all sentient beings.

Theorists such as Held question whether the ethics of care alone is a sufficient guiding conception for ethics, whether it can account for institutional inequality and prevent moral wrongs, suggesting that concepts such as justice may also be necessary. Yet a strong conception of care that was demanding and broad-reaching enough to overcome the demandingness and situatedness critiques would be sufficient to stand on its own, if not universally, at least in a substantial set of scenarios. Alia would be concerned for those whom she could help by coming out of the closet. Moreover, the family and community members who threaten her well-being by being critical of her sexuality would be supportive of her, had they been socialized to care rather than pursue their own values at the expense of others.

Given more rigorous expectations for ethical action, if we frame the debate in terms of a responsibility to care for our community, rather than questioning a duty to sacrifice, then we can affirm even the smallest acts of being out of the closet as *care*. By being out, one might be a role model for young

neighbors, or be an empathetic listener for a friend struggling with his identity. As the Gallup poll that Cooley invokes suggests, being out challenges homophobia by offering an alternative model of queer sexuality, providing families, friends, and acquaintances with a personal example to help counteract society’s homophobic stereotypes.

Being out of the closet can also be a way to care for oneself. For Alia (as well as for others) being out of the closet means not having to hide a core feature of her identity, finding a support system, and having the chance to engage in the relationships she desires. Cooley addresses how being out can increase long-term flourishing. He points to interpersonal benefits or “relational goods” such as loving relationships, and personal benefits including reducing internalized homophobia by coming to terms with one’s own sexuality. Combating homophobia and contributing to the acceptance of alternative sexualities by being out, the queer individual improves her own potential for flourishing in the long-run in a society that accepts homosexuality.

Ethics of care is queering moral thought. It challenges normative ethical approaches, recognizes the singularity of individuals’ circumstances, and shifts moral paradigms away from viewing institutions as the “appropriate determinants of society.”<sup>9</sup> It highlights the central role of care and relationships in our lives. In caring for ourselves, we may reject the homophobia of the closet. In caring for our community we may be out queer role models or straight allies. Whether we are out to combat homophobia or remain silent to protect ourselves, to be ethically right, we should care.

#### Endnotes

1. While I recognize the criticism of the term “homophobia” that Gregory Herek offers in “Beyond Homophobia” (2004), I will use “homophobia” as a blanket term to describe what he clarifies is more accurately described as sexual stigma, heterosexism, and sexual prejudice.
2. I use “queer” as an inclusive term for non-heterosexual sexualities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual and intersex.
3. D. Cooley, “Is There a Duty to Be Out?” *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues* 09, no. 2 (2010): 11-13. [www.gallup.com/poll/118931/Knowing-Someone-Gay-Lesbian-Affects-Views-Gay-Issues.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/118931/Knowing-Someone-Gay-Lesbian-Affects-Views-Gay-Issues.aspx)
4. Cooley.
5. V. Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.
6. M. Slote, *Ethics of Care and Empathy* (Routledge, 2007).
7. N. Noddings, *The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality* (University of California Press, 2010).
8. W. Hollway, *The Capacity to Care* (Routledge, 2006). Noddings makes a similar point that ethical caring is not the same as natural caring (Noddings 36, 152-3).
9. Held, 64.

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## ***Where Medicine and Homophobia Meet: The Case of Prenatal Dexamethasone***

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In June 2010, I published “Preventing Homosexuality (and Uppity Women) in the Womb?” [[http://www.thehastingscenter.org/Bioethicsforum/Post.aspx?id=4754&blogid=140&terms=preventing+homosexuality+and+%23filename+\\*](http://www.thehastingscenter.org/Bioethicsforum/Post.aspx?id=4754&blogid=140&terms=preventing+homosexuality+and+%23filename+*)].

[html](#)] with historian of science Alice Dreger and attorney Anne Tamar-Mattis in Bioethics Forum, an online site for commentary sponsored by the Hastings Center. We described the practice of prescribing a powerful steroid to pregnant women at risk of giving birth to a girl with Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH). In its most common form, CAH is a serious, potentially life-threatening condition marked by a complex of difficulties resulting in a deficiency in cortisol and excess of androgen. Life-long medical management (not unlike that involved in controlling Type-1 Diabetes) is typically required. Because in genetic females the condition is frequently characterized by ambiguous genitalia (owing to the unusually high exposure of the fetus to androgens in utero), CAH in sex-affected females is also treated under the umbrella of treatment for Disorders of Sex Development (DSD), which has for the last 50 years or so resulted in pediatric “normalizing” genital surgeries. Dexamethasone therapy does not prevent the disease of CAH, but is prescribed because it has shown some success of reducing the masculinization of females’ genitalia, and is supposed also to lessen “behavioral masculinization,” which is to say, atypical gender behavior (tomboyism), and lesbianism.

Prenatal administration of dexamethasone has until recently been regarded by many in endocrinology and obstetrics as the standard of care for attempting to mitigate genital ambiguity (and now “behavioral masculinization”) in girls with CAH. The drug is prescribed off-label, meaning it has not been approved for the prenatal use for these purposes; because dexamethasone therapy must begin before determination of what sex the fetus is and whether it is affected by CAH, we know that 7 of 8 fetuses who have been started on this in the first trimester have been “unnecessarily” exposed. There are in addition, risks to the pregnant woman, the exposed fetus, and the person the fetus may become. Dreger, Feder, and Hilde Lindemann describe these in an earlier essay, “Fetal Cosmetology.” [[http://www.thehastingscenter.org/Bioethicsforum/Post.aspx?id=4470&blogid=140&terms=fetal+cosmetology+and+%23filename+\\*.html](http://www.thehastingscenter.org/Bioethicsforum/Post.aspx?id=4470&blogid=140&terms=fetal+cosmetology+and+%23filename+*.html)]

It is tempting to describe the bioethical issues as uninteresting philosophically, so obviously do they violate the most basic and accepted principles of bioethics involving informed consent, particularly as regards what is a longstanding, uncontrolled experiment on pregnant women often uninformed about the risks they are undertaking for themselves, their pregnancies, and eventually their children. This is not to mention the move to prevent a “condition” (lesbianism) no longer regarded as pathological. If we needed any reminder that there is a good deal of work to be done to respond to prejudices and fears that strongly persist, the case of dexamethasone to prevent homosexuality in women reminds us of how much remains to be done, as well as of the challenges that we face in addressing them.

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## ***What If It Doesn't Get Better? Suicide, Bad Feelings, and the Outside of Homonormativity***

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In September 2010, prominent gay author, editor, and activist Dan Savage, along with his partner Terry Miller, recorded the first web video for the It Gets Better Project. The video is framed as an emotive, constructive response to the recent, widely publicized spate of suicides among queer youth, with the case of Rutgers freshman Tyler Clementi perhaps most prominent among them. While the phenomenon of suicide amongst

queer youth is nothing new—statistics have attested to these astronomically high rates for quite a long time—a concerted, coalitional effort to reassuringly respond to these at-risk youth is quite novel.

It is a psychotherapeutic truism that a suicide attempt is a tacit cry for help, even if it is not cogently articulated as such by its initiator. This is, I think, because the news of attempted suicide, when experienced within one’s intimate sphere, arrives in the form of an ethical injunction. A question that arises, immediately, is what one could have done differently in order to prevent or ameliorate the sense of hopelessness, the existential destitution, which precipitates a suicide attempt. It is this sort of question, writ large, that the It Gets Better Project hazards a response to. The account given at [itgetsbetter.org](http://itgetsbetter.org) frames the genesis of the project as such:

Dan [Savage] heard about the suicides of Justin Aberg and Billy Lucas and had a reaction so many LGBT adults had. “I wish I could’ve talked to that kid for five minutes before he killed himself,” Dan recently said. “I’d tell him that however bad it was in high school or middle school...it gets better.” The It Gets Better Project was born.<sup>1</sup>

As a communal response to the phenomenon of queer youth suicide, the IGB Project has been wildly successful, galvanizing hundreds of individuals, corporations, and informal groups to compose their own videos, all of which are compiled on the IGB website. The IGB Project has also been instrumental in the securing of a quarter-million dollars by GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) that will be dedicated to anti-bullying efforts in middle and high schools. Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller have also edited *It Gets Better: The Book*, set for a March 2011 release.

It’s not my intention to doubt the value of this project. This massive instantiation of a communal affective politics that works to affirm the value of queer lives—to keep queer kids alive—is, no doubt, a pretty awesome development. But I do think it important to ask after the politics that orchestrate this effort, for to promise queer youth, in good faith, that it gets better necessitates that one *actually believes it does*. Put differently, it necessitates that we not, in classic Sartrean bad faith, assume the role of positive queer elder, assuring youth that once they leave high school, life will be lavender and roses, if we do not believe it will be. I, for one, am extremely skeptical that situations do, in fact, improve, particularly for those constituents of LGBT community located on the margins of homonormativity—folks who are, sometimes concurrently, poor, working-class, trans, intersex, genderqueer, of color.

On account of this skepticism, if I—as a perhaps crotchety older queer who doesn’t believe that our contemporary overlapping realities are made of the stuff that would ensure a happy future for queer kids—am to issue an assertion that things do, indeed, get better, it would necessarily involve a certain utopic impulse. The assertion, if made in good faith, would hinge on my capacity to imagine a future that, for contemporary queer youth, will be worth inhabiting. Moreover, it would follow that I would be engaged actively in constituting this future, in rendering this future as the horizon of my existential transcendence, the utopic end-point towards which I direct my projects. It necessitates that I have a workable vision of a desired world that organizes my intentionality.

The organizing question for this text, then, is this: What sort of imagined futures are on offer among the most popular, most widely viewed of these videos? If we move beyond the empty surface reassurance that one’s existential conditions will improve, what content is on offer? What substantive changes?

What promises? For it is on these promises of a more viable future that the success of the entire project hinges.

In order to begin to respond to this question, I'd like to propose that we think of the IGB project as, after Ann Cvetkovich's recent work, a queer archive of trauma. Archives of trauma tend to be messier, more idiosyncratic, more diffuse, diverse, and polysemic than conventional archival forms. This is because, as Cvetkovich argues,

trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics.<sup>2</sup>

Trauma is central to the IGB project in multiple ways: the trauma of queer youth suicide that occasioned the project, the ways in which the reassurance that life improves often opens up, for those contributing their own testimony as part of this archive, tenuously sutured emotional wounds stemming from one's own bouts with bullying, depression, attempted suicide. The project is rife with videos of LGBTQ adults recounting existential dilemmas from their own autobiography—perhaps, most famously, the designer Tim Gunn's<sup>3</sup> (of Project Runway fame) confession of attempted suicide, an account of his own youth that elicits a barely-curbed flood of tears. These accounts of past trauma are meant to elicit an affective link cemented through the proclamation of experiential similarity. "It was that bad for us, but we lived through it, fought our way through the depressive thicket, survived. You can, too." Many of the videos display a certain fraught fragility that molds the testimonies, an inability to decide if the contributors are grieving for the queer youth already dead or for their own queer traumas, their own violent and difficult lives. It is in this undecidability that a queer public is formed around a compound of shared negative affects, bad feelings. In offering up testimonials by way of reassurance, we are doing something more than ostensibly helping prevent queer youth suicides—we are publicly affirming a shared, overlapping set of traumas that, while only making primetime very recently, have informed and shaped queer lives for a very, very long time. Going public with these similar histories of trauma—this massive coming out about our experiences with suicide, depression, anxiety, rather than coming out about our sexualities—testifies to the difficult-to-negotiate, often devastating feelings elicited by our differential experiences of oppression.

It is important, then, that we concede that this set of shared bad feelings, insofar as they form much of the emotive fabric of our daily lives, cannot simply be attributed to the phenomenon of bullying or the ostensible cruelty of children and adolescents, but are actually elicited by the interface of institutional oppression with our emotional lives. Moreover, it is cumulative and quotidian—the traumas attested to in the IGB archive are not the sole result of cataclysmic, momentous events, but often elicited by a compendium of insidious and subtle discriminations.

In a way, this video project works counter to its proclaimed intentions: while attempting to reassure, to prevent the forcible foreclosure of queer lives, it provides a vast archive that attests, through force of affect, to the commonality and ongoing operations of trauma in the emotional lives of queer subjects. Many contributors avow existential improvement through a veil of tears, through a display that, while intending to be chin

up, falls periodically to despondency. What sort of reassurance is this?

Perhaps the only reassurance certain queer adults can offer at this historical juncture is fraught, unreliable, and supported only by the shakiest and most fragile kind of hope.

But beyond the confessions, the recounting of trauma, the tears, and the assurances, there is another narrative at work that we must grapple with. It is a narrative very familiar to many of us, and it is this: the presumption that one's route to a better future will be secured through following the well-trodden path of what has been called the Great Gay Migration. That is, one will graduate (from high school, or college) and flee from suffocating, oppressive small-town life toward one of the Advocate's top-ranked gayest cities, wherein one will a) begin college or b) capitalize on the new business and career opportunities big city life affords all while c) living, with great relief, the daily reality of social and political tolerance in a "safe" urban enclave replete with GLBT-owned businesses—a gayborhood. Put differently, the temporal promise of a better future hinges on a mythic geographical movement that presumes both a certain degree of class privilege as well as the inhabitation of a comfortable subject position within gay and lesbian community—that is, assumes homonormativity. Indeed, class privilege and homonormativity are often kissing cousins and that they function as such within the space of this narrative thread that runs throughout the IGB project is no surprise.

While a certain kind of hope is proffered by the telos explicit in the Great Gay Migration narrative, it is a hope that is fundamentally conservative, decidedly non-utopic. The homonormative tendencies of the project sharpen in focus if we read the *It Gets Better* Project alongside another document—the statistical results compiled from an extensive survey of trans and genderqueer adults by the National Center for Transgender Equality, with support provided by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and published as a pamphlet entitled *Injustice at Every Turn*.<sup>4</sup> In short, this document suggests that for those located on the margins, or—more precisely—those subjects we can think of as the constitutive outside of homonormativity, "bad" queers, gender-transgressive, transsexual, racialized as non-white, non-citizens—it doesn't get better, but, in fact, may get a whole lot worse.

The statistics provided are harrowing. I'll just give a brief gloss of some of the major findings here, for illustrative purposes: nearly half—41 percent—of trans adults have attempted suicide, some more than once. Trans adults are nearly four times more likely to live in circumstances of extreme poverty. Two thirds of trans adults reported experiencing a form of extreme discrimination on account of their gender identity and expression (instances such as refusal of housing, sexual and physical assault, homelessness, denial of medical service, and incarceration); roughly 25 percent reported experiencing more than one of these forms of extreme discrimination. Introducing racialization as an analytic factor, the surveyors found even higher rates of suicide, poverty, and extreme discrimination among trans and gender non-conforming folks of color.

Given this dire situation, it is important to consider that for many minoritized constituents ostensibly spoken to by this project, the affirmations on offer ring hollow. Yet, there is a certain appeal to the IGB project, and this appeal consists—for me—in the fact that it takes the question of the future seriously, that it does not simply presume the facticity of the future. In a way, it acknowledges what Jose Munoz declared recently *Cruising Utopia*: that "the future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity."<sup>5</sup> The problem lies in the fact that this promise of a future is one only available, in a very real sense, to the most normative



of queers. It relies on a queered (though avowedly neoliberal-individualist) promise of an attainable good life, shaped by upward class mobility and a decisive lack of interpersonal and institutional discrimination. In Barack Obama's contribution, he reiterates precisely this point, wielding constitutional language to do so, ending with the claim that "each of us deserves the freedom to pursue our own version of happiness."<sup>6</sup> The good life is commensurable, here, with the individuated attainment of one's "own version of happiness." The promise of this attainment ignores the intersecting forces of normativity, ignores the phenomenon of daily coercion and the repetitive situational Catch-22's encountered daily by many non-homonormative queer folk. In short, this good life is definitively unattainable for many non-normative queers, as attested to by the NCTE survey results.

To promise a better future, in good faith, dictates that those who would do so remain accountable to the dire existential realities of non-homonormative queers and that they, in making this temporal promise, refuse the notion of the future as the perennial continuation on the present. Rather than arguing that the queer good life lies somewhere else—if you could only break out of your small town—we must commit instead to the radical undecidability of the future and affirm that this better world does not yet exist. To promise a better future in these times, we must practice an affective politics shaped by a utopian impulse, an embrace of the notion that we can work to build the sorts of queer worlds that would sustain us. These queer worlds don't—if we trust the NCTE's stats—yet exist for us, and if we are to realize them, we must refuse the homonormative promise of the Great Gay Migration, refuse the idea that a geographical shift is all that is necessary to ameliorate the undesirable conditions that forcibly mold our lives.

I believe, deeply, that this queer utopian imagining is a necessary task for contemporary feminist philosophers. In a way, I seek to revivify, in a queer frame, the challenge Ernst Bloch put to philosophy in volume one of his *Principle of Hope*, wherein he wrote, "Philosophy will have conscience of tomorrow, commitment to the future, knowledge of hope, or it will have no more knowledge."<sup>7</sup>

These words appear near the inception of *Principle of Hope*—a reckoning, a dare, a taunt, a pragmatic assertion regarding the possible obsolescence of a purely or strictly anamnesis approach to knowledge. Anamnesis, for Bloch (by way of his reading of Plato), denotes knowledge conceived as always (and only) re-remembering, past-invocation, eternal return. An entrenched belief in knowledge as anamnesis, then, is not only (as Nietzsche would have it) a truly terrifying thought, but one that must (contra Nietzsche) be refused wholesale. Within the Marxian register of Bloch's thought, anamnesis is a truly terrible notion, a block to revolutionary desire, a block to radical intending, a barricade to the enactment of praxis guided by utopian impulses, for anamnesis renders the notion of utopic hope impractical, if not wholly unintelligible.

Turning away from anamnesis, then, means turning towards a recognition of "the being of a Not-Yet-Being."<sup>8</sup> We can index this recognition in more contemporary and immediately relevant terms, however: the recognition of the being of a yet-to-be-determined, Not-Yet-Being (all these yet!) is another way of saying that (*sans* yet) other worlds are possible. *Otro mundos son posibles*. That is, we are not condemned to despair, nor to banal acceptance of some sort of embourgeoised samsaric disposition towards the being-in-the-world.

Heeding Bloch's call for a utopian imagination as a way out of a strictly anamnestic cycle of experiential knowledge, we must think about how to construct an affective politics that, while perhaps beginning with shared trauma and negative affect,

isn't content to end there. Rather, a queer utopian imagination would utilize these negative affects as fuel for the construction of utopian blueprints that can guide our contemporary theorizing and action. These utopian blueprints would have the capacity to reattune us to ways out of a homonormative politics that either ignores or tokenizes minoritarian queer subjects—that is, to make us more attentive to the radical queer potentialities that inhere in our present. Refusing the narrative of gay migration, we can instead think about building social, political, erotic, and institutional alternatives where we are. Hope, here, is not contingent on a movement in space, but on a reorientation of our temporal horizon that mobilizes, recuperates, and repurposes radical and promising elements from our interwoven queer presents and pasts—a short list could include, perhaps, radical feminist utopian fiction, the manifestoes of radical queer movements past, the memoirs left us by camp icons, the networks of affiliation we've developed through our collective protest and organizing, the small amount of savings we may or may not have: all this in order to imbue the present with a sense of a workable, desirable, and realizable future. If we are to promise queer youth that it gets better, we must acknowledge the horror of the present moment—for queer youth as well as queer adults—and get to the radical and difficult work of imagining and constructing viable, non-homonormative alternatives.

#### Endnotes

1. <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/> (February 20, 2011)
2. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2003), 7.
3. [http://www.itgetsbetter.org/#9GGAgqt\\_rQc](http://www.itgetsbetter.org/#9GGAgqt_rQc) (February 27, 2011)
4. National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. 2011. <http://endtransdiscrimination.org/report.html> (February 27, 2011)
5. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 95.
6. <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/#geyAFbSDPVk> (February 22, 2011)
7. Ernst Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, Volume One (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 140.
8. *Ibid.*

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## Where Are the Gay Girls? Re-cognizing Homophobia

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In three weeks during September 2010, the visibility of homophobic bullying and teen suicide gripped the nation's attention. On September 9<sup>th</sup>, and after years of bullying about his sexual orientation, fifteen-year-old Billy Lucas hanged himself. On September 21<sup>st</sup>, Seth Walsh, 13, attempted suicide by hanging himself from a tree. While Seth remained in the hospital and on life support, eighteen-year-old Tyler Clementi was involuntarily outed on the Internet by his roommate at Rutgers University. On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, Tyler ended his life by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. The very next day, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, Asher Brown, 13, reportedly came out to his step-father and then committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. Asher's parents claim to have repeatedly approached Asher's school about his experience of being bullied only to

have their grievances be largely ignored. Finally, on September 29<sup>th</sup>, Raymond Chase, openly gay and nineteen years of age, hanged himself. It was on that same day, after eight days of being on life support, when Seth Walsh died in the hospital.

By the end of the month the dangerous reality of homophobia and its persistence had clearly revealed itself, but in this series of tragic events, where the shocking suicide of one gay or perceived to be gay boy was compounded by the suicide of another, the deadly consequences of homophobia were not carried out by the hands of the homophobes themselves. Unlike the infamously brutal murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, these boys were not *murdered* out of hate. Homophobia in the form of homophobic bullying led them to do the dirty work themselves.

National news coverage of these suicides gave the appearance of a sudden surge in queer teen suicide last September, but those in the queer community know that the dangers of various forms of homophobia, especially as they threaten queer youth, are not unique to last fall. While recounting her experience of growing up gay in the 1970s, Ladelle McWhorter writes, “We die too young. We are beaten, stabbed, shot, or burned to death by people who say that our presence on the planet is a threat to their way of life, or we are harassed to the point of hopelessness and suicide.”<sup>1</sup> Even well into the twenty-first century, queer kids are up to four times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers.<sup>2</sup> Considering the heightened risks of violence, harassment, and psychological pain for LGBT individuals, McWhorter offers a poignant thought: “Imagine what the percentage of non-heterosexual men and women in the general population would be if all queer kids survived into adulthood. The proverbial ten percent might be far too low.”<sup>3</sup>

With so much focus on homophobic bullying and queer teen suicide last September, another intriguing issue surfaced: All of the stories involved boys. This led myself and others to ask, “Where are the gay girls, and how are they fairing against homophobia?” During his October 4<sup>th</sup> interview on WHYY public radio, Dan Savage—writer, advice columnist, and LGBT activist—was asked, “Why are all of these suicides involving gay boys?”<sup>4</sup> In response, Savage explained that homophobia is more directed at males than females and that while a “tomboy” inhabits a socially acceptable position regarding her gender non-conformity, there is a forceful intolerance of small, “sissy” boys. Referring specifically to Asher and Seth as examples, Savage claimed that slight and effeminate boys are more subject to vicious attack.

Despite that Savage’s response reiterates problematic assumptions more than it clarifies the issues,<sup>5</sup> there are important insights to be gained by reflecting on *how* he makes this claim. Rather than stating that homophobia is more directed at boys than girls, I argue that homophobia has different forms that can often affect boys and girls in different ways. By looking at the experiences of queer girls,<sup>6</sup> homophobia is also recognizable in the form of an epistemology of ignorance<sup>7</sup>—not a mere lack of knowledge, but a produced inability to know about queer sexuality that is sustained by the erasure, misrecognition, or dismissal of queer and fluid sexuality.<sup>8</sup> I argue that this form of homophobia can produce anxiety and a unique set of struggles that might lead (and probably has led) some gay girls to suicide. Thus, even if homophobic bullying viciously and overtly targets (some) gay boys more than girls, homophobia in the form of the erasure, dismissal, and misunderstanding of the fluidity of sexuality must be accounted for if we are to effectively resist homophobia and support queer youth. I want to emphasize that a failure to appreciate how homophobia sustains this form of ignorance risks further alienating not just queer girls but boys, as well, since assumptions about the rigidity and coherence of

sexuality can produce unhealthy and unnecessary anxiety for people of all genders.<sup>9</sup>

### **Where Are the Gay Girls? The Erasure of Lesbian Existence**

It is a grave misperception to assume that gay girls do not also struggle to the point of suicide. Within days of the deaths of Seth Walsh and Raymond Chase, at least three young lesbians committed suicide. Chantal Dube, 17, and Jeanine Blanchette, 21, had dated one another since February, and on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, they committed suicide together outside of Toronto. A few days after the girls made “goodbye calls” and wrote letters to friends and family, their bodies were found by a family-led search party lying together on a blanket in a wooded area. Family members speculate that they overdosed on prescription medications.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, on October 4<sup>th</sup>, the same day when Savage was asked why all of these suicides involved gay boys, nineteen-year-old Aiyisha Hassan took her own life. She was a student at Howard University and a lesbian.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the proximity in time to the suicides in September and a heightened sensitivity to queer teen suicide, the double suicide of Chantal and Jeanine and Aiyisha’s death were largely dismissed by the news media. Before jumping to the conclusion that this is all a matter of gender bias,<sup>12</sup> as if journalists simply care more about gay boys than they care about gay girls, it’s possible that the lack of coverage was due to the fact that their suicides were not explicitly related to homophobic bullying. It’s not apparent that Aiyisha was bullied for being a lesbian; her friends explained that she was having a difficult time dealing with a number of things—figuring out how to express her sexuality was one of her main struggles.<sup>13</sup> And in the case of Jeanine and Chantal, neither bullying nor sexuality were seen as contributing factors. Jeanine’s family explained that “they do not believe that [Jeanine’s and Chantal’s] sexuality had anything to do with their deaths.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, emphasis was placed on Jeanine’s mental health. In September, after months of feeling depressed, Jeanine admitted herself to a hospital where she was put on prescription medication and released several days later. Jeanine’s mother claimed that Jeanine was released too soon and that “she was just hurting.”<sup>15</sup>

Rather than merely pointing out the comparative lack of attention that was given to these girls’ deaths, I want to highlight the difference in how their experiences and sexualities were described by those around them. Not only were these girls apparently not the targets of homophobic bullying, but when their queerness was acknowledged, it was decentered and subsumed under the general explanation that they were “struggling” or “just hurting.” What if their sexuality, and perhaps especially a cultural misperception or non-recognition of it, actually contributed to their struggles and hurt? Might this evidence an epistemology of ignorance as a form of homophobia that disallows homosexuality in the cultural imagination almost as much as in the realm of lived experience?

More than thirty years since it was first published, Adrienne Rich’s essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” is still relevant.<sup>16</sup> Rich argues that heterosexuality is enforced for girls and women through various political, economic, and social practices that naturalize its compulsory character thereby making lesbian existence seem like, at best, a deviation from a woman’s natural attraction to men. As part of its enforcement, compulsory heterosexuality also renders the historical reality of lesbian existence invisible.

Sometimes this erasure occurs in counter-intuitive ways. For example, although visibility of queer people has generally increased in recent years given the highly publicized debates on rights to gay marriage and successful efforts to repeal “Don’t

Ask, Don't Tell," Rich warns against the uncritical subsumption of lesbians in general discussions on homosexuality. She writes, "Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through 'inclusion' as female versions of homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to deny and erase female reality once again."<sup>17</sup> This is evidenced by the general inclusion of lesbians within current discourses on homophobia and bullying while, at the same time, explicit references to specific queer girls are lacking. It can also be found in the otherwise impressive public responses to the September suicides. Of particular importance are the YouTube video submissions that constitute Dan Savage's "It Gets Better Project." Within weeks, videos were produced in the hundreds from Savage, President Obama, celebrities, and lots of everyday queer people who want to give queer kids a sense of hope and let them know that they, too, can live happy, successful lives if they just make it through the hard times of adolescence. However, and especially at the outset of the project, it was noted by the lesbian pop-culture site, AfterEllen.com, that "[t]he celebrities are primarily straight, and the gay ones are primarily men. [Lesbians] aren't seeing themselves, so it feels like young gay women aren't a target audience."<sup>18</sup>

Without being able to really know the extent to which Chantal, Jeanine, and Aiyisha were dealing with pressures from homophobia or what other factors might have contributed to their deaths, it is feasible to imagine how dismissive attitudes from others and one's culture about one's experiences can create increased difficulty for queer girls with respect to their sexuality. Such a lack of recognition could perhaps largely contribute to what others might perceive as "struggling" or "just hurting," even to the point of suicide. In particular, it can make it more difficult for a girl to understand, accept, or feel comfortable with her queer sexuality. She may not even know precisely what might be queer about her, or that there are others with experiences that are similar to her own. I am suggesting that this lack of recognition, which begins to look a lot like an erasure of lesbian existence, functions as a different form of homophobia—a sustained ignorance that is part of a system of compulsory heterosexuality.

### **Sexual Fluidity and Challenges for Outreach**

Another element of homophobia in this form of an epistemology of ignorance is revealed by Lisa Diamond's research in *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*.<sup>19</sup> Diamond explains that what it means to be "gay" does not map on equally to the experiences of boys and girls and men and women, and that this difference poses significant implications for our (mis) understanding of male and female sexuality.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, this knowledge (or ignorance) shapes the messages and effectiveness of outreach programs.

Echoing Rich on the erasure of lesbian existence through a more general inclusion into discussions of male homosexuality, Diamond notes that men and women are rarely distinguished in arguments about homosexuality on the assumption that they go through the same processes of development for sexual identity formation. This assumption is furthered by the fact that scientific research within most nature/nurture debates on the causes of homosexuality have focused primarily on the experiences of men. In the rare instances when research has focused on female homosexuality, it typically relied on testimonies of women who self-identify as lesbian or bisexual. But since more women show interest, curiosity, or an openness to the possibility of sexual experiences with those of the same sex or gender than women who identify as lesbian or bisexual, this research leads to conclusions that represent only a minority of women who report some degree of homosexual desire, attraction, or behavior.<sup>21</sup> In light of these assumptions and factors in research,

Diamond explains that social attitudes on female sexuality have been misguided and misinformed. In other words, most research has actually contributed to the maintenance of an epistemology of ignorance regarding sexual fluidity.

Diamond claims that unlike male sexuality, which more often tends to be recognized from an early age and remain the same for the duration of one's life, female sexuality tends to be more fluid in its formation and dynamic throughout the course of one's lifetime. Her research from a ten-year longitudinal study of more than one hundred women concludes that there is no single path for determining sexual identity and that the fluidity of female sexuality is influenced by the dynamics of various biological, psychological, cultural, and environmental factors. Given that "not everyone experiences the same mix of influences," Diamond explains that "two women might end up as lesbian through entirely different routes."<sup>22</sup> Thus, while there *are* self-identifying homosexual girls who come out as adolescents, there are still more women who come out well after they are in their twenties, thirties, and forties. Some never "come out" at all.

While Diamond's research challenges traditional views of sexuality as fixed and rigid and complicates debates over biological origins of sexuality and personal choice, it also highlights tensions around standard notions of authenticity and who counts as a "real" lesbian. Diamond explains that many women relate to one participant's questioning:

I didn't feel "different," but was I? (From whom?)  
Had I changed? (From what?) Was I heterosexual  
in adolescence only to become lesbian in my late  
twenties? Was I lesbian always but coerced into  
heterosexuality? Was I a less authentic lesbian than  
my friends who had "always known" that they were  
sexually and affectionally attracted to other women?  
What kind of woman was a lesbian woman?<sup>23</sup>

Acknowledging sexual fluidity and asking such questions can invoke anxiety about the "reality" of one's sexual identity, thereby placing a queer girl's sexual identity in a very tenuous position. This is in part due to our "slavish adherence to a rigid and obviously ill-fitting model of sexuality,"<sup>24</sup> and also because when the fluidity of female sexuality is acknowledged, it is often done so in a way that undermines queer identities by deeming them less real, as "just a phase," or a kind of experimentation. Because it resists easy categorization, fluid sexuality can be easier to ignore or deny by loved ones, psychologists, scientists, and journalists. If rigid identities do not fit, one might even resist making her sexuality central to her understanding of herself and her struggles. Thus, for girls who might be gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, or perhaps even for some of those who are "just struggling," finding comfort, confidence, and security with one's identity and one's experience is no small task.

As a result, Diamond's work on sexual fluidity points to the difficulty of creating more effective outreach programs that will support, rather than alienate, young girls. As long as assumptions persist about sexuality as clear, rigid, and consistent, even outreach programs such as the "It Gets Better Project" will fail to adequately support queer people, especially young queer girls and women. Video submissions that echo the refrain, "You can't help the way that you were born"<sup>25</sup> will continue to "inadequately represent the enormous variability in female sexuality [with the result that] women may end up feeling doubly deviant, their experiences reflecting neither mainstream societal expectations nor perceived norms of 'typical' gay experience."<sup>26</sup>

### **Conclusion: Re-cognizing Homophobia**

I have argued that homophobia can evidence itself in multiple

forms, including that of an epistemology of ignorance which creates and sustains the misrecognition and misunderstanding of homosexuality through the erasure and dismissal of fluid, queer sexuality. While it is unfortunately the case that homophobic bullying leads many queer people to suicide, a failure to appreciate various forms and operations of homophobia risks leaving many other queer people feeling alienated. It is for this reason that I have drawn attention to the fact that while homophobic bullying may more viciously target some gay boys, the conditions are set such that some young lesbians are also “struggling,” even to the point of suicide. Despite our best efforts, then, directing our attention only to the more readily apparent forms of homophobia could actually produce greater ignorance of the complexities of homophobia and result in increased anxiety among those who also need our support.

With this in mind, I want to end on a cautionary note. Rich’s notions of compulsory heterosexuality and the erasure of lesbian existence and Diamond’s work on sexual fluidity are certainly provocative and illuminating, but I think it would be a mistake to use their insights to only answer questions such as, “Where are the gay girls?” Compulsory heterosexuality and too-rigid models of sexuality create immense social, political, psychological problems and physical dangers for boys, girls, men, and women who are bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgendered. We must remain critically reflexive, then, regarding our use of such notions. For example, emphasizing the fluidity of female sexuality while reiterating that male sexuality is more stable (which is Diamond’s move) might actually perpetuate a limiting view of sexuality in general, and one that is at the detriment to questioning boys and men. Beyond those in the queer community, it is also important to remain sensitive to how such institutionalized practices and models might produce unique difficulties and tensions even for those who are heterosexual. Their challenges will mostly likely be quite different from those that beset others in the queer community, but the normalization and policing of sexuality affects heterosexual people just as much as it affects those who are not. My aim has been to show that notions like compulsory heterosexuality and sexual fluidity are at least useful for thinking through structures of thought that not only limit the lives of the sexually marginalized but also limit our capacity to understand their experiences. In order to effectively support queer youth and resist homophobia, we must be able to better recognize their lives and loves, as well as their struggles and deaths.

#### Endnotes

1. Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 5.
2. The Trevor Project, a leading national organization for crisis management and suicide prevention for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, reports that throughout the 2000s, nine out of ten LGBT youths have been harassed at school, with at least 60 percent feeling unsafe there. Those who self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual face two to three times the risk of bullying at school than do heterosexual students. Regarding the experiences of transgendered students, almost all report having been verbally abused in the previous year. More than a third of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths report having attempted suicide and that about half of the transgendered youth population have seriously considered it. “The Trevor Project.” <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/suicide-resources/suicidal-signs> (October 1, 2010).
3. McWhorter, 5.
4. Radio Times. “Bullying and Cyberbullying, Especially vs. Gay Youth.” October 4, 2010. WHY Radio. [http://why.org/cms/radiotimes/2010/10/04/bullying-cyberbullying-especially-vs-](http://why.org/cms/radiotimes/2010/10/04/bullying-cyberbullying-especially-vs-gay-youth/)
5. Like, for instance, his unfortunate slippage between gender and sexual identity. Although gender and sexuality cannot be fully separated from one another, it is also problematic to carelessly blur the two. Gayle Salamon describes how the problematic conflation of the transgression of sexual norms with the transgression of gender norms has dire consequences for transpeople in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). See especially Chapter Four, “Transfeminism and the Future of Gender.”
6. Throughout the paper I will use “gay” and “queer” rather loosely because the label “gay” often connotes an identity or way of identifying that doesn’t accord with how some people identify. “Queer,” then, refers more generally to a sense of not being (strictly) heterosexual.
7. Charles Mills’ notion of an epistemology of ignorance can be helpfully applied here. Mills writes, “Thus in effect, on matters related to race, The Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (18). Such a cognitive model is marked its preclusion of “self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities” (18). For more, see Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
8. Savage’s apparent failure to appreciate how homophobia deeply affects girls could be an example of this kind of ignorance. In other words, the quickness of his dismissal produces and sustains a gap in genuine understanding of homophobia by directing the attention away from queer girls.
9. Although I am careful to not conflate sexual identity and gender identity, the reference to gender here is intentional since sexual identification can be a frequent source of anxiety for those who are, or are involved with someone who is, transgendered.
10. “Family-led Search Party Finds Bodies of Missing Women in Orangeville.” 1996-2010. thestar.com. <http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/article/870124-family-led-search-party-finds-bodies-of-missing-women-in-orangeville> (October 5, 2010).
11. “19 Years Old- Suicide in Southern CA by Daughter of Prominent Marin Exec Director.” 2010. LezGetReal. <http://lezgetreal.com/2010/10/19-years-old-suicide-at-uc-irvine-by-daughter-of-prominent-marin-exec-director/> (October 7, 2010).
12. I am suggesting that gender is complexly related to experiences of sexuality, homophobia, and perhaps even suicide, and that this may play a role in the difference in news coverage of the suicides of gay boys and girls, but I acknowledge that news coverage of queer teen suicide may have been intentionally dropped after September. In a brief conversation with Dan Savage in November 2010 at Penn State University, he relayed to me that he had been pressured to stop talking about queer teen suicide precisely to avoid encouraging “copy-cat” suicides. Other young gay boys committed suicide after September and received only a few mentions from local news sources or LGBT blogs. Zach Harrington, 19, and Corey Jackson, 19, were both gay and committed suicide in early October.
13. Even though Justin Aaberg’s suicide occurred on July 9<sup>th</sup>, two months before the cascade of September suicides, Justin was gay and he was bullied because of it. The connection to homophobic bullying accounts for why Justin, 15, was often included in news reports. For examples, see <http://www.queerty.com/teenager-justin-aaberg-killed-himself-over-gay-bullying-his-mom-wont-let-anyone-forget-20100914/> and [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/39593311/ns/us\\_news-life/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/39593311/ns/us_news-life/). However, the circumstances surrounding Raymond

Chase's suicide were never determined. Bullying was not an obvious reason for his death either, but Raymond was named and pictured as the fifth gay teen to commit suicide in September. Acknowledging this difference, one media source wrote, "Regardless of his motive, this is a horrible tragedy." "Raymond Chase, Openly Gay College Student, Commits Suicide." 2010. Towleroad. <http://www.towleroad.com/2010/10/raymond-chase-openly-gay-college-student-commits-suicide.html> (October 10, 2010).

14. "Family-led Search Party."
15. *Ibid.*
16. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* (1980): 631-60.
17. Rich, 649.
18. "Huddle: It Gets Better." AfterEllen.com October 8, 2010. <http://www.afterellen.com/column/afterellen-huddle/it-gets-better?page=0%2C0> (October 10, 2010).
19. Lisa M. Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
20. As I will further explain below, I am uncomfortable with Diamond's tendency to essentialize the fluidity of female sexuality as if all women are naturally more fluid than men and/or men do not experience fluidity in their sexuality.
21. Diamond, 28. With this in mind, McWhorter's suggestion that "the proverbial ten percent might be far too low" is appropriately raised again in a different context.
22. Diamond, 28.
23. Diamond, 14.
24. Diamond, 259.
25. Lady Gaga's single "Born This Way" was released February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Clearly a pro-LGBT anthem, it is also clear that her lyrics invoke gay male sexuality with references, such as, "it doesn't matter if you love him" and "don't be a drag—just be a queen." To the extent that her main message calls for pride for the way that one was born, I worry that this, too, might end up causing many queer kids (and perhaps especially girls) to feel alienated if they are not so sure that they were "born" gay.
26. Diamond, 15.

remain superimposed on the center of this starfish, still sighing. Undoubtedly, Samwell is inviting us to consider, as a sexual proposition, his black anus. Indeed, the lyrics of the song that he proceeds to sing constitute his attempt to seduce some unnamed addressee, with the questions, incessantly repeated, with faux modesty and camp incredulity: "What what, in the butt? ...You wanna do it in my butt, in my butt?"

What is a philosopher to make of these phenomena? I offer Samwell's lyrics as an example of the sort of lessened bartering power available to black men who have sex with men (MSM) and who identify as bottom. I argue that such men experience lessened bartering power, when they interact with other MSM, in what is the highly competitive market-place for sexual approbation from, and for sexual activity with, other MSM. I argue that this lessened bartering power is at least one of the causes of the disproportionately high prevalence of infection by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), among young black MSM in the USA. My argument proceeds in three stages. First, I establish two facts. Second, I offer a causal theory that connects those two facts. Third, in light of this causal theory, I make three recommendations.

### Two Facts

The first fact is that, in the USA, HIV disproportionately affects young black MSM. Let us break this claim down into three, smaller, constituent parts. First, HIV disproportionately affects blacks. Between 2005 and 2008, blacks constituted only 13.6% of the population of a sample of 37 states in the USA. Yet, during the same period, blacks accounted for 50.3% of all the diagnoses of HIV in those 37 states. By contrast, whites constituted 67.9% of that same population, yet only 29.4% of those same diagnoses.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that your lifetime risk of receiving a diagnosis of HIV is 1 in 22, if you're black, but only 1 in 170, if you're white.<sup>9</sup> Second, HIV disproportionately affects MSM. The CDC found that the proportion of men who reported engaging in sex with other men, within the past five years, was 2%.<sup>10</sup> Yet, in 2008, MSM accounted for 54% of all the diagnoses of HIV in the USA.<sup>11</sup> Third, and finally, between 2005 and 2008, in the same sample of 37 states, which I mentioned earlier, 61.1% of all HIV transmissions among black men were attributed to sex between men.<sup>12</sup> Even more importantly, between 2005 and 2008, in these same 37 states, "[m]ales aged 13-24 years accounted for the largest percentage (30.9%) of HIV diagnoses among black/African American males with infection attributed to male-to-male sexual contact."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, "[d]uring 2001-2006, approximately twice as many...diagnoses occurred in black MSM aged 13-24 years as in their white counterparts."<sup>14</sup>

The second fact is that sexual racism exists against black MSM. Sexual racism is but one type of social segregation. Social segregation arises, as Elizabeth Anderson has argued,<sup>15</sup> where one social group attains dominant control over some good that is critical to securing social advantage. Having attained this dominant control, the social in-group, as we may now call it, does at least one of two things: either (a) it *closes ranks* around that good, ensuring that members of social out-groups do not have access to the good, and that members of social out-groups occupy a space at a distance from that good, or (b) it *invites* members of social out-groups to *partake* of the good, on the proviso that, as they partake of the good together, side-by-side, members of the social in-group will enjoy a superior social role, whereas members of the social out-group must assume an inferior social role. Finally, in order to rationalize this curious social protocol, the in-group spins a story, in which it attributes the spatial segregation or the role segregation to some dishonorable trait, internal to members of the out-group.

In sexual racism, the critical goods at stake are sexual

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## What? What? In the (Black) Butt

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On Valentine's Day, February 14, 2007, Samwell went viral.<sup>1</sup> "[J]ust over a week later, [his video had] already been played more than half a million times."<sup>2</sup> "The month it was released, 'What What' was the third most-viewed music video, the third most-discussed video and the third-favorite music video on YouTube."<sup>3</sup> "A year later, after the video had already been downloaded nearly nine million times, an episode of *South Park*...featured a shot-for-shot re-creation of the video, starring Butters (a popular *South Park* character) in place of Samwell."<sup>4</sup> Two years later, Samwell had found a spin-off market for branded, spangled underwear.<sup>5</sup> According to the Internet Movie Database, a related movie is now in development.<sup>6</sup> To date, as we go to press, his video, on YouTube, has "received over 150,000 viewer comments, has been written about in over 1,500 blogs and news articles...has been honored with over 1,000 response videos" and has been downloaded and viewed over 44,000,000 times.<sup>7</sup>

The video opens with a milk chocolate heart against a cyan blue sky. Within the shape of the heart are the lips of Samwell himself, a black male vocalist, sighing. The chocolate heart quickly morphs into a milk chocolate *starfish*. Samwell's lips

approbation and sexual activity. That is to say, what is at stake is the good of being *considered* sexually attractive and the good of participating in sex with another human being. In sexual racism, members of the in-group are racialized as white, or rather the configuration of their various body-parts is considered “white enough.” By contrast, members of the out-group are racialized as black, or considered “insufficiently white.” The in-group spins the story that blacks are not sexually desirable. Thus, *exclusionary* sexual racism occurs when a white MSM withholds sexual approbation or sexual activity from black MSM; by contrast, *exploitative* sexual racism occurs when a white MSM offers sexual approbation or sexual activity to black MSM, *on the proviso that black MSM assume a racially stigmatizing role.*

Sexual racism exists both offline and online. It is difficult to demonstrate that sexual racism exists offline. However, the online behavior of MSM provides us with telling empirical evidence that this is so. For instance, in 2003, William Brown III created four personal advertisements. He posted these ads under the rubric of each of four cities (Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and San Francisco), on two websites (Gay.com, which “caters more to [men] who are 21 and older,” and XY.com, which “caters more to [men] who are between 15 and 24”). He left the ads in place for a period of a month. The personal ads carried “identical personality traits and physical characteristics, and were only differentiated by race.” Brown found that, “[i]n all 8 city/site comparison groups Black men received the lowest number of responses.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in 2008, Russell K. Robinson conducted a study on Adam4adam.com, leaving personal ads in place during one hour of “prime time for men looking to connect with another man,” in each of New York and Los Angeles. Robinson found that, in response to their personal ads, black and Asian MSM received a similarly low number of unsolicited messages (30 and 34, respectively), whereas Latino and white MSM received a similarly high number of unsolicited messages (79 and 83, respectively). However, what distinguished black MSM, in Robinson’s study, was that black MSM who identified as bottom (that is, as the *receptive* partner in anal intercourse), received by far the fewest unsolicited messages (4), whereas black MSM who identified as top (that is, as the *insertive* partner in anal intercourse) received nearly seven times as many (26).<sup>17</sup>

We can explain this discrepancy, by consulting, in addition to this *quantitative* evidence for sexual racism, the *qualitative* evidence that we have. Mary Dianne Plummer conducted focus groups in Seattle: two with twelve Asian MSM, two with nine black MSM, and three with seventeen white MSM. Plummer found that sexual approbation from white MSM, and sexual activity between white MSM and black MSM, is regulated by two “ethnosexual stereotypes”: that of the “black Mandingo” and that of the “savage black top.” The “black Mandingo” is, according to one white MSM, “...the gay idea that all black men are...hung like horses.” Indeed, a black MSM reports, “I get a lot of that...with White guys who are like, ‘Fuck me with your big black cock.’ ...It’s like you’re a living porn fantasy.” The “savage black top” is invoked in the words of one white MSM, who claims, “well, obviously they’re tops because they’ve got the big dicks and they’re going to fuck my little White ass.” Indeed, a black MSM reports, “[White men] are coming up to me and they’re like, ‘oh you must be a gangster. You must be all that. You can fuck the shit out of me!’”<sup>18</sup> These findings are confirmed by Niels Teunis, who interviewed black MSM in San Francisco. He found that “all but one of the [fourteen] African American men, with whom [he] spoke, described taking an exclusively top role in their sexual relations with white men, despite their desire to take other roles. The specific desires of the African American men were often ignored in their sexual interactions.” From his interviews, Teunis concludes that “white

men maintain a position of privilege and superiority in their sexual interactions with African American men. [As bottoms, t]hey expect to be served sexually, or when they are in the top position, they become racially abusive.”<sup>19</sup>

### A Causal Theory

Sexual racism is at least one of the causes of infection by HIV among young black MSM. This is because sexual racism reduces a black MSM’s freedom to define himself sexually. He is restricted to either (1) no sex at all, (2) sex only with others similarly excluded or exploited, or (3) sex only in which he plays along with ethnosexual stereotypes. Let’s eliminate option (1) and suppose that a black MSM chooses to participate in sexual activity. Then he faces either (2) a limited sexual network, comprising only other black MSM, or (3) lessened bartering power, in the competitive market-place for sex with white MSM.

Take the limited sexual network. H. Fisher Raymond and Willi McFarland, in a study in San Francisco, found that “Black MSM had a significant, threefold higher level of same race sexual partnering than would be expected by chance alone.” They speculated that “the sexual networks of Black MSM are constrained to smaller numbers and are therefore potentially more highly interconnected than other groups. Once HIV enters one part of such [a] tightly connected network, it is likely to spread rapidly throughout.”<sup>20</sup> Edward O. Laumann and Yousik Yoom, who analyzed a “nationally representative probability sample of 1,511 men...in the United States” confirmed this speculation. They found “that ‘peripheral’ African Americans (who have had only one partner in the past year) are five times more likely to choose ‘core’ African Americans (who have had four or more partners in the past year) than ‘peripheral’ whites are to choose ‘core’ whites.” Moreover, they found that “the relatively high sexual contacts between the African American core and its periphery facilitate the spread of infection overflow into the entire African American population.” They call this phenomenon the ‘intra-racial network effect.’<sup>21</sup> Thus, my causal hypothesis is as follows: given the already much higher prevalence of HIV among black MSM, to restrict, as sexual racism does, a black MSM who *does not* carry HIV to a sexual network comprising *only* other black MSM, is to increase the likelihood that he will have sex with someone who *does* carry HIV.

Now take the lessened bartering power. We have seen that, if a black MSM chooses sex with white MSM, he is confronted with a demand to conform to the ethnosexual stereotypes of the “black Mandingo” and the “savage black top.” There are two possible scenarios. Either (1) he can and does conform to those ethnosexual stereotypes, or (2) he can’t or won’t conform to those stereotypes. Let’s again eliminate option (1) and suppose he can’t or won’t. “Just as the Asian child who isn’t good at math may go through life with an inferiority complex or may not feel Asian enough because stereotypes say that he is supposed to be good at math, racialized body stereotypes can be just as destructive. The African American male who isn’t sexually well endowed or isn’t as sexually aggressive as both homosexual and heterosexual society say he must be, may feel inferior.”<sup>22</sup> Such a black MSM is likely to consider himself to have lessened bartering power in the market-place for sex with MSM. He is likely to have lessened confidence in his ability to attract sexual approbation from, and to achieve sexual activity with, other MSM. He is likely to have low sexual self-confidence. *Young* black MSM, fraught with the insecurities of adolescence and of “coming out of the closet,” are *especially* likely to find themselves with low sexual self-confidence.

Since they feel unable to supply what consumers are demanding, people with low sexual self-confidence are vulnerable to exploitation, in situations where they must

bargain with someone whom they consider to have bartering power superior to their own. Thus, my causal hypothesis is as follows: either (a) because black MSM offer unprotected anal intercourse as a unique selling proposition in the competitive market-place for sex with white MSM, or (b) because black MSM give in more readily to demands to engage in unprotected anal intercourse, in order to persuade white MSM to have sex with them, the lessened bartering power of black MSM could be contributing to a higher prevalence of HIV among black MSM. Indeed, when compared with white British MSM in England, “black men were more likely to have insertive unprotected anal intercourse, both with a partner they knew to be HIV positive [2.76 times more likely] and with a partner whose HIV status they did not know [1.46 times more likely].”<sup>23</sup>

It might be said that I misunderstand how HIV is transmitted. For the insertive partner in unprotected anal intercourse is at a much lesser risk of contracting HIV than the receptive.<sup>24</sup> That may be true.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, what these figures *suggest* is that black MSM who do not carry HIV are disproportionately more amenable to engaging in unprotected anal intercourse *even when they know that their sexual partner carries HIV*. This curious fact suggests that, in such encounters, black MSM consider themselves to have lessened bartering power. As Calvin, an “Ivy League educat[ed]” black MSM “in his mid 30s,” put it: “this guy is actually doing me a favor by sleeping with me, and I should make sure [he is pleased].”<sup>26</sup>

### Enter Samwell.

“I feel you watching me, over there. / Come to me, if you care. / Don’t sit and stare; it’s just not fair. / Make your move, if you dare.” Samwell tries to entice his unnamed addressee, attempting to draw him closer, to draw him in. Yet there is ambivalence on the part of the addressee; he “sit[s] and stare[s]” at Samwell. He patently sees in Samwell *something* that attracts him, but that thing is not so valuable that he feels he needs to “[m]ake [the first] move.” The ball is in Samwell’s court. As Samwell recognizes, the relationship that obtains between the two is “just not fair.”

Samwell succumbs: he makes the first move. “If you want it, I’ll give you power. / Just be gentle; I’m delicate like a flower.” Who has the power? Does Samwell truly believe this power is his to bestow? Is it that his addressee proposes, whereas Samwell disposes? This seems doubtful. For Samwell’s conditional offer of power soon becomes a desperate supplication: “I will give you what you need. / All I want is your big fat C. / Give it to me, if you please. / Give it to me, if you please.”

What is a “big fat C”? Unreal, an interviewer for Missouri’s *The Riverfront Times*, posed this very question to Giorgio (also known as Mike Stasny), the producer of Samwell’s song:

Unreal: “In the song, is he saying all he wants is ‘your big fat C’ or ‘your big fat seed’?”

Giorgio: “I read online that someone thought it was ‘C,’ which would just be a short and softened way of saying ‘cock.’ That would be a brilliant lyric. But he’s saying seed. I have no fucking idea what he’s talking about, but when I heard it I knew it was pure genius.”<sup>27</sup>

For an MSM, one who offers himself as bottom to another MSM, to express a desire not for the putative top’s “cock,” but rather for the putative top’s “seed,” is for him to express a desire for sex with that “cock” unimpeded by barrier protection. The black MSM is requesting, is offering as a unique selling proposition, is begging for, unprotected anal intercourse.

“You wanna do it in my butt, in my butt?”

You wanna do it in my butt, in my butt?

You wanna do it in my butt, in my butt?

Let’s do it in the butt.

OKAY!”

Some might complain that this interpretation of what is merely a pop phenomenon attributes too much intention to Samwell. Yet do we need to assume intention on Samwell’s part, for this interpretation to be one that helps us make sense of black bottom experience? I think not, and the producer of Samwell’s song would agree with me: “Part of what’s so attractive about Sam is that he comes up with these wonderful ideas, but he doesn’t totally realize that, when combined, they can be pretty complex.”<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, even though intention on Samwell’s part is *not required*, it might actually be *forthcoming*. Samwell’s “latest single, *Protect Respect*, is about having self-respect and using a condom during any sex act. While he is concerned with the HIV/AIDS epidemic among the gay community, Samwell wants to bring attention to the fastest growing demographic contracting HIV/AIDS, African-American women.”<sup>29</sup> Does Samwell feel he has said what he wants to say about black MSM and HIV? Is that why he is now concerned with HIV and black *women*?

### Three Recommendations

In response to the data that HIV disproportionately affects young black MSM, the CDC’s primary recommendation is that we test more black MSM more frequently: “The higher rates of diagnoses among blacks...suggest that adolescents and adults from this population who are at higher risk for HIV infection might benefit from more frequent testing to facilitate earlier diagnosis.”<sup>30</sup>

The CDC is misguided. Our primary aim should not be the “earlier diagnosis” of infection. On the contrary, our primary aim should be the *prevention* of infection. The CDC will not prevent the infection of young black MSM, unless it tackles the limited sexual networks to which black MSM are relegated and the lessened bartering power that black MSM enjoy. Sexual racism is the cause of those limited sexual networks and sexual racism is the cause of that lessened bartering power. For this reason, the CDC must put tackling sexual racism at (or very near) the milk chocolate heart of its campaign to tackle HIV.

Such a campaign, if it is to be successful, will be driven by data on sexual racism, data, that is, on the impact of sexual racism upon sexual negotiation and upon the resultant sexual behavior of men who have sex with men. This is the sort of data that has very recently been gathered, online, by Denton Callandar, a doctoral candidate, at the National Centre in HIV Social Research, at the University of New South Wales, in Australia.<sup>31</sup> Callandar’s survey is the first of its kind in the world. The CDC must conduct a similar survey in the USA.

The resultant data could be used to design and raise funds for two sorts of campaign. On the one hand, the CDC could design and fund a campaign that tackles sexual racism *obliquely*. For example, the most recent campaign by Big Up, a British charity promoting health among black MSM in Britain, circulated posters featuring five black queer subjects, of widely differing complexions, ages, and physiques. Each holds a long fluorescent neon tube. Each tube is of a different color of the rainbow. “Be switched on,” we are told, “Embrace diversity in our community.”<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the CDC could design and fund a campaign that tackles sexual racism *explicitly*. It just so happens that such a campaign is already in existence. It was created, and is maintained, by Andy Quan, a Chinese Canadian MSM, and Tim Mansfield, a white Australian MSM, both of whom reside in Sydney, Australia. My principle recommendation is, therefore, that the CDC fund this campaign, and develop it for

an audience beyond Australia, for an audience in the USA. That campaign is the website [sexualracismsux.com](http://sexualracismsux.com).

#### Endnotes

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbGkxcY7YFU>
2. Samwell asks the eternal question: "You want to do it in my butt?" *The Riverfront Times* [St. Louis, MO], Wednesday, February 28, 2007. Volume 31, Issue 9. <http://www.riverfronttimes.com/2007-02-28/music/samwell-asks-the-eternal-question-you-want-to-do-it-in-my-butt/>.
3. Lilledeshan Bose, "The Who Who Behind the 'What What': Meet the Local Duo who Turned 'What What (In the Butt)' into an Internet Sensation," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* [Milwaukee, WI], Thursday, November 15, 2007.
4. Brownmark Films, The Samwell Project: <http://www.specialentertainment.com/brownmark-films/>
5. Samwell launches his new merchandise, on January 9, 2009: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CRImDLLeYIE&feature=relmfu>. It remains available for purchase: <http://www.districtlines.com/samwell>.
6. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1591639/>
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8. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Disparities in Diagnoses of HIV Infection between Blacks/African Americans and Other Racial/ethnic Populations—37 States, 2005-2008," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 60, no. 4 (2011): 93-98, at 94.
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17. Russell K. Robinson, "Structural Dimensions of Romantic Preferences," *Fordham Law Review* 76 (2008): 2787-2819, at 2813-2814.
18. Mary Dianne Plummer, "Sexual Racism in Gay Communities: Negotiating the Ethnosexual Marketplace," PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2007, at 13-14 & 30. It is likely that the "porn fantasy," to which one black MSM in Plummer's study referred, is that fantasy depicted in the final professional work of the most notorious black male porn star of past two decades. In trying to describe *Niggas' revenge* (which he considers to be "the most powerful movie of my career"), Blake claims that he "can't do much better to express what it's about than quote what's written on the back of the box: 'White neo-nazi supremacists...fuck with the wrong niggas and get their come-uppance from the huge-muscled, huge-cocked Blake Boys: Bobby, Flex-Deon, and Chris...and their Puerto Rican buddy, Eric Top Stud. The nazis are arbitrarily and brutally used as fuck-holes, urinals, and cum repositories in the most controversial video of the decade.'" Bobby Blake, *My Life in Porn: The Bobby Blake Story* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2008), at 242 & 239-240.
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28. *Ibid.*
29. This string of words is drawn from *The Official Samwell Fan Page!* on Facebook. <http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Official-Samwell-Fan-Page/239937612761?sk=info>.
30. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Disparities in Diagnoses of HIV Infection," 97.
31. See <http://justapreference.com>. One advertisement for this study stated, "Men come in all colours. Do you have a preference? Take our short survey."
32. <http://www.gmfa.org.uk/aboutgmfa/our-work/switchedon>

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NEWS AND NEW IN PRINT

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Raja Halwani, Carol Quinn, and Andy Wible have co-edited a book entitled *Queer Philosophy: Presentations of the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy 1998-2008*. It is due in print by Summer 2012 (Rodopi Press). Authors include Claudia Card, John Corvino, Richard Mohr, and Martha Nussbaum. There is a whole range of topics including aesthetics, ethics, identity, and religion: 42 essays in all. This is a must-read for anyone interested in queer topics or involved with the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy, and it will stand as a wonderful monument to all of our thinking and writing over those years.