PERFORMING TRAUMA: THE IT GETS BETTER PROJECT AS A PERFORMANCE OF WHITE TRAUMA

by

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Abstract

Taking the It Gets Better Project as its case study, this thesis argues that the ways in which the project represents trauma is through an events-based model that centers the experiences of young, cis, white, gay boys. This is accomplished through a narrative of trauma that puts forward the idea that all queer youth experience trauma as an effect of being queer and that through this normalization they are positioned as all experiencing trauma in the same way. Furthermore, this framing is based upon the centering of sexuality as the primary way trauma manifests, which erases experiences of trauma that are marked by other axes of identity. The first chapter introduces my political commitments and a theoretical framework for interpreting the It Gets Better Project’s representations of trauma. The second chapter addresses the ways in which the project’s mantra, “it gets better,” constructs a linear teleology of queer suffering through an affective attachment to happiness and a melancholic attachment to the figure of the innocent child. The third chapter situates the It Gets Better Project within a broader discourse of queer liberalism to suggest that the project itself works to strengthen the borders of the Canadian and American nation-states. The conclusion suggests that a different practice of reading or remembering death, one attentive to questions of history, can gesture towards a future where ‘it’ can ‘get better.’
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Chapter 1

Psychoanalysis, Trauma, and Affect: A Theoretical Framework

“The essence of trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe. All we have to do is to mark repeatedly the trauma as such” (Žižek 272-273).

“All I can do is tell the truth. No, that isn’t so—I have missed it. There is no truth that, in passing through awareness does not lie. But one runs after it all the same” (Lacan vii).

“Stories are made from an emotional process that involves symbolically elaborating experience in a way that brings narrative coherence and understanding to our existence. In this way, every story is the better story, or the best possible story we have invented to allow ourselves to go on living” (Georgis 1).

1.1 Remarks on the Project

In 2010 activist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller started the It Gets Better Project in response to an increasing number of suicides committed by queer youth.

Although the It Gets Better Project is not the first nor the only social justice activist project on queer youth suicide, it is perhaps the most well-known. Since the project’s inception, there has been upwards of 50,000 videos recorded and uploaded to social media websites. The videos follow the same general format with the message “it gets better” being repeated. The It Gets Better Project has been well received in mainstream media. For example, the non-governmental organization GLAAD, formerly known as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, awarded Savage with a Webby Award in 2011 for founding the project and “inspiring LGBT youth to overcome bullying” (Gouttebroze n.pag). This is not to homogenize the project. Indeed, there are videos and

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1 Other projects include Andrea Gibson’s and Kelsey Gibb’s project Stay Here With Me.
2 The change from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation to the acronym GLAAD was made as a way of being more inclusive to a diverse range of sexual and
commentaries that are made with the intention of critiquing the overarching narrative that ‘it’ will ‘get better.’ For example, Jack Halberstam offers an incendiary critique of the project and its founders, Savage and Miller, that the message of the campaign is a lie. Halberstam argues, “one can rarely say this to youth of color or to teenage moms or to victims of sexual abuse and, for the most part, unless one is talking to silver spoon in the mouth gays, one cannot promise to most queers that ‘things get better’” (n. pag). While there might be other videos made or commentaries written that seek to nuance the It Gets Better Project, there is still a primary focus on those stories that adhere to the message that “it gets better.” I am situating my own critique amid this tension, at once being aware of resistance to the project while offering my own critique of the project. I have elected to not choose specific videos to analyze at this moment because of the difficulty and tensions of watching the videos. I think there is a fine line between watching the videos for research purposes and (re)producing a voyeurism in the consumption of these videos that I am seeking to avoid. Indeed, I find myself asking the questions: “Whose [stories] am I telling? What stories am I not telling in the process of choosing [these ones]?” (Dubinsky 359). This opens a broader question of when resistance is safe and when it is not observation. The aim of this thesis is not to resolve this tension; however, I do believe that it is something important to consider.

My thesis is concerned with how trauma is represented and articulated within the It Gets Better Project. I ask the questions: How is trauma represented in the It Gets Better Project? What sort of cultural work do these representations do? Who are these gender identities and expressions that extend beyond the categories of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian.’
representations for? Admittedly, as someone who identifies as queer, and who might be considered as a subject of the It Gets Better Project, I have always thought of the project itself as overly trite. I tend to think of it as akin to putting a bandage on a broken limb; potentially comforting, but overall it ignores the cause of the injury. My dissatisfaction with the It Gets Better Project also stems from my own experiences as a queer youth. However, the point here is not to center myself; I want to gesture towards my own political investments in this work as a means of introducing it. Queer suicide is something that I have thought about constantly during both my undergraduate and graduate studies. Throughout my own investigations into numerous schools of thought I have not found the answers I have been looking for. In fact, I am not quite sure what my questions were to begin with. I think, most pressingly, I find myself asking why this happens. Through this process, I came to the literatures of trauma and affect, which have provided me with a means of removing the bandage and moving towards the cause of injury. The remainder of this chapter focuses situating this work within the disciplines of trauma studies and affect theory while also establishing a theoretical framework that will be used to answer the questions posed above.

1.2 Introducing the Theory

This chapter focuses on an analysis of the emergence of trauma studies through the examination of key foundational texts such as Cathy Caruth’s introduction to her edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, her follow-up monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Shoshana Felman’s “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” and Dori Laub’s “Truth and Testimony: The Process and The Struggle” and “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” The aim of
this analysis is to establish a groundwork for understanding how trauma studies has developed from these texts and how core theoretical concepts are debated. While thinking about trauma has emerged in myriad disciplines, most prominently within Freud’s psychoanalysis, it is in the works of Caruth, Felman, and Laub that one can establish a sort of watershed moment in the formation of trauma studies as a field because of the sustained effects their works have on how theorists continue to approach trauma. I will also examine some of the works of contemporary trauma theorists like Jeffrey Alexander, Ann Cvetkovich, and Robert Luckhurst to show how, even through their resistance against and expansion of discourses of trauma, the work of these theorists can be traced back to Caruth’s, Felman’s, and Laub’s original works and how those works themselves can be traced back to psychoanalysis.

This overview of some of the key foundational texts will situate this work within an ongoing debate over the status of knowledge claims made within trauma studies, frequently seen as a conflict between historicist and psychoanalytic approaches. For instance, Stef Craps charges Caruth and her contemporaries with creating what he calls an “events-based model” of trauma that posits that trauma is brought about by one particularly catastrophic event that can be located at a specific point in time (31). Within an events-based model of trauma, then, there is an essentialist approach to what gets to be considered traumatic that forecloses experiences of trauma that are not irreducible to an event. Indeed, as Craps argues, “Unlike structural trauma, racism is historically specific; yet, unlike structural trauma, it is not related to a particular event, with a before and an after” (32). What is ultimately argued here is that there is a lack of historicization of trauma. However, historicizing trauma is not a catch-all solution, at best, such a
historicization would put forth the idea of a continuous and stable ontology of trauma that is applicable transhistorically, which is not the case (Luckhurst 19). As Luckhurst argues, following Foucault, any attempt to trace histories in such a way—that is, a genealogical account of a concept—must be attuned to how these ideas emerge in different contexts and evoke different meanings depending upon their contextual emergence (1). To this end, I follow Luckhurst’s assertion that “trauma is a concept that can only emerge within modernity, tracing it as an effect of the rise, in the nineteenth century, of the technological and statistical society that can generate, multiply and quantify the ‘shocks’ of modern life” (19). Thus, a return to psychoanalytic thinking is required to parse out the particularities of trauma itself.

In a return to psychoanalysis, I am thinking through how psychoanalysis, in Ranjana Khanna’s (re)reading of the discipline, is important “in the world today as a reading practice that makes apparent the psychical strife of colonial and post-colonial modernity” (x) and that psychoanalysis has the potential to be “the means through which contingent postcolonial futures can be imagined ethically” (xii). Such an assertion would appear to push against the argument that Craps makes of trauma, and one would be correct in reading Khanna’s work in such a way. In returning to psychoanalytic thought, I argue that an approach to trauma that seeks to fix trauma in history and in time fails to account for how trauma works psychoanalytically. In reading the critiques of trauma studies against psychoanalytic readings of trauma, the fissures in the argument put forth by Craps become more apparent because of how the argument itself hinges upon an understanding of trauma in which the totality of trauma itself is rendered legible.

However, while I do not think that Craps’s argument holds true, the question of what
counts as traumatic is an important one that calls into question how trauma circulates and precisely how events come to be seen as traumatic.

How might an account be made for the ways in which trauma circulates? I believe that conceptualizing trauma alongside affect in the wake of a return to psychoanalysis will help to answer that question. Buelens, Durrant, and Eagleson, following Luckhurst’s argument that “trauma is also always a breaching of disciplines” (4), not tied down to notions of a binary of psychic or somatic, neither fully material nor discursive, argue that trauma occupies a space in which “currents meet” (1). That is to say, thinking about trauma necessitates thinking in an interdisciplinary way precisely because of the ways in which trauma crosses boundaries. Thinking of the various starting points for conceiving trauma as water currents that are constantly flowing together and against each other, yet, amidst the turbulence, are still fundamentally connected, is an appropriate way to begin thinking about how affective trauma is.

In thinking about trauma, psychoanalysis, and affect, I am drawn to Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson’s configuration of traumatic affect. As a coalescence of trauma and affect, traumatic affect is attuned to the metaphorical conceptualization of trauma as flowing like water, and in this attunement allows one to think of trauma as a spectrum or a continuum wherein the personal cannot be severed from the collective. Such a thinking of trauma in such a way is imperative to both Craps’s argument against Caruth’s approach to trauma and my counterargument against a historicist approach to trauma because, fundamentally, both arguments are concerned with subjectivity and trauma. According to Atkinson and Richardson, traumatic affect defies a certain unitary definition and is best understood as a mode of analysis:
Traumatic affect can, however, be understood as the mode, substance and dynamics of relation through which trauma is experienced, transmitted, conveyed, and represented. Traumatic affect crosses boundaries, between personal and political, text and body, screen and audience, philosophy and culture. It is not a prescriptive and contained concept, but an open one. Rather than narrowing the meaning of its constitutive terms, traumatic affect brings them into relation in dynamic and surprising ways, sometimes discovering spaces in between that refuse to conform to either.

(12)

What, then, is the promise of traumatic affect in discussions of subjectivity? It is precisely in how traumatic affect seeks to map the trajectories of trauma and affect that will help give an account of trauma that is attentive to the ways in which subjects are produced within projects focused on experiences of trauma. More precisely, thinking through traumatic affect will aid in tracing and analyzing the affective attachment to trauma. What I outline in the remainder of this chapter will expand upon my initial musings here to form a theoretical framework, a formative reading practice that will flow through the rest of this thesis.

1.3 The Events-Based Model of Trauma

Trauma studies, as a distinct school of thought, emerged most immediately out of psychoanalytic practice and theory, particularly through the works of Sigmund Freud. As a school of thought distinct from psychoanalysis, however, trauma studies did not gain much traction until the inclusion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980 (Caruth, *Trauma*
The inclusion of PTSD in the DSM emerged as a response to the horrific nature of war, namely the Second World War (1939-1945) and the Vietnam War (1955-1975) (Caruth, *Trauma* 3). The inclusion of trauma in the DSM is significant for two reasons: it at once extended the definition of trauma beyond the realm of survivors of war to numerous other horrible incidents. Beyond the extension of a definition, this introduction also functioned to disrupt the understanding of trauma in that while the expansion of what could be conceived as traumatic in terms of pathology, the expansion itself made trauma much more difficult to address in terms of curing the pathology (Caruth *Trauma* 3-4). It is in this explosion of discourses on trauma where Caruth explicates notions of the traumatic event and the traumatic experience. Trauma, as Caruth establishes, cannot be defined solely by the event precisely because the event itself does not necessarily traumatize everyone equally. In conceptualizing trauma, there is a need to address both the event and its witness(es); that is, the structure of the traumatic experience is where one finds trauma. Indeed, as Caruth writes, “The pathology consists, rather, in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (*Trauma* 4-5 original emphasis). Thus, the notion of an events-based model of trauma becomes established in the explication that trauma is understood in the experience of the event; the possession that Caruth refers to engenders the idea of trauma as an event.

The move to consider trauma as an event, then, establishes trauma as a question of history (*Trauma* 5). As a question of history in the terms of an events-based model, trauma becomes tied to a specific historical moment. For Caruth, “The traumatized, we
might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Trauma 5). Trauma, then, is not something that one has knowledge of, even through the structure of its experience, but rather trauma “itself possesses, at will, the one it inhabits, [and] often produces a deep uncertainty as to its very truth” (Caruth, Trauma 6). Important to thinking about trauma is thinking about it in terms of its latency; there is the initial forgetting of the traumatic experience as the event itself occurs, but the experience of the event inevitably returns. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, Caruth asserts that not only does the event return, but it does so against the will of the survivor (Trauma 6). Freud speaks of this when he writes of war neuroses: “Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (qtd in Caruth, Trauma 5). The latency of trauma, this initial forgetting, points to a key function in Caruth’s formulation: trauma’s temporality (Trauma 8). The temporality of trauma is not something that Caruth coined on her own, rather, trauma’s temporality can be linked back to Freud’s work. Over the course of his work—Caruth specifically invokes the thinking in Project for a Scientific Psychology (1895) and Moses and Monotheism (1939)—Freud would engage with the notions of temporality and latency. He was primarily concerned with, as Caruth writes, “the way in which trauma is not a simple or single experience of events but that events, insofar as they are traumatic, assume their force precisely in their temporal delay” (Trauma 9). That is to say, again, that trauma itself cannot truly be known, that trauma as an event is itself inaccessible. This leaves the question of how to access the inaccessible, how to know the impossible. Yet, given trauma’s latency and its tendency to return
against the will of the survivor, one might alter the question to ask how do you contend with trauma accessing you.

These epistemological concerns engender a sort of aporia when thinking about trauma. Specifically, these questions highlight the internal conflicts in thinking about trauma, for if trauma cannot be known or accessed, then how do we think about traumatic events? Moreover, how do we begin to write or speak about something that we cannot say? The sort of disjunctive quality of Caruth’s interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis as it relates to trauma invokes what Shoshana Felman calls a “crisis of truth” (Education 17). In “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching”, Felman reflects upon a course she taught on literature and testimony in which she had her students engage with the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. It is within the interactions Felman has with her students and her own self-reflexivity where the answers to the aporia of trauma lay.

Felman calls the act of testimony “that of bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma” (Education 13). Testimony gives way to thinking about how trauma circulates and how we relate to catastrophic events (Education 16). Felman points out that testimony does not offer an all-encompassing recounting of the traumatic event; crucially, the event itself is inaccessible. Rather, since the memory of the traumatic event returns against the will of the survivor, the survivor can only ever give a glimpse into the memories of an overwhelming event:

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed
as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. (*Education* 16)

It is clear, then, that by being in excess of our frames of reference the trauma returns against the will of the survivor, but does not return in full, rather only in the fragments of a memory. Testimony offers a method through which these fragments can be assembled and assimilated into a frame of reference; assimilated yet still imperfect precisely because memories are as such only a reflection of the event and not the event itself. While testimony might offer a means through which trauma can be witnessed, it is still plagued by aporia. Thus, testimony is conceived as a “discursive practice, as opposed to a pure *theory*” (*Felman, Education* 17 original emphasis). Testimony, then, is inherently a narrative practice and is encumbered with the notion of speech acts: “To *testify*—to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one’s own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement” (*Felman* 17, *Education* original emphasis). As a speech act, then, testimony becomes less a statement of what is known to be true than it is a narrative mode through which the truth of trauma might be accessed.

The move to consider testimony as a narrative mode, rather than as establishing a sort of objective truth, is heavily influenced by Freud’s own work on dreams and wish fulfillment. Felman points to the second chapter of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which focuses on the Irma Dream: a recurring dream in which Freud is distraught about the incomplete treatment of his patient, the dream’s namesake, Irma (*Education* 22). Responding to this sort of recurrence, Freud takes to writing down everything he can in relation to the dream, including his own thoughts and feelings of Irma’s treatment.
Through this sort of confessional mode, Freud comes to understand dreams as a means of wish fulfillment: “Thus its content was the fulfillment of a wish and its motive was a wish” (Freud qtd. in Felman, Education 22 original emphasis).

Testimony can thus be understood to exist in relation to confession. However, there is a key distinction to be made between notions of testimony and notions of confession because the two, while similar, are not identical. Confession can be envisioned, and Felman’s work points to this direction, as a vehicle through which the content of the testimony can be transmitted (Education 23). It is not that one confesses their trauma and that acts as a sort of mode of testimony that is readily assimilated into one’s own psyche, rather, the testimony is found by the clinician within the confessional. The parsing out of the differences between confessional and testimony in Freud’s work allows for the establishment of a more dialogical process whereby there is not a strict binary of patient and clinician, but rather both are, at once, engaging in reciprocal roles. The reciprocal relationship here is what is termed psychoanalytic dialogue: “an unprecedented kind of dialogue in which the doctor’s testimony does not substitute itself for the patient’s testimony, but resonates with it, because, as Freud discovers, it takes two to witness the unconscious” (Felman, Education 24 original emphasis). The effect of this sort of reciprocal relationship, then, does not necessarily fall back on traditional clinician-patient power dynamics. However, it does not imply that this relationship has no power dynamics, it certainly does. Bearing witness, especially in terms of psychoanalytic dialogue, is key in the work of testimony. Indeed, as Felman establishes:

Psychoanalysis, in this way, profoundly rethinks and radically renews the very concept of the testimony, by submitting, and by recognizing for the
first time in history of culture, that one does not have to possess, or own the truth, in order to effectively bear witness to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, as truth that is, essentially, not available to its own speaker. (24, Education original emphasis)

Here the notion of bearing witness to one’s trauma is put to the forefront. An important concept indeed, for it allows for a connection between Felman and Caruth’s own interpretations of Freud’s insights. The idea that the truth is not available to the speaker and requires another to listen and to witness directly ties into how Caruth conceptualizes, through Freud, trauma’s latency as something that cannot be known until after the fact, through its repetition. Thus, the psychoanalytic dialogue established in Freud’s work forms the basis of what can be called an events-based model of trauma through which trauma is conceptualized as an event in one’s life. However, as Felman shows, to access trauma there needs to not only be an instance of testimony, but an instance of witnessing as well. It is important to note that there is an intact temporality here that indicates that the trauma did happen at a certain time. However, during the latency period of trauma, it is as if the event has not yet occurred and thus is not yet signifiable. While bearing witness does allow for access to trauma, the trauma itself remains unstable.

The idea of bearing witness emerges prominently in the writings of psychoanalyst Dori Laub, specifically in his essay in Caruth’s collection: “Truth and Testimony: The Process and The Struggle”. Reflecting on his experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust, Laub constructs three interdependent levels of witnessing: witnessing one’s
self during the experience, witnessing another’s testimony, and being a witness to
witnessing (61-62). These three levels of witnessing are necessary for Laub, for the
witness only witnessing their own trauma is insufficient because by experiencing the
event, or, as Laub writes, “being inside the event” (66 original emphasis), they are at once
a witness and a non-witness. Laub expands on the incomprehensibility of the traumatic
event in positing that “there are never enough words or the right words, there is never
enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to
articulate the story that cannot be fully capture in thought, memory, and speech” (63
original emphasis). In highlighting the simultaneous subject position of both witness and
non-witness that the survivor occupies, Laub’s work is important in further establishing
both Felman’s and Caruth’s argument that there needs to be a witness to the witnessing.
For Laub, the telling of trauma is necessitated by the survivor’s imperative to tell their
story (63-64). The process of telling, however, is fraught with the impossibility of telling
in such a way that “the pressure thus continues unremittingly, and if words are not
trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the
struggle to tell continues” (63). Put differently, there needs to be someone to listen to the
testimony of the latent trauma, even if, as Laub argues, there is never enough or the right
kind of listening. Thus, the telling of one’s trauma and the listening of the other allows
for access to the truth of the testimony and, by proxy, the truth of the experience.

For Laub, trauma cannot be known by the witness alone. Referencing the horrible
nature of the Holocaust, Laub claims that because the events of the Holocaust were so
overwhelming, there was in fact no self that was in existence during the event that
experienced the trauma:
And indeed, against all odds, attempts at bearing witness did take place; chroniclers of course existed and the struggle to maintain the process of recording and of salvaging and safeguarding evidence was carried on relentlessly . . . However, these attempts to inform oneself and inform others were doomed to fail . . . The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event—of its dimensions, consequences, and above all, its radical otherness to all known frames of reference—that it was beyond the limits of the human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine. (68 original emphasis)

It is precisely in this moment that the witnessing of another’s trauma becomes important. Testimony can make up for the need of a witness during the event by allowing survivors to bear witness to their trauma belatedly. In this process, both the witness to the trauma—the survivor—and the witness to the witnessing—the listener—form a joint relationship and take on the responsibility for producing the truth of the event (Laub 69).

In Laub’s “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening” the relationship of the survivor and listener is explored. When one listens to a narrative of trauma, one at once “comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma himself” (57). Although a sort of co-owner of the trauma, the listener still maintains a distance from the traumatic event. In effect, the listener of trauma at once witnesses both their own witnessing and the trauma witness. In this dual witnessing, testimony is formed as a distinct event of its own. As Laub writes, “knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given
that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own
right” (62). Though, as Laub, Felman, and Caruth have pointed to in their writings,
trauma can never be captured or truly known, bearing witness to one’s own traumatic
experience, and having a listener present, can help one to know the event. By knowing
the event, the survivor may construct a narrative that works to externalize the traumatic
event itself so that it may be transmitted and assimilated into one’s understanding, thus
resolving the crisis through the work of reparation (Laub 69).

Caruth expands upon notions of bearing witness and the testimony of trauma in
*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. In this book, Caruth more
clearly crystalizes her theory of trauma, one that, as will be illustrated later on, flows
through much of the literature on trauma. More specifically, she expands upon how
trauma is a question of history. Using Torquato Tasso’s epic poem “Jerusalem
Delivered,” Caruth introduces readers to the poem’s main characters in Tancred and
Clorinda, and focuses on how Tancred unknowingly kills Clorinda and how this event is
paramount for the understanding of trauma as a wound inflicted upon the mind
(*Experience* 3). The deployment of Tasso’s story by Caruth is meant to show how the
wound speaks out about the encounter, which is meant to illustrate the notions of bearing
witness and trauma’s latency. For Caruth, the voice of Clorinda represents the witness to
a traumatic history that Tancred cannot ever fully know on his own. The theoretical
underpinnings of Caruth’s work in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, and in the texts
addressed above from Felman and Laub, come through in Caruth’s development of “the
voice of the other,” for which Caruth suggests “we can also read the address of the voice
here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the
story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another” (Experience 8). Caruth, Felman, and Laub all touched on this in their earlier contributions to ideas of bearing witness and testimony. Taking the German-to-English translation of Freud’s own Moses and Monotheism as central to her understanding and development of a theory of trauma, Caruth writes: “In the rewriting of the departure within the languages of Freud’s text, that we participate most fully in Freud’s central insight, in Moses and Monotheism, that history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Experience 23-24).

What is offered, then, from the foundational texts by Caruth, Felman, and Laub are both epistemological and ontological commentaries on trauma. From their works, it is understood that trauma as an event exists beyond the register of human experience; that is, the traumatic event is beyond comprehension and cannot be assimilated as experience, thus it only returns against the will of the survivor via fragmented memories. Consequently, due to this latency, trauma cannot be known by the witness alone, but rather requires the witnessing of another. It is through this requirement of another’s witnessing that the ideas of bearing witness and testimony are given breadth. Finally, it is through the necessity of the voice of another where the model of trauma here has its most critical promise: “In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (Trauma 11). The promise here is powerful, and is echoed in Caruth’s quotation above concerning the German-to-English translation of Freud’s Moses and Monotheism. What is at stake in the claims being made here is not just a
theory of what trauma is and how one can come to know it, but a fundamental changing
of the traumatic subject through the assimilation of the traumatic experience.
Psychoanalysis, then, is as Caruth suggests, “no longer simply a statement about others,
but is itself a complex act, and statement of survival” (9 Trauma original emphasis).

These core ideas have influenced and continue to influence how scholars
categorize trauma. For instance, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Laura Brown
challenges the notion that trauma exists outside the range of human experience. Calling
into question notions of human experience, Brown questions beyond whose experience
does trauma exist (100). By not qualifying what is meant by the assertion human
experience, by not qualifying what is meant by human, “The range of human experience
becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class;
white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class Christian men” and so “trauma is thus
that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other” (101). Brown points to
how, for instance, the atrocities of war and genocide are conceptualized as traumatic,
while, on the other hand, events such as domestic abuse are not seen to be as traumatic.
Indeed, as Brown argues, survivors of war are treated quite differently than women who
are abused in their homes, with the former being seen as victims of chance and the latter
as somehow contributing to their own situation (102). The crux of this assertion relies on
the belief that trauma is only ever incidental and never caused. When the onus for the
traumatic experience is placed on the victim of trauma the event itself is not seen as
traumatic and does not disrupt the range of what is considered to be human experience.
Instead, these sorts of events are imagined as “a continuing background noise rather than
an unusual event” (103). Brown points to how theorists have been pushing back against
this sort of gatekeeping of trauma by changing how one might begin to think of trauma. For instance, Diana Russell calls the incestuous abuse of women a “secret trauma” and Maria Root calls the effects of various forms of oppression “insidious trauma” (Brown 101, 107). Challenging the content of trauma in such a way allows for the expansion of what is considered as traumatic. While Brown offers an insightful critique of what gets to be classified as traumatic—the content—she still, like Caruth, Felman, and Laub, conceives of trauma as manifesting in an event. It is the construction of trauma as an event that has continued to shape how contemporary theorists of trauma conceptualize trauma and where the critique of an events-based model manifests.  

1.4 The Events-Based Model in Contemporary Trauma Studies

I now turn to the ways in which contemporary theorists of trauma are articulating their own views that, in keeping with the metaphor of water, flow together, against each other, and separately within the larger body of trauma literature. My main concern here is how the ideas of Caruth, Felman, and Laub have been taken up by contemporary theorists in a discursive shift from talking about the trauma of the individual to the trauma of collectives. Attentive to the metaphorics of water that I am suggesting, this is not to say that this shift marks a distinctive change in the theorization of trauma. Brown’s work concerns the collective suffering of women living under patriarchy and Laub’s work concerns the collective suffering of racialized people in death camps. Rather, I am suggesting that while these currents are flowing simultaneously, they do not necessarily

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3 The trend of an events-based model of trauma can also be read in texts such as Kali Tal’s 1996 text Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma and in Kirby Farrell’s 1998 text Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties.
flow together. Also, particularly concerning is the sort of meaning making produced from a theory of collective trauma that emerges from these streams of thought.

Contemporary trauma theorists note how the introduction of trauma—as PTSD—into the DSM in 1980 marked a distinct shift in the understanding of trauma. For example, Roger Luckhurst asserts that the continual expansion of what could be considered a cause of PTSD throughout successive iterations of the DSM has moved from an individual focus wherein trauma may only be attributed to those involved—survivors of trauma—to an allowance for the consideration of ‘secondary’ victims, those who are near the traumatic event yet do not experience the event itself, like rescue workers or bystanders (1). In the wake of this expansion, there has been a stronger focus on sociological understandings of trauma as something that is experienced by collectives. It is not the case that trauma was never conceived to be inflicted upon groups of people, as Freud’s own Moses and Monotheism (1939) and Civilization and Its Discontents (1930) both conceptualize trauma at the level of the collective. As Luckhurst writes, “collectives, whether they are political activists, survivor groups, or ethnic, regional or national formations unite around the re-experiencing of their woundedness” (1-2). Demonstrating this sort of uptake of collective trauma Jeffrey Alexander argues, “the cultural construction of collective trauma is fuelled by individual experiences of pain and suffering, but it is the threat to collective rather than individual identity that defines the suffering at stake” (2 my emphasis). The understanding of trauma and the event, as outlined above, is in the construction of the collective, applied more broadly to groups of people through the collective suffering of individuals. In this sort of cultural construction
there is an appropriation of the discourse of trauma illustrated by Caruth, Felman, and Laub. In differentiating the individual from the collective, Alexander asserts:

\[ \text{Individual victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defenses are overcome, bring pain into consciousness so they are able to mourn. For collectivities, it is different. Rather than denial, repression, and ‘working through,’ it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there. A ‘we’ must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts danger.} \]

(3 original emphasis)

The creation of a collective ‘we’ engenders the idea that cultural traumas, as Ron Eyerman argues, “are not things, but processes of meaning making and attribution . . . cultural traumas are made, not born” (43). Alexander supports the idea of collective traumas being created in how he describes the transformation of individual trauma into collective trauma as being the work of culture (3-4). That is to say, the wound inflicted is not one upon the body or the mind of the individual, but the collection of wounds inflicted upon individuals that is then transposed into a wound inflicted upon the collective.

The discursive shift from individual trauma to collective trauma is not only because of a yearning to create a collective identity as a means of acknowledgment of trauma, but also because of the limits of narratability of individual trauma. As previously noted, the formative texts on trauma theory, as well as the psychoanalytic methodology upon which they base their claims, assert that trauma cannot be known as it is lived
through; one cannot properly grasp the horrific nature of the event as it is experienced precisely because it is horrific. The extension of the trauma to the witness and the witnessing witness—the one who witnesses the trauma survivor’s witnessing—provides the ground upon which the expansion of individual trauma to collective trauma can be made. There is no severing of individual and collective trauma, rather, it is important to note that “the wounds that incur are collective and social as much as they are individual” (Eyerman 43). However, the processes by which the identification with the collective occur are not unilateral. As Fanon demonstrates, and as later chapters will extrapolate, an identification with the collective is something that can be forced upon one’s self. For instance, with regards to the violence of racialization Fanon argues that “the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye” (Black Skin 89). The Other for Fanon is the white man and colonizer and the process of racialization at once detaches one from one’s body and “as a result, the body schema, attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema” that also disorganizes the psyche, resulting in Fanon questioning “where should I put myself from now on?” (Black Skin 92, 94). From Fanon’s work, it can be established that the formation of collective identities can itself be traumatic.

Thinking about collective trauma is not new. As previously mentioned, Laura Brown offers critiques of trauma discourse and adapts Maria Root’s concept of insidious trauma to describe how different marginalized groups are made to be hyper aware of the threat of potential trauma (107). Again, as previously mentioned, there is still a focus on the resolution of a traumatic event that leads to the healing of the individual. The move to considerations of collective trauma necessarily entails a rethinking of how trauma ought
to be resolved. Specifically, how might a group go about doing the work of reparation? Who is it doing the reparative work and for whom?

Alongside this more recent shift towards collective understandings of trauma came a consequent shift away from individual medicalized models of trauma. One site where this shift is perhaps most prominent is in queer trauma. In *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* Ann Cvetkovich advocates for an understanding of trauma that is not reducible to medicalized models that have historically marginalized queer people and people of color. For Cvetkovich, a consideration for queer forms of trauma involves “ways of thinking about trauma that do not pathologize it, that seize control over it from the medical experts, and that forge creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions” (3).

Cvetkovich’s move to depathologize trauma is analogous to Brown’s interrogation of what is encompassed under the phrase ‘human experience’. Both seek to challenge the primacy given to those traumatic events that are registered as especially catastrophic, namely war and genocide. That is not to remove the status of either war or genocide as being traumatic, but rather to highlight that which gets excluded or, as Cvetokich puts it “slip[s] out of the picture” in discussions of the traumatic (3). Exemplifying the discursive shift from individual to collective, Cvetkovich situates her work in cultural responses to queer trauma that focuses on how queer people respond to traumas inflicted upon a queer collective. To document these responses, Cvetkovich formulates the namesake of her book, an archive of feelings: “An exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotion, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (7).
Archives of trauma are necessarily complex and unorthodox because of trauma’s own complexity. Thus, the memory of trauma can exist in multiplicitous and multifarious fragmented forms. Indeed, trauma is not found only in spoken narrative of the witness, but can be found in cultural artifacts that are themselves imbued with memories of the past (Cvetkovich 7-8). In the archival assemblage of trauma, Cvetkovich argues that gay and lesbian cultures bear a striking resemblance to the unconventional archives of trauma in that both are products of a hidden history. Whereas grassroots political activism has formed archives of histories of gay and lesbian cultures, other movements have focused on the preservation of other traumatic histories such as the Holocaust and slavery (Cvetkovich 8). Through grassroots activism that seeks to establish an archive—a collective cultural memory—Cvetkovich’s work is invested in the examination of what she terms “trauma cultures,” which are “public cultures that form in and around trauma” (9). Following the work of queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, Cvetkovich, while interested in material archives, is also interested in a more ephemeral archival formation that emerges from queer cultural spaces that are built around thinking about sex, feelings, and trauma.

Cvetkovich’s work is an excellent account of how queer identities and resistances to medicalized models of trauma can, and indeed do, exclude people. Furthermore, the resonances of Caruth’s, Felman’s, and Laub’s work echo through Cvetkovich’s as there is still a focus on how events bear the marker of trauma. For instance, one of the sites of trauma that Cvetkovich takes as foundational to her work is the AIDS crisis. In pointing to how, even within queer activism, some deaths are given more attention than others and that homophobia is taken as the focal point of the trauma, there is again a focus on a
distinct and discrete moment in history, in this case the AIDS crisis. Thus, much like the critiques Brown brings forth in her work, Cvetkovich seeks to disrupt and expand upon the ways in which trauma gets discussed.

A documentation of some of the foundational ideas in trauma studies literature as well as an account for more contemporary literature shows that the ontological and epistemological claims being made about trauma in the earlier works are reified in the latter. Predominantly, what has carried through from psychoanalytic thought, to the foundational texts of trauma theory, to contemporary models of trauma that shift focus from the individual to the collective, is the idea of trauma as an event. Not only as an event, but an event of the past, one that occurs and then leaves traces that forcefully return as fragmented memories, which are later to be resolved and assimilated into experience. One might be compelled to assert that the claims being made here are that trauma can only be known afterwards and that the event itself exists in the past. This sort of thinking is understandable when thinking through how trauma itself is a question of history. However, this is not the case as trauma exists in a way that does not adhere to a normative temporality of past-present-future. Rather, as established above from Caruth’s readings of Freud, trauma is more akin to an ongoing process that is continually returning and the subject is structured in relation to the trauma; while one might be able to assimilate the event back into experience, the trauma does not disappear and the wound is not healed—trauma is haunting. The following section will engage with critiques of trauma that themselves seem to be focused on conceptualizing trauma as something to be understood within a normative temporal framework of past-present-future.
1.5 Troubling the Events-Based Model

Despite Caruth’s formulation of trauma as a question of history, her original texts have been criticized in how they do little to historicize trauma. The standard critique here is as follows: trauma is not irreducible to an event-based model because an event-based model does not account for various forms of trauma that do not necessarily have a before and after. Stef Craps provides an interesting critique of an events-based model of trauma in *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds*. For Craps, the foundational texts of trauma studies fail to live up to Caruth’s promise of cross-cultural engagement and solidarity in the face of disparate yet converging histories. Specifically, they fail on four accounts:

- They marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures,
- they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity,
- they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and
- they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas. (2)

Thus, contrary to the critical promise of trauma theory, there is more of a risk of (re)producing marginalizing narratives resulting in the continued oppression of, in Craps’ terms, non-Western and minority peoples. The violence of racialization that Fanon points to, and as I quote in the previous section, is an example of this process. In Fanon’s formulations, Black people, through the violence of racialization are constructed as a collectivity as seen through the eyes of the white Other. Dwight McBride’s analysis
of the ways in which slave testimonies are used to create a cohesive and homogenous narrative that itself reproduces marginalization extends this line of thinking. For, as he explains, “this logic goes far toward explaining why white bodies can signify individuality and why black bodies—with their limited access to the category of the individual—almost always signify as representative bodies” (11). For McBride, this sense of collectivity can be both legitimizing in the way that a collective understanding of trauma can help it make sense, yet limiting in how collectivity has the potential to “make it virtually impossible to speak of the self solely as an individual” (10). Thus, it is important to pay particular attention to who is telling stories and for whom they are telling these stories.

One of the primary sites of analysis of Caruth’s that Craps critiques is her use of Tasso’s “Jerusalem Delivered.” Specifically, Craps critiques how she does not properly historicize the characters Tancred and Clorinda. Where Freud reads the scene of Tancred unwittingly killing Clorinda as being indicative of trauma’s repetition, Caruth reads further in drawing attention to the voice of the wound. In doing so, Caruth places Tancred as the survivor of trauma, which, as Craps argues, obfuscates the wound inflicted upon Clorinda (15). More than obfuscation, Craps argues that in order for Caruth’s argument that the voice of the wound is, in this case, also the voice of Clorinda, there is a rewriting of the wound and subsequent trauma: “Caruth thus effectively rewrites the wound inflicted upon Clorinda as the trauma suffered by Tancred” (15). For Craps though, it is

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4 Craps cites Ruth Leys’s Trauma: A Genealogy, Amy Novak’s chapter “Who Speaks? Who Listens? The Problem of Address in Two Nigerian Trauma Novels” in Postcolonial Trauma Novels, and Michael Rothberg’s Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization as critiques of Caruth’s use of Tancred and Clorinda as being fundamental in formulating his own critique.
not merely the obfuscation of Clorinda’s own wound and the rewriting of Clorinda’s wound as Tancred’s trauma that is troubling, rather it is the erasure of the fact that Caruth does not make clear in her writing that Clorinda is an Ethiopian woman being killed by a European crusader, Tancred. Contrary to Caruth’s initial promise of cross-cultural engagement and that one’s history is never simply one’s own, her reading of Tancred and Clorinda all but silences the violence inflicted upon Clorinda. Indeed, as Craps argues, there is a “tendency to turn violence inflicted upon a non-European other into a mere occasion for the exploration of the exemplary trauma suffered by the—in terms of Freud’s argument—European subjects responsible for that violence, which itself becomes obscured in the process” (17). Edward Said’s lecture “Freud and the Non-European” takes up this point of the obfuscation of European violence. Indeed, as Said notes, Freud’s own understanding and interpretation of non-European cultures bears a “peculiarly ‘Western’ stamp” (14). Rather than a limiting factor of his work, Said argues that this places Freud within a particular time and place, for “his whole work in that sense is about the Other,” however, this understanding is itself couched in Freud’s own understandings of “the classics of Graeco-Roman and Hebrew Antiquity and what was later to derive from them in various modern European languages, literatures, sciences, religions and cultures with which he himself acquainted” (14). Important for this analysis is Said’s assertion and question that “it is true to say that Freud’s was a Eurocentric view of culture—and why should it not be?” (16). Freud’s own understanding of the world is one that is structured by a Eurocentric bias precisely because of the time in which Freud was working. However, Freud’s arguments, as Said points out, do not place an “insurmountable barrier between non-European primitives and European civilization,” but rather “what may have
been left behind historically catches up with us in such universal behaviours as the prohibition against incest, or—as he characterizes it in *Moses and Monotheism*—the return of the repressed” (20). My point here is that while Freud’s own work does come with Eurocentrism, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which this Eurocentrism is made apparent, or not, within the works of those who are continuing with Freud’s ideas.

The instance of Caruth ignoring both the wounding of Clorinda and the fact that Clorinda is an Ethiopian woman being wounded by a European crusader illuminates Craps’ central critique of the formative texts in trauma studies: that there is a Eurocentric bias in the centralization of the Holocaust. This centering of the Holocaust is seen throughout the works of Caruth, Felman, Laub, and, as Craps mentions, Dominick LaCapra (10). However, LaCapra recognizes that there is an overemphasis on the Holocaust in trauma studies and that such an overemphasis may result in a denial of more ‘at-home’ 

‘*at-home*’ here refers specifically to the overemphasis on the Holocaust in the United States. The full interview appears as the final chapter of LaCapra’s book *Writing History, Writing Trauma:* “Interview for Yad Vashem (June 9, 1998)” pp. 141-180.
The centrality of Eurocentrism is not incidental in the formative texts that I have mentioned thus far. The concept of trauma itself is a product of Western epistemologies. Allan Young provides an incisive commentary on the historical production of trauma in *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*:

The disorder is not timeless, nor does it possess an intrinsic unity. Rather, it is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented and by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources. (5)

Aforementioned challenges to the hegemony of Western epistemologies of trauma such as the ones launched by Laura Brown illustrate these conditions of production. Indeed, Brown makes a sustained critique of how what gets called ‘trauma’ and what does not is dependent both upon the situation and the person, with the experiences of men—specifically white, Christian, able-bodied, young, middle-class men—given primacy over the experiences of other people. The responses to the normative construction of trauma given by Brown, and by other early feminist trauma theorists, to tend to focus on a politics of sameness whereby the experiences of men and women are compared in terms of equivalence in engendering trauma (Craps 20-21). What, then, does this mean for trauma theory if trauma itself is an artifact of Western thought that tends to center the experiences of certain people? What does a critique of this model do if it only focuses on

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6 Specifically, Craps points to Clare Stocks’s essay “Trauma Theory and the Singular Self: Rethinking Extreme Experiences in the Light of Cross Cultural Identity” in volume 21 issue 1 of *Textual Practice* to ground his claim alongside Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) and Kali Tal’s *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996).
how the traumas of others are like the trauma experienced by the specific category of men Brown is referring to? Such a focus on a politics of sameness erases material differences between people that also contributes to social differences. Craps likens this sort of “uncritical application of psychological concepts” a form of cultural imperialism (22). Drawing on the work of Derek Summerfield, Craps furthers his point by noting that the push towards a universalizing notion of trauma is a form of cultural imperialism that bears a striking resemblance to logics of settler colonialism that rendered Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies as primitive and uncivilized (22-23).

As mentioned earlier, a Western notion of trauma falls under what Craps has termed an “events-based model” of trauma (31). In being a Western artefact, this model of trauma is insufficient in addressing diverse understandings of trauma that cannot be classified under one universalizing epistemological or ontological paradigm. Critiques of this model are not new or surprising as Frantz Fanon predicted the uncritical and apolitical tendencies of a dominant model of trauma focused on an individualizing and pathologizing narrative (Craps 28).

Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* address the psychopathology of racism and colonialism, pointing to a specific forms of colonial trauma that affects both the colonizer and the colonized. Though, to be clear, the affect of colonial trauma is not homogenous. Prior to Fanon’s writings, Aimé Césaire, in *Discourse on Colonialism*, points to the links between the logics of colonialism and the logics of Nazism. He points to how European civilization “takes refuge in a hypocrisy” (31) and that “before they were its victims, they were its accomplices” (36). Furthermore, Césaire remarks that Europeans “tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them,
that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it has been applied only to non-European peoples” (36). What can be gleaned from both Fanon’s and Césaire’s writings is that, yes, trauma is a question of history; however, it is a history that extends beyond the Holocaust. Interestingly, both Fanon and Césaire wrote before the theorists I note above, notably Caruth, yet their own critiques do not appear in her writing. However, they often do appear in the form of critique, which might suggest that the Eurocentric quality of Freud’s own work is embedded within the works of these theorists.

If trauma is a question of history, then, necessarily, it must also be a question of whose history. Which histories are being talked about? Which are left out? Craps stresses that merely engaging with the traumas of others will not resolve the problems posed by an events-based model of trauma. It is not just a lack of engagement that is harmful, but merely engaging with the traumas of others can be appropriative (Craps 14). Rather, there needs to be a focus on recognizing traumas in their own context. Furthermore, as noted above, even if we begin theorizing trauma with the Holocaust, it cannot be severed from its own roots in colonial logics. The severance of the Holocaust from its colonial roots is itself an effect of the project of colonialism. Importantly, it is not Freud’s work that is being criticized here, but rather how it is taken up and written about, and how these processes themselves can be viewed as effects of colonialism. As Fanon argues in The Wretched of the Earth:

Colonialism is not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or of draining the colonized brain of any form or substance. With a kind of perverted
logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it. (149)

As we can see, the sort of individualizing narrative of trauma that is settled on the construction of trauma as having or belonging to a discrete event does not do much to capture the historical particularities that give rise to trauma. This is not to dismiss the work of Caruth, Felman, and Laub; their work is important, especially the point that trauma is a question of history, rather I am seeking to grasp the full breadth of the critique against them. In particular, the charges of constructing an events-based model, of an individual focus on trauma, and of Eurocentrism. These critiques themselves are somewhat codependent on each other in such a way that while they might appear together, they are not necessarily engendered by the other. However, as I will show in the next section, these critiques exhibit a critical failure in the understanding of how trauma is approached psychoanalytically.

1.6 Trauma’s Temporality and Going Against the Historicists

While Craps offers an interesting critique of a structural approach to trauma, I want to suggest that there is an error in the ways in which Caruth’s work is taken up in his writing and thus how his critique of trauma is formed. The push from Craps is for a historicization of trauma so that it may be rendered knowable. However, as previously mentioned, one of the hallmarks of trauma as such is it is not knowable. Trauma itself is always already a retrospective construction that is destabilizing to the subject and thus always epistemologically unsettling. Craps’s analysis hinges upon two theoretical moves that I push back against here: the effort to pinpoint trauma in terms of time and the overall historicist move to know trauma vis-à-vis a Foucauldian genealogical approach.
The move to attempt to historicize trauma is a kind of anachronism in that the psychoanalytic understanding of time is not a normative one, but rather one that is opposed to a sort of genealogical understanding of trauma that is presented in the critique of Caruth’s work. Returning to Freud, “we invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma after the event” (qtd. in Laplanche 41). For Laplanche, and his interpretation of Freud’s texts, this is the heart of Freud’s construction of trauma: “We try to track down the trauma, but the traumatic memory was only secondarily traumatic: we never manage to fix the traumatic event historically . . . in situating the trauma, one cannot appreciate its traumatic impact, and vice versa” (41 original emphasis). In trying to fix trauma as a distinct event within a normative understanding of temporality, one has already made an egregious error. Trauma, though recognized as an event per se, is not really an event at all in terms of a normative temporal understanding of an event that has a distinct before, during, and afterward. Instead, the event of trauma needs to be recognized as unassimilable moments that exist in time, but not in a way that can be fixed to a particular moment in time. As for the memory of the event: “It remains there, waiting in a kind of limbo, in a corner of the ‘preconscious’; the crucial point is that it is not linked to the rest of psychical life” (Laplanche 41). Thus, trauma’s temporality, so to speak, is not one that can be pinned down to a particular moment in time.

In an interview with Caruth, Laplanche expands on trauma and temporality. As I have already established, trauma exists as fragments of memory that return. In Caruth and Laplanche’s understanding of Freud’s work, what is traumatic is the return, or the revivification of “the original implantation” (Caruth Interview). However, much of this
understanding hinges on how Freud’s work is translated into English. This sort of return is based upon the English translation of the German Nachträglichkeit: belatedness. However, Laplanche notes that the French translation is usually après-coup, which itself translates to English as afterwardness. Nonetheless, as is often a problem in translation, neither belatedness nor après-coup fully capture the meaning of Nachträglichkeit, which encapsulates both in Freud’s writing on the temporality of trauma (Caruth Interview). Which further bolsters the claim that trauma cannot be treated as a distinct event with a before, during, and afterwards, yet encompasses all three. Or, as Mitchum Huehls writes, “Trauma is thus not a moment, but instead spans an individual’s temporal continuum, constituting her past, present, and future” (42). In this way, trauma needs to be understood on its own temporal terms.

The push towards historicism can be traced to Foucauldian thinking, particularly the way in which a genealogical approach that seeks to make a case for what we can call the history of the present. In a Foucauldian sense, a genealogical approach entails an examination of how things have come to be articulated in the present based on the conditions of the past. Foucault’s classic example is that of sexuality in his volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. Central to his development of the repressive hypothesis in the first volume is the claim that discourses of sexuality, contrary to popular opinion of the time-period—that being that during the Victorian era—were not repressed, but rather were continuously developed. As Foucault argues,

One had to speak of sex; one had to speak publicly and in a manner that was not determined by the division between licit and illicit, even if the speaker maintained the distinction for himself (which is what these solemn
and preliminary declarations were intended to show): one had to speak of it as a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered. (24)

By examining the discursive history of sexuality, we can trace how sexuality has historically been discussed, studied, organized, categorized, and managed—and thus how it has come to inform how we discuss sexuality today. In this sense, a genealogical approach to trauma would seek to critique the origins of trauma in psychoanalysis as showcased above. However, while the Foucauldian push to such a genealogical approach does well to call into question the content of trauma, yet the urge to fix trauma temporally, as noted above, is misplaced.

One of the most incisive critiques of Foucauldian analysis is Joan Copjec’s Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists. While avoiding a stable definition of historicism, Copjec offers insight into what we might call historicist: “We are calling historicist the reduction of society to its indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge” (6). The primary charge that Copjec makes against Foucault’s work, and historicists that follow him, is against the move to capture all of society as a network of power relations with the “disallowance of any reference to a principle or a subject that ‘transcends’ the regime of power he analyzes” (7). By avoiding an element of transcendence, Foucault thereby reduces society to its power/knowledge relations to render the relations legible as such. It is precisely this element of transcendence that pushes against historicism. As Copjec explains, “some notion of transcendence is plainly
needed if one is to avoid the reduction of social space to the relations that fill it” (7).

Transcendence, for Copjec, specifically pushes against the compulsion of speech that Foucault argues for in his work, specifically the compulsion to speak of a thing to make knowledge claims about said thing. Under Foucault’s arguments, there is no existence of something prior to speaking about it. Copjec formulates this line of thinking thusly:

Something cannot be claimed to exist unless it first can be stated, articulated in language . . . it is a materialist argument parallel to the rule of science which states that no object can be legitimately posited unless one can also specify the technical means of locating it. The existence of a thing materially depends on its being articulated in language, for only in this case can it be said to have an objective—that is to say, verifiable—existence, one that can be debated by others. (7-8)

The sort of dependency upon a linguistic conceptualization is evident in Foucault’s words above concerning sex and sexuality. A Foucauldian interpretation of trauma would also follow suit; one must speak the trauma, articulate it in language, for the trauma to come into existence. The push back against this sort of conceptualization comes through in Copjec’s illustration of transcendence. For Copjec, this element of transcendence is the Lacanian real, which itself cannot be captured by language, but rather exists beyond the scope of language, hence the transcendence. Invoking Lacan, Copjec writes: “The point is rather to heed the lesson the original model had to teach: structures do not—and should not—take to the streets. They are not to be located among the relations that constitute our everyday reality; they belong, instead, to the order of the real.” (11). The real is precisely that which cannot be reduced to the symbolic; that which exists in excess and cannot be
capture in language. Within a Lacanian approach there is an acknowledgement of the failure of a metalanguage, one that speaks the absolute truth, a language that can capture all aspects of reality, and in this recognition is perhaps the most powerful affront to Foucault’s historicism:

For, what we do when we recognize the impossibility of metalanguage is to split society between its appearance—the positive relations and facts we observe in it—and its being, that is to say, its generative principle, which cannot appear among these relations. What we do, in essence, is install society’s generative principle, provide for it a place beyond the realm of positive appearances. Fitted out thus with a generative principle, society ceases to be conceived as a dead structure, mappable on some flat surface; society is finally by this means brought to life. (Copjec 9 original emphasis)

In an effort to understand the particularities of the power-knowledge relations that inform society, the historicist move at once renders society as simply structural. On the other hand, through a psychoanalytic approach, one that recognizes the impossibility of a metalanguage, room for a conceptualization of the being of society as a part of the Lacanian real is made. Consequently, to link with my metaphors of water, we can begin to think about how society is continually forming and moving, and not as a dead structure.

From Laplanche’s and Copjec’s analyses, we can map these same arguments onto an historicist approach to trauma. The historicist approach to trauma does not recognize the split between the appearance of trauma and its being. In doing so, such an approach
renders trauma as simply a structure to be known. Craps’s critique hinges on charging Caruth with a structural-based approach to trauma—the events-based model—yet, in his analysis, he falls into the historicist trap of not recognizing a split between appearance and being. Such a slip is a critical one, for the psychoanalytic texts upon which Caruth and other trauma scholars draw from, like Laplanche’s own reading of Freud, necessitate understanding trauma’s temporality in psychoanalytic terms. In doing so, then, much like the recognition of society as not a dead structure, trauma too can be recognized a something that is continually forming and moving.

While the critique of a structural approach to trauma and the desire to historicize it does not align well with psychoanalysis, the critique itself does engender thoughtful concerns with regards to how the subject is (re)configured within projects of trauma. In particular, if one reforms Craps’s argument to target the appearance of trauma—the observable relations of trauma—then the argument itself is articulated in such a way that does not flatten out the being of trauma. Thus a methodological approach to looking at the ways in which groups deploy trauma narratives, and the critiques of such a deployment, needs to be in tune with the psychoanalytic underpinnings of trauma’s unique ontology and epistemology. More precisely, one must question the ways in which trauma comes to be seen as such and the ways in which knowledge claims are made about it.
1.7 A Note on Method: A Better Story⁷

Amid the different currents of theoretical thought I need to make clear my stake in these variant discourses of trauma. Returning to Cvetkovich, my entry point into these different streams of thinking is with the idea of queer trauma. I am moved by her conceptualization of archives of feelings and imagine the It Gets Better Project as an archive of its own. While Cvetkovich’s move to depathologize trauma is understandable there is a concern brought about by the establishment of a collectivity, precisely who gets included in the newly established ‘we’ of the collectivity. Who creates the collectivity and who are its gatekeepers?

As trauma conceived within the literatures I am addressing is concerned with narrative it would only make sense that the method by which I work my way through this material is one of reading and storytelling. For, as Kalí Tal writes, “literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it ‘real’ both to the victim and to the community” (21). In this way, I am thinking through the It Gets Better Project as its own literature of trauma, as a series of texts to be read. Cvetkovich’s ephemeral archive is useful in providing the groundwork for thinking about the It Gets Better Project as an archive of feelings. Yet, there is a material sense to this archive in that there does exist an electronic repository of videos made available to the public. Of course, the videos themselves can also be found on various video-streaming websites such as YouTube. The conceptualization of a queer collectivity and the establishment of a ‘we’ therein provides a good basis for the interrogation of the

⁷ The title of this section is adapted from Dina Georgis’s monograph The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East.
conditions of the project’s production and for its deployment of trauma-as-affect as a means of congealing an identity centered on being queer. Conceptualizing the It Gets Better Project as an archive—a cultural text—begs the questions: how does one read this archive? What stories and histories does it tell? What stories and histories have been distorted and disfigured? Is there a better story and how might we tell it?

As previously mentioned, not all of Craps’s charges against Caruth specifically, and trauma studies more broadly, are unfounded. In fact, with the reformulating I mentioned in discussing trauma’s temporality we might begin to question just for whom does it supposedly get better and what sort of better might it be getting. To this end, looking at psychoanalysis as a colonial discipline and reading it from a point of view that recognizes it as such à la Fanon and Césaire is helpful in beginning to answer these questions and the questions I have posed throughout this introduction. In illustrating how the formative texts on trauma studies fail in engendering Caruth’s promise of cross-cultural engagement it is imperative to also think through psychoanalysis, specifically Freud’s insights into trauma and his work on melancholy and mourning. Ranjana Khanna’s reading of Freud is useful here, particularly in terms of looking at the discursive shift in trauma studies from the individual to the group. In Dark Continents, Khanna engages in what she calls a project of “worlding” psychoanalysis that “documents the world events through which psychoanalysis was produced, and it also offers a critical reading practice which itself is a product of that initial violent projective saying” (5). Psychoanalysis offers a story, one of political representation and psychical transformation, it “describes the processing of subjects into the larger groups that constitute nation-states” and in doing so psychoanalysis also points to how the
“processing moves the subject from the earth to world, reproduction to production, emotion to signification, and filiation to affiliation at the same time it makes visible the strife that haunts those representational teleologies” (8). As Shoshana Felman describes, drawing from Lacan, psychoanalysis is a practice of reading in which “‘reading’ refers to the analyst’s activity of interpreting, and the emphasis is on the displacement operated by the interpreting . . . what the patient says beyond what he has been incited to say, beyond the current motivation of the situation” (Adventure 21 original emphasis). Through psychoanalysis, then, we can begin to narrate the story of how the move from individual trauma to collective trauma is represented in the It Gets Better Project’s incitement to getting better. It is precisely within this incitement where the move to a collective identity is made. Furthermore, we can begin to make clearer the sort of political and cultural work this maneuver had to do to establish itself as representative of a collectivity.

Dina Georgis points to how stories are valuable “for making insights into collective histories and group identity” and that “[s]tories give us access to the deeply human qualities of how political histories get written from the existential experience of trauma, loss, difficulty, and relationality” (1). Georgis also argues that stories “not only give us insight into social constructs, but also help us understand why we give our ‘selves’ over to collective imaginaries, histories, and identities” (2). Reconfiguring Caruth’s claim that in experiencing trauma we forget the event as it occurs and cannot comprehend it, Georgis puts forward the idea of the ‘better story’ through paying attention to what she calls “ghostly affect” for “[a]s long as ghosts exist, the story is interminable, sketched and resketched from the unassimilated traces of experience and of
being itself’ (11). What ghosts haunt the archive of feelings that I am conceptualizing It Gets Better Project as? What stories do they tell? As Ranjana Khanna argues:

Such a logic of haunting, mourning, and melancholia as part of the structure of the everyday rather than as particularly one of the loss or death of a person, thing, or idea suggests a notion of temporality, historicity, and development that has implications for the understanding of postcolonial temporality of the nation. (270)

The attention to affect, calling back to the introduction of this chapter in which I situate my work within an approach to Atkinson’s and Richardson’s traumatic affect, is important in helping to describe the appearance of trauma; that is, what is observable in the way in which trauma is deployed as affect.

In *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* Ben Anderson describes how affect has, in the wake of what Patricia Clough and Jean Halley⁸ call an affective turn, been deployed in myriad ways and defines affect as:

A heterogeneous range of phenomena that are taken to be a part of life: background moods such as depression, moments of intense and focused involvement such as euphoria, immediate visceral responses of shame or hate, shared atmospheres of hope or panic, eruptions of passion, lifelong dedications of love, fleeting feelings of boredom, societal moods such as anxiety or fear, neurological bodily transitions such as a feeling of aliveness, waves of feeling . . . amongst much else. (5)

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⁸ Anderson is specifically referring to the collection of essays *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* of which Clough and Halley are editors.
Affect thus has a sort of ephemeral quality to it in that it cannot be captured or attached to just one singular phenomenon, yet flows between and through subjects and objects. Affects can and do, however, have particularly sticky qualities. Indeed, as Eve Sedgwick argues, “affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of things, including other affects” (19). I want to link together here Cvetkovich’s archive of feelings with what Ben Anderson calls affective atmospheres to further elucidate the ways in which trauma and affect coalesce under the framing of traumatic affect that I described earlier. According to Anderson, “affective atmospheres are a class of experience that occur before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-between subject/object distinctions” and that “atmospheres are the shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge” (78). If taken together, both archives of feelings and affective atmospheres suggest how trauma-as-affect appears within the It Gets Better Project. However, by grounding my work in a psychoanalytic understanding of trauma, there is no claim to be made in terms of fully grasping the being of trauma. Neither is there a claim to an absolute truth of trauma. An alignment to affect allows for a reading that traces the way in which trauma circulates in the It Gets Better Project and how it is represented. An alignment to psychoanalysis, on the other hand, helps in providing an interpretation of what the circulation of trauma does.

Not only does an alignment of affect and psychoanalysis in a reading practice, a mode of interpreting archives, reveal what is represented, but also it gestures to that which is not there. For Caruth, psychoanalysis is “a thinking of the archive” that
“becomes witness to the strange notion of a memory that erases” (After the End 20 original emphasis). Such an understanding of psychoanalysis in terms of the archive sutures together the various theoretical threads I have established within this framework. For if the It Gets Better Project is taken as an archive in which trauma as affect flows, psychoanalysis, then, is the practice whereby the archive can be read. The following chapter focuses on how the It Gets Better Project produces a notion of queer subjectivity that is always already traumatized and sets out to establish the connection between the making of the traumatized queer subject and the melancholic attachment to the figure of the innocent child.
Chapter 2

Queer Trauma as White Trauma in the It Gets Better Project

“If we listen patiently to the many and various self-reproaches of the melancholic, we will be unable to avoid a sense that the most intense among them often have little to do with the patient himself, but may with slight modifications be adapted to another person whom the patient loves, has loved or is supposed to love” (Freud “Mourning and Melancholia” 315).

“Thus, on the one hand, we can conceive of a victim who has not been traumatized—either because the victimization did not produce the kind of disruption that trauma ought to signify in order to have conceptual purchase, or because the victim has been murdered, as in the case of Clorinda. The dead are not traumatized, they are dead; trauma implies some ‘other’ mode of living on . . . trauma should not be a category that confirms moral value…” (Rothberg 90).

2.1 Introduction

In the introduction to her essay “Coda: The Cost of Getting Better,” Jasbir Puar laments “there are many things lost in the naming of a death as a ‘gay youth suicide’” (149). This chapter seeks to investigate just what is lost in such a naming alongside the question of what sort of subject is made in the space of that which is lost. In writing on the question of “What is lost?” David Eng and David Kazanjian argue that such a question necessarily leads into the question “What remains?” and that “loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained” (2). Furthermore, Eng and Kazanjian establish that “‘loss’ names what is apprehended by discourses and practices of mourning, melancholia, nostalgia, sadness, trauma, and depression” (2). What is, then, named in the lamenting of a ‘queer suicide’? What is lost in such a naming? What remains in the face of such loss?
While the previous chapter focused on establishing a theoretical framework through the notion of traumatic affect, this chapter seeks to establish the method within a specific cultural milieu. Both Atkinson and Richardson warn of two possible problems if this framework is not located within a specific cultural milieu. First, the authors warn of a risk of “translating bodily experience onto whole societies and cultures” (11) in a sort of homogenization of the experience of trauma. Second, the authors point to how there is a possibility of “slipping into an endless field of Deleuzian multiplicities that coalesce, cohere, then erupt, decay or drift apart” (11). To avoid such dangers, there needs to be a grounding of the meaning of affect and trauma in a specific cultural milieu. To ground such a method in reference to the It Gets Better Project is to question the precise context in which the project itself has emerged and how it currently operates.

The first section of this chapter argues that the It Gets Better Project forms under a biopolitical understanding of queer youth suicide that itself is rooted in the power dynamics of the state in the deployment of life and death. Emerging from Foucault’s “biopolitics of the population” wherein “the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death,” I examine the conditions by which the project itself formed and argue that thinking about trauma in terms of the experience of a collectivity allows for the production of a collective “we” through which organization around the wound occurs (139, 138 original emphasis). While making use of Foucault’s concepts, I endeavor to be attentive to how a Foucauldian reading of sexuality itself as “a biopolitics, by which he marked modern regimes that produce subjects of life by deploying state racism to define them apart from populations marked for death” (Morgensen 109). This section also extends Mark
Seltzer’s theory of a wound culture through Anna Gibbs’s and Ben O’Houghlin’s attentions to traumatic affect in an era dominated by social media technologies.

The second section builds upon the groundwork of the first by paying attention to the circulation of trauma and affect in the project. Specific attention is paid to the affective attachment to happiness that sets up a teleological narrative of sadness-to-happiness, which gestures to a process of healing that is easy. The work of Cathy Cohen is used here to mark how such a narrative is reliant upon a singular notion of queer trauma that actively marginalizes those that lay claim to more than just queer as an identity category. Following Cohen, I argue that in the move away from an inclusive conceptualization of queer there is instead a focus predominantly on the white queer subject such that the queer subject is always already both the white subject and the traumatized subject.

The final section critically engages with notions of mourning and melancholia. In particular, a psychoanalytic notion of race, developed in the work of Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, is used to argue that by focusing on the white queer subject the It Gets Better Project, elaborates a melancholic attachment to whiteness where whiteness signifies the wholeness of a subject. Thereby, the work of reparation is the work of the incorporation of whiteness back into the subject. The attachment to the innocent child, then, comes to signify a desirable futurity. Ranjana Khanna’s theory of the work of melancholia illustrates that this desirable futurity, the signification of the innocent child, is in fact a rearticulation of colonial logics via the specter of colonialism that haunts the work of mourning.
2.2 From Individual to Collective: Assigning Suicide and Wound Cultures

In the previous chapter I made note of a discursive shift in thinking of trauma from notions of trauma as an individual experience of suffering to a more collective understanding of suffering as a wound inflicted upon a group. In an urge to remedy the limits of narratability of individual trauma, a push to establish a group identity forms. For, as Alexander argues, “trauma narratives can trigger significant repairs in the civil fabric” and that in such a move “the pivotal question becomes not who did this to me, but what group did this to us?” (2). It is within such a question of trauma I make my entry point into considering the It Gets Better Project as an archive of its own. As Cvetkovich notes, “trauma’s archive incorporates personal memories, which can be recorded in oral and video testimonies, memoirs, letters, and journals” (Archive 7). While trauma may serve as an entry point into the archive that is the It Gets Better Project, I want to engage here with the question of how such an archive came to be. What sorts of conditions made such an emergence possible? Furthermore, how has it become understood that suicide and being queer are somehow mutually constitutive?

In the previous chapter, the counter-argument to a Foucauldian genealogical approach to trauma might indicate a wholesale rejection of Foucauldian thought, I think that Foucault’s insight into the production of subjects through discourse is quite useful here in discussing the productions of a queer subject that is at once traumatized as an effect of being queer. Of note is how, in Foucault’s analysis of sexuality, non-normative sexual identities become knowable through various discourses, such as medical discourses (85). According to Rob Cover in Queer Youth Suicide, Culture and Identity: Unliveable Lives, the ways in which knowledge about queer suicide is disseminated is
primarily through such discourses (2). Specifically, through the dissemination of
statistical reports on queer youth suicide, medical discourses produce what Cover calls a
‘suicidal script’ in which “the link between queer sexuality and suicide is presumed to be
causal” (2). Such an assumption about the causal link of being queer and committing
suicide are not new. Indeed, Cover notes that there has been a proliferation of such
medical publications in the past two decades that show such a link (1). Though Cover
establishes the proliferation of such publications is fairly recent, the linking of sexuality,
mental health, and suicide is much more complex and extends beyond the past two
decades. For Grzanka and Mann, suicide is constructed is something that is, as they
argue, “inextricable from the ways in which we understand the very fabric of the social
and the psyche” (376). The study of suicide is not new, as evidenced by the work of
Émile Durkheim’s 1897 work *Suicide* which posited that suicide is a social problem, yet
the link between suicide and sexuality, as Grzanka and Mann argue, requires slightly
different thinking: “Psychopoliticized *sexuality*, as we illustrate later, serves an affective
capacity that makes a simultaneously psychological and sociological interpretation of
suicide legible” (376 original emphasis). The evidence given for such an association of
queerness with suicidality is that queer youth are often shown to be at a greater risk of
suicide than self-identified heterosexual youth (Cover 1). Cover specifically points to
Paul Gibson’s chapter in the United States Administration’s *Report of the Secretary’s
Task Force on Youth Suicide*, which indicates both that “gay youth are 2 to 3 times more
likely to attempt suicide than other young people” and, consequently, “may comprise up
to 30 percent of completed suicides annually” (Gibson qtd. in Cover 2). The common
conceptualization, then, of the trauma of the suicide of queer youth is to view it as “the
emanation or result of a mental illness . . . one *must surely* be mentally ill to give up on a life” (Cover 9 original emphasis). However, neither Cover nor I am satisfied with such a simplification of the production of queer youth as suicidal. While there might be a statistical link between being queer and suicidality, the causes of such an alleged link are quite complex. Cover’s own argument pushes back against the notion of a causal link between being queer and suicidality:

> However, where this either ignores social factors or relies on the notion of the internalisation of those factors, it leaves aside ways in which both mental illness and suicidality can be understood as co-morbidity emerging from the same social, subjective or environmental factors through which a subject is constituted, as well as the fact that similar suicides do not always result from the same causes. (9)

I want to draw a connection here between Cover’s arguments against a causal link between being queer and suicidality with Copjec’s critique of Foucault. Specifically, Copjec’s own charge that the Foucauldian approach is one that, through the deployment of discourse and the compulsion to speak, rests upon a compulsion to know and to make knowledge claims about an object. The same sort of push towards absolute knowledge claims about the object can be seen here in terms of claiming to know, or more precisely, wanting to know, suicide. Though Cover himself does not draw from Copjec’s work, I think their arguments follow a similar logical pattern. In my estimation, they both seem to be concerned with the flattening out of the difference. It is precisely within this flattening out of different experiences where my analysis of the *It Gets Better Project* can start to emerge. For if one can argue that to be queer is to be traumatized, and if one can give
credence to such a claim through the deployment of medical discourses that suggest the truth of the claim, then, an understanding of a ‘we’ can start to congeal around a collective of people.

Cover is cognizant to the risks here of homogenizing an entire collective. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Cover suggests that we ought to be more attentive to the ways in which queer youth must “negotiate different forms of vulnerability at different times, including sudden, unprecedented and unexpected forms of being made exposed or made weak” (8). Under such conditions, one might suggest that, for queer youth, a higher inclination towards suicidality might be a sort of pre-emptive or belated response to continued traumatic experiences of homophobic violence. Positing such a formulation, Cover suggests that thinking in such a way reveals “the relationship between subjectivity, pain and vulnerability that can lead to suicidality,” such that the lives of queer youth can be constructed as unlivable (8-9).

I want to make it clear here that I do not see this formation of a ‘we’ as something that occurs based on a communal effort of a diverse group, rather, returning to Foucault, this sort of identity is one that is produced for queer subjects. It is within a cultural context, as Alexander suggests, that a group identity forms, and, in this case, it is how a queer identity can be formed. Cover, while, again, not drawing on Copjec, does indeed draw on Foucault to further explain this sort of grouping. Specifically, he invokes Foucault’s notion of biopolitics in an interrogation of the construction of suicide. Cover argues that for Foucault, in discussions of suicide it “is not simply the taking of life, but the talking about life that is at stake” through the deployment of discursive relations of
power and knowledge (9 original emphasis). Suicide, for Foucault, presents a problem to the formulation of disciplinary power:

This determination to die, strange and yet so persistent and constant in its manifestations, and consequently so difficult to explain as being due to particular circumstances or individual accidents, was one of the first astonishments of society in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life. (139)

Through a biopolitical lens, suicide becomes overdetermined as a statistical measure, much in the same way that Foucault points to various measures of life and death used in the calculation of population censuses (Cover 9). In this way, suicide becomes “knowable by the degree to which it occurs, and thus a matter of intervention or prevention determined predominantly by rates and figures” (Cover 9-10). From Foucault’s theory of biopolitics Cover suggests that “as a construct, then, suicide is made intelligible through a range of competing—but not mutually exclusive—discourses that range across the religious, the ethical, the psychiatric, the psychological and the social” and that through this conceptualization of suicide as a construct “suicidality, then, involves a range of behaviors, but a suicide attempt is about a flight from the psychic pain that emerges from the ways in which the subject is located or, indeed, constituted within sociality” (10).

Amidst the discursive flow of power in Cover’s arguments here we can establish the groundwork for the emergence of a “collective we” contingent upon the formation of a subject of violence that experiences violence as an effect of being queer. While Foucault’s own work, and the adaptation of his theories by Cover, point to the ways in which medical and other discourses produce queer youths as subjects of violence that are
always already suicidal it is important to note how such a conceptualization itself points to the constructedness of the supposed causal link between queerness and suicidality; that is, if the link is constructed it is not causal in a matter-of-fact sort of way, but rather is produced as such. As Foucault suggests, “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (101). Such an attempt at thwarting the discursive formation of queer youth as inherently suicidal, or to ‘fix’ those queer youth that are suicidal, results in the formation of queer youth as a collective, one that forms through trauma. As Alexander might suggest, now it becomes possible to ask who did this to ‘us.’ With the formation of a distinguishable group with a purportedly high rate of suicide, an intervention via a biopolitical understanding can occur.

As previously suggested, the formation of a collective ‘we’ calls for a cultural understanding of trauma specific to the milieu in which the formation of a collective occurs. The sort of cultural understanding and interpretation of trauma that I am outlining here is indicative of what Mark Seltzer calls a ‘wound culture.’ For Seltzer, a wound culture is the result of “the convening of the public around scenes of violence” and that the culture itself is precisely the “public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (3). Furthermore, a wound culture is not just a statement of public engagement, but interaction as well because “the very notion of sociality is bound to the excitations of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual, as public spectacle” (Seltzer 3-4). Thus, with trauma constructed as a public spectacle there is a certain desire for images of trauma, for the consumption of traumatic imagery, or for what Sarah Ahmed calls the
“commodification of suffering” (32). Yet, within Ahmed’s work is also an acknowledgement of the ways in which collective suffering “as a pain that cannot be shared through empathy, is a call not just for an attentive hearing” that creates the potential for “collective politics, as a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one” (39). However, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which power dynamics are deployed in narratives of collective suffering. Seltzer attributes the creation of a wound culture to the veritable collapsing of public and private spheres. For Seltzer, the wound that is trauma defines this collapse. Indeed, he argues “the notion of trauma has thus come to function not merely as a sort of switch point between bodily and psychic orders; it has, beyond that, come to function as a switch point between individual and collective, private and public orders of things” (5). Trauma, then, is integral in what Seltzer calls “the pathological public sphere,” which is his way of articulating how a wound culture is produced (5). More than just a switch point, for Seltzer, trauma also is also about matters of representation precisely because wound culture is formed within “the relays between bodies and signs, wounding and sociality” (12). What is important for Seltzer here, and for my own argument, is the notion of the binding of trauma and representation. It is this binding wherein the aforementioned relays occur between trauma and representation. The repetition of the representation of trauma as spectacle leads to the collective gathering around the wound, hence the formation of a wound culture. With reference to the It Gets Better Project, it is the repetition of the spectacle of queer youth suicide, the binding of
the trauma of suicide with the representation of queer youth, that fosters the collective gathering.

While Seltzer’s formulation is useful in establishing the beginnings of the groundwork from which the It Gets Better Project can emerge, his work does not quite capture the complexities of a more current epoch, one that works with instantaneous transmission of images. Anna Gibbs notes that Seltzer’s theorization of wound culture does not quite work in a more mediatized age because it was conceptualized during a prominently broadcast oriented era (130). Thus, solely relying on wound culture and the spectacle of trauma without updating the concept to fit a more technologically advanced era would not be sufficient. As the It Gets Better Project shows, there is not so much a focus in this case on a broadcast oriented system, though this system is in fact quite alive and well, but rather one of seamless communication and connection. Such seamlessness coincides with the development of social media technologies that allow one to immediately relay their own lived experiences. These technologies thus allow for depictions of trauma to be constantly flowing, whereas in a broadcast oriented era they might be relegated to a specific time in which a broadcast took place or there might be a longer delay between the event and its broadcast. What Seltzer does not cover, and what Gibbs points to, it how “so many people watching televised trauma have a firsthand relation to trauma of their own” (130). For those with a relation to trauma, Seltzer’s focus the spectacle of trauma does not quite capture the complexities of an oversaturation of traumatic imagery. While it is certainly possible that this oversaturation of images might indeed make one numb to them—desensitize them to the image—leading to what Gibbs calls the “death of experience,” one might still be affected, which makes these images
something more than just a spectacle (130). Thus, it is important to pay attention not only to what images are circulated, but their affect. More precisely, there must be attention given to, as Gibbs might say, the traumatic circuitry of affect.

To account for the potential of the instantaneous transmission of traumatic imagery, I turn to what Ben O’Loughlin’s calls the “mediatization of trauma” (193). In recent years, as O’Loughlin observes, and as previously mentioned, there has been an increase in the introduction of technologies that are capable of transmitting images of trauma en masse instantaneously. For example, O’Loughlin focuses on “the shock of the survivors of the 7/7 London bombings in 2005 as they found themselves becoming public property” (194). Further examples might include the repeated showing of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, particularly of the image of the planes crashing into the towers and of what has become colloquially known as “The Falling Man.” More recent examples would include: the images of the murder of Black people due to police brutality, the police attacks on the protestors of the North Dakota Access Pipeline, the image of the Syrian child on the beach in Turkey, and, most recently, the multiple videos uploaded to media sharing sites that documented the bombing of an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England. Importantly, the representation of these events do not all signal the establishment of a collective trauma from a single event. For example, police brutality towards racialized people is not a single event, but evidence of the ubiquity of such violence. What I am attempting to draw

9 I’ve elected to refrain from showing and referencing the images here precisely because I do not want to participate in their repetition. Furthermore, the point here is not to direct the reader into looking at these images of trauma, but rather to provide examples of how Seltzer’s ‘wound culture’ must be slightly altered to account for how readily accessible and transmittable these images have become since Seltzer’s publication in 1997.
attention to here is the ways in which these images are transmitted. For O’Loughlin, the key difference between broadcast-oriented forms of media like news reports and self-broadcast forms of media like cellphones is an aspect of control. This difference can be linked to what O’Loughlin described as “media logics”: “Certain mediums, and the production and consumption practices that emerge around them, privilege particular ways of behaving” (196). Following these logics, O’Loughlin differentiates between television—the more broadcast oriented medium—and the Internet—the more self-broadcast oriented medium. Television broadcasts tend to align more with the impulses and narratives of political leaders and organizations (O’Loughlin 196). “Television,” as O’Loughlin argues “prioritizes a visually compelling and verbally fluent mode of action” that itself involves an “‘imposition’ of news media temporalities, news values and news’ narrative frameworks” (196-197). Therefore, there is a more established regiment of power going on within news broadcasts. Self-broadcast via the Internet, on the other hand, is more chaotic. Indeed, as O’Loughlin argues, “digital media create a potentially destabilizing dynamic here, a ‘contingent openness,’ since digital content can emerge to force the reconsideration of some event or phenomenon” (197). That is not to say that self-broadcast is not used to promote ideological stances of political leaders and organization, rather the mediums of self-broadcast have a more chaotic element that is more open-ended. For example, O’Loughlin points to how the pictures of the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib at the hands of American soldiers destabilized the narrative of foreign policy that the United States was putting forward up to that point (197-198).

What is key here is the process of mediatization. According to O’Loughlin, mediatization is the process by which social events become recognized as media phenomenon (193).
With the advent of self-broadcasting technologies, who is subjected to trauma and who witnesses said trauma is not completely clear. That is not to say that the subject position of witness and of survivor are ever so neatly demarcated, however, within the public eye, peoples’ lives tend to become public whether they want them to or not. For instance, it is not known if those that experienced the traumatic events I mentioned above wanted their experiences broadcast in such a way, yet they were regardless and, in this mediatization, colloquialisms like “The Falling Man” are born and people become reducible to these events. Indeed, as O’Loughlin argues, “being caught up in an accident or becoming indirectly connected to a news story entails a permanent risk of being thrust into the media spotlight on the media’s terms” (194). On the other hand, one has more a sense of control with self-broadcasting. In the same vein, as media becomes inundated with images of trauma there brings the risk of (re)traumatizing members of the audience. Or, more precisely, re-energising the wound of trauma. Despite the apparent ubiquity of images of trauma in media, O’Loughlin argues that trauma and mediatization should not be as close as they are:

Mediatization involves the transformation of social practices and institutions into public, expressive, performing practices. Trauma leads to ‘numbing’ and possibly avoidance, as Caruth states—the opposite of public expression . . . Trauma appears unsuited to news media presentation events as ‘stories’ with cause and effect, with a past, present and likely future. (195)
Returning to Seltzer, and to what Gibbs expands upon from her text, the linking of mediatization and trauma is achieved by the continual development of new technologies that not only allow, but encourage the collapse of public and private spheres.

What we arrive at here is a sort of web of seemingly disparate threads that are all sutured together to create the conditions that make the emergence of It Gets Better Project possible. First, in a biopolitical age suicide becomes the effect of a non-normative or queer sexual identity through the overdetermination of rates of suicide by queer youth. By marking one’s identity with the trauma of suicide, a biopolitical move is made that congeals around a group in such a way to identify said group. In this instance, this move is made by the state in the proliferation of suicide rates. This identification is then how queer youth become legible as queer youth; that is, they are seen as inherently suicidal. In this identification, those members of the group are seen as subjects of violence that are “produced in vulnerability” based on their experiences of or connections to trauma (Cover 7). Under this sort of framework of identity and the collapse of public and private spheres, being queer means one experiences trauma as showcased through the repeated exposure to images, through the It Gets Better Project, that either project trauma—as in the case of the queer youth that make videos about their experiences—or talk about trauma—the videos created by people who are not queer, but want to participate in the spreading of messages of hope. To heal the purported trauma of being queer, the It Gets Better Project emerges as a reaction to the re-energising of a wound in an effort to do the work of reparation. Yet, what sort of work is being done in the project? How does the project go about attempting to heal the wounded? A turn towards a more critical interrogation of the project’s namesake and mantra, ‘it gets better,’ will help to answer
these questions and suggest just for whom ‘it’ is supposed to ‘get better’. Furthermore, such an interrogation will help elucidate the traumatic circuitry of affect.

2.3 Affective Attachments to Happiness and the Teleology of Queer Suffering

I argue It Gets Better Project has been able to gain traction because of how it organizes its mission—the projection of the ‘it gets better’ mantra—and how the audiovisual media that is its driving force creates the conditions for a Cvetkovician “trauma culture” around which the formation of a sort of cultural identity based upon trauma can occur. It is important, however, to question the implications of organizing around the wound of trauma. In The Cultural Politics of Emotion Sara Ahmed warns against organizing around an identity built upon the wound:

The transformation of the wound into an identity is problematic. One of the reasons that this is problematic is precisely because of its fetishism: the transformation of the wound into an identity cuts the wound off from a history of ‘getting hurt’ or injured. It turns the wound into something that simply ‘is’ rather than something that has happened in time and space . . . The problem with the wound fetishism is the equivalence it assumes between forms of injury. The production of equivalence allows injury to become an entitlement which is then equally available to all others. (32)

For Ahmed, this danger is something present in narratives of pain and suffering, especially in what is called “testimonial culture” (32). Ahmed and Stacey note that testimonial cultures are without unitary form, thus thinking about testimonial cultures requires thinking about “the ways in which speaking about injustice, trauma, pain and grief have become crucial aspects of contemporary life which have transformed notions
of what it means to be a subject, what it means to speak, and how we understand the formation of communities and collectivities” (2). When thinking through the idea that the creation of a wound culture and the fetishization of wounded subjects it is imperative that one begin to question whose trauma is being put to the forefront. Worded differently, there must be an interrogation into which subject is constructed as the baseline against all other similar traumas are subjugated. Ahmed points to this too, noting that special attention must be paid to the rhetorical moves that focus on invoking “narratives of injury” or, more precisely, the ways in which “more privileged subjects will have a greater recourse to narratives of injury” (Cultural Politics 33). Specifically, one needs to be cognizant of the ways in which “pain is not simply an effect of a history of harm; it is the bodily life of that history” (Cultural Politics 34). As previously mentioned, it is the experience of trauma rather than the event itself that needs to be examined. More specifically, one must pay close attention to the sociohistorical conditions that allow the trauma to manifest. By turning trauma—the wound—into an identity, there is, as Ahmed points out, a severance from history and the production of trauma as spectacle for consumption in a wound culture. If trauma is severed from history, an enormous task considering trauma is always also a question of history, then in the context of the It Gets Better Project, the trauma experienced by queer youth is a spectacle that exists on its own without context—without the question of history. Regarding this question of history, Ahmed posits “our task might instead to be to ‘remember’ how the surfaces of bodies (including the bodies of communities, as I will suggest later) came to be wounded in the first place” (33). Echoing Ahmed’s concern, one must question precisely what does one mean when one invokes queer as an identity.
To demonstrate whose particular queer trauma is being represented and whose is not, I must engage in a brief commentary on the categorization of queer as an identity. Specifically, as a political identity. It is important to note that queer has never had a particularly stable meaning, at least in the realm of political identification, and how it is differentially produced and applied to different persons in time and space is important for this analysis. Traditionally seen as a derogatory word\(^{10}\), queer gained traction in political spheres in North America in the 1990s (Cohen 22). The deployment of queer as a political identity was to be seen as a “new political direction and agenda, one that does not focus on integration into dominant structures but instead seeks to transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allows systems of oppression to persist and operate efficiently” (Cohen 21). The strong unifying factor here was the promise for a radical movement that would have a broad aspect of inclusivity. This inclusivity, rather than trying to make all queer people the same, would endeavour to recognize the differences among queer people in a more intersectional approach to disrupt hegemonic power structures not only of sexuality, but also of race, gender, class, and other axes of identity. Cohen sums up the radical potential of queer theory and, by extension, the radical potential that the adoption of a queer identity has:

> Through its conception of a wide continuum of sexual possibilities, queer theory stands in direct contract to the normalizing tendencies of hegemonic sexuality rooted in ideas of static, stable sexual identities and behaviors . . . At its best, queer theory focuses on and makes central the

\(^{10}\) In many cases queer is still seen as a derogatory term, I am not trying to suggest that it has lost this status, but that the status itself is not a fixed one, but rather one that is continuously moving and shifting.
constructed nature of sexuality and sexual categories, but also the varying
degrees and multiple sites of power distributed within all categories of
sexuality, including the normative category of heterosexuality. (22-23)

Important for Cohen is that queer denotes more than just one’s sexual identity; that is,
queer is meant to be an expression of a diametrical opposition to heteronormativity,
which also encompasses notions of gender, race, class, and other axes of identity. Queer
politics, then, is meant to stand in opposition to a category-based identity politics that
only focuses on sexuality as the most important, if not the only relevant, aspect of one’s
identity (Cohen 23). For Cohen, this conceptualization of a queer politics holds great
promise “for those of us who find ourselves on the margins, operating through multiple
identities and thus not fuller served or recognized through traditional single-identity-
based-politics” (24). While the radical potential of adopting queer as a political identity
that speaks to many facets of one’s identity and therefore can work as a mode of “multi-
sited resistance” that would speak to hegemonic constructions of race and gender
alongside sexuality, there has been a failure in contemporary mainstream queer politics to
incorporate this radical approach into its political constituency (Cohen 24-25). As Cohen
notes, “while a number of similarities and connections between the politics of lesbians,
gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color during the 1970s and 1980s and
queer activists of today clearly exist, the present-day rendition of this politics has
deviated significantly from its legacy” (31). Rather than focusing on radical potentiality,
many queer activists, in Cohen’s view, seem comfortable in (re)producing singular
narratives of resistance based upon only one aspect of identity—sexuality—which does
not do anything to challenge or even recognize multiple intersecting power structures.
Such a focus on a singular narrative of resistance deliberately ignores differences among those who may or may not, identify with queer as an identity category. This deliberate ignoring of difference has not only discursive effects with respect to how social movements emerge based on a queer identity that itself gives primacy to sexuality, but also material effects with respect to the political accomplishments of those movements. Queer, by signaling one’s relationality to multiple intersecting power structures, signaled an opposition to fixed identity categories. In effect, queer signaled a disruption.

Following Cohen, I argue that an exposition of the mantra ‘it gets better’ and the discourse produced by this mantra is indicative of a moving away from the radical potential of queer into a more single-identity-focused politics based on sexual identity. The message ‘it gets better’ is a simple yet powerful one: It will get better, but you just need to hold on until it does, happiness is waiting for you on the other side of suffering. As such, there is a teleological narrative set up here in which the wounded queer youth moves from suffering to happiness over time. What I question here is the value placed upon happiness, and just what this happiness means. Happiness as an object can be seen as something that one desires and thus has an attachment to in the sense that happiness is a goal to achieve—an object of desire. The hopeful mantra of the It Gets Better Project contains in it an optimistic view of the future; that is, for ‘it’ to ‘get better.’ Lauren Berlant calls this sort of optimism a “cruel optimism” (24). More specifically, Berlant argues that when an object you desire becomes an obstacle to your own flourishing, a relation of cruel optimism is created. She defines cruel optimism as:

A relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too
possible, and toxic. What’s cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have $x$ in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world . . . Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object. (24)

I argue, under Berlant’s formulation, that the happiness promised to queer youth is indeed a significantly problematic object. Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* is useful here to extend my claim that the sort of promised happiness embedded in the ‘it gets better’ mantra is problematic. The explicit link between Berlant and Ahmed’s work is this attachment to what is called ‘the good life.’ Berlant points to ‘the good life’ as being exemplary of cruel optimism (27). Ahmed points to ‘the good life’ as some sort of end goal of achieving happiness (13-14). She asks not what happiness is, but rather what it does. With regards to happiness, Ahmed argues that ‘ideas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy and capable of being happy ‘in the right way’’’ (13). This then engenders the question: Who, in the realm of the It Gets Better Project, gets to be happy? Speaking to the phenomenon of unhappy queers that Ahmed identifies in her work, there is an explicit moral distinction between good (read: happy) lives and bad (read: unhappy) lives. An equally important question emerges with respect not to who gets to be happy, but what this happiness looks like and for whom has access to this particular brand of happiness. For Ahmed, happiness:
Directs us toward certain objects as being necessary for a good life. The good life, in other words, is imagined through the proximity of objects. There is no doubt that the affective repertoire of happiness gives us images of a certain kind of life, a life that has certain things and does certain things. There is no doubt that it is hard to separate images of the good life from the historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, as expressed in romantic love and coupledom, as well as in the idealization of domestic privacy . . . Heterosexual love becomes about the possibility of a happy ending; about what life is aimed toward, as being what gives life direction or purpose, or as what drives a story. (90)

So, what has been extrapolated from Berlant’s and Ahmed’s work here is that the subjects of the It Gets Better Project, and the videos produced, engender this cruelly optimistic affective attachment to a sort of happiness that is dependent upon how close one can approximate oneself with heterosexual love. Through this formulation, the achievement of happiness is dependent upon how well a queer person can mimic heterosexual depictions of intimacy. The endpoint to this thread of logic is that those who cannot fully ascribe to this sort of heterosexual intimacy are doomed forever to be unhappy and those that can, will be healed of their trauma. Linked back to Cohen’s work, the focus on an approximation with heteronormativity does not account for differences based on gender, race, or class in the way that Cohen’s vision of a radical queer politics would. Heteronormativity, then, signals a particularly privileged relationality to these categories of identity.
2.4 Melancholic Attachments to the Innocent Child

Conceptualizing trauma as affect is useful for describing the current of trauma; that is, the ways in which trauma circulates. However, it is not sufficient explaining why affect is sticky. If affect is thought of to be sticky and to flow between bodies, then, thinking of trauma as affect would require the same sort of thinking about trauma. This is not the only way to think about trauma, but more to gesture towards a thinking of trauma and affect together that is attentive to how the affective attachment to happiness-as-whiteness moves between bodies. Connecting trauma and affect, I suggest that we might think of the circulation of this attachment as traumatic. The previous sections have thus far illustrated that affect is sticky and how it sticks to certain bodies, both in terms of the body of the individual and the body of the collective, but there has not been a focused discussion on why such a sticking happens. The previous sections of this chapter have focused on the conditions of emergence for the It Gets Better Project and how the subject comes to be configured as one that is traumatized, that has suicide-as-trauma stuck to it by the fact of its existence, that is bound to a teleological narrative of sadness-to-happiness. Yet, not much attention has been given to the melancholic attachment of the subject. That is to ask, returning to the beginning of the chapter, what is lost here? For Puar, in the context of the It Gets Better Project, there is a sense of a loss of privilege. Indeed, as she writes, “part of the outrage generated by these deaths is based precisely in a belief that things are indeed supposed to be better, especially for a particular class of white gay men . . . this amounts to a reinstatement of white racial privilege that was lost with being gay” and that within the project’s narrative there is an affective conversion of injury/suicide into cultural capital “not only through affectations of blame, guilt, and
suffering, but also through those of triumph, transgression, and success” (151). Thus, the sort of affective and cruel attachment to happiness outlined above is one that is predicated upon a notion of whiteness. This notion of whiteness, however, is not reducible to the subject itself, but is more in line with the affect’s stickiness and how this stickiness is, as Ahmed argues, “dependent on past histories of association that often ‘work’ through concealment” (Cultural Politics 13). As Cohen points out concerning queer activism, “in its current rendition, queer politics is coded with class, gender, and race privilege,” and that, by virtue of these privileges, many queer activists “operate out of a political culture of individualism . . . that allows them to disregard historically or culturally recognized categories and communities” (34). In operating through a notion of whiteness, there is a concealment of history that allows for a culture of individualism to emerge. A singular narrative of queer trauma that is posited by the It Gets Better Project, one in which the sole focus is oppression on the axis of sexuality, actively ignores the ways in which oppression is manifested in different forms in favor of collapsing “our understanding of power into a single continuum of evaluation” (Cohen 37).

If one pauses to examine the biopolitics of the It Gets Better Project one might conclude that the project itself has an attachment to whiteness through the perceived loss of privilege that Puar points to. Alexander Weheliye argues that “the biopolitical function of race is racism; it is the establishment and maintenance of caesuras, not their abolition” (55-56). He builds this argument through invoking Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definitions of racism as “state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death” (qtd. in Weheliye 55). Weheliye makes the claim that it is racism that allows for biopolitics to function and criticizes Foucault’s
own desire to differentiate ethnic and biological racism: “Put bluntly, there exists no significant difference between ethnic and biological racism in the way Foucault imagines, since both rely on the same tools of the trade: racializing assemblages” (60). Thought of thusly, the biopolitics of the It Gets Better Project, the singular narrative of queer trauma qua sexuality, and the affective attachment to happiness function as what Weheliye terms “racialized political violence” precisely because such a violence “always possesses a function beyond its mere exercise” (71). While Weheliye’s initial argument concerns musician M.I.A.’s video for her song “Born Free” I believe that his assertion that the function of racialized political violence, “the façade of race as an absolute biological substance that enforces existence categories while also producing new ones,” is adaptable to my arguments here. In fact, I believe that Weheliye’s work here will help tie together the arguments I started making with my reference to Cohen’s critique of queer politics.

In the production of a queer subject based upon an individualized notion of trauma, there exists the enforcement of the existing category of queerness as sexuality while producing a new category of queerness that explicitly, by the conditions of its formation, is saturated with notions of whiteness such that the queer subject not just becomes the white subject, but the two are produced as synonymous. To dig deeper into the question of why this single-identity politics that renders queerness as whiteness persists, I turn to psychoanalytic conceptualizations of subject constitution. As stated, the previous sections have focused on the how and the what in terms of the circulation of trauma-as-affect and the production of queer subjectivity. However, the formulations above do not get into the attachment to race and racism, and how they function within
political movements like the It Gets Better Project that are based upon understandings of sexual difference.

For Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, race, thought of psychoanalytically, “is fundamentally a regime of looking” and “a practice of visibility rather than [a] scientific, anthropological or cultural theory” (2). Seshadri-Crooks uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to examine the ways in which the subject comes to be constituted and how this constitution, through sexual difference, comes to also signify racial difference. She argues that whiteness is a “master signifier (without a signified) that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference” (3-4). For Seshadri-Crooks, discussions of race require a certain particularity, especially when thinking through race psychoanalytically, because while sexuality is understood as having a quality of indeterminancy that exists beyond the scope of language, and while class is constructed as something that is mostly symbolic, race is somewhere in between. As she argues, “race resembles class in that it is of purely cultural and historical origin, but it is also like sex in that it produces extra-discursive effects” (4). From this perspective, race is seen to be marked upon one’s body, and thus the question central to Seshadri-Crooks’s analysis is: “Why do we feel that we must necessarily insist on the evidence of our eyes?” (4). The overreliance on visualization comes to be evident of what Teresa Brennan calls “social psychosis,” wherein there is a focus on visual difference (Seshadri-Crooks 5).

Consequently, and working through Lacan’s Symbolic Order, the attachment to whiteness that I am attempting to outline becomes cogent:
I suggest that it is the symbolic order of racial difference itself that
governs seeing, rather than the reverse. We *believe* in the factuality of
difference in order to *see* it, because the order of racial difference is an
order that promises access to an absolute wholeness to its subjects—white,
black, yellow or brown. The relation of fantasy to the symbolic order of
race must be construed somewhat differently. The fantasy of wholeness, of
being, that the signifier holds out is not a case of narcissistic
misrecognition, but is a fundamental fantasy that determines the trajectory
of the subject of ‘race.’ (Seshadri-Crooks 5)

What whiteness become, then, is precisely the wholeness that Seshadri-Crooks gestures
towards. If we return to Puar’s assertion that the It Gets Better Project is a response to is
the perceived loss of a sense of racial privilege, the project’s own mission becomes one to
re-establish a sense of wholeness within the subject; that is, the It Gets Better Project
becomes a statement of the loss of privilege and ‘it’ is only ever supposed to ‘get better’
for a select group of, as Puar suggests, gay white men. For Puar, the attachment to
whiteness is thus configured as a desire for whiteness, or at least a desire for the racial
privilege that comes with an identification with whiteness (151). As she argues, “part of
the outrage generated by these deaths is based precisely in a belief that things are indeed
supposed to be better, especially for a particular class of white gay men . . . this amounts
to a reinstatement of white racial privilege that was lost with being gay” (151). However,
the attachment to whiteness is not predicated simply upon a desire for racial privilege.
Such a unilateral deployment would establish reparation as homogenous in being
accessed through a desire for racial privilege. Furthermore, it would establish those
outside the narrative of the It Gets Better Project, namely queer and trans people of color, as desiring racial privilege. This is not the argument I am seeking to make. Indeed, as pointed out above, whiteness is more affective. The attachment to whiteness, then, means more than an attachment to white skin, though the materiality of the skin is important. This desire for whiteness signifies that whiteness itself is more akin to a contagion or, as David Eng and Shinhee Han argue, a condition (343). Configured as a condition, whiteness, then, alters both the physical and the affective in a way that forces a haunting that is both physical and psychical (Eng and Han 343).

Within this notion of loss, I argue that the It Gets Better Project is based upon the melancholic attachment to the figure of an innocent child that is racially coded as white. To get at this point I turn to Freud’s essay, “Mourning and Melancholia.” In his essay, Freud endeavours to differentiate between processes of mourning and melancholia. Mourning, on the one hand, “is commonly the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or abstraction taking the place of a person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on” (310). One mourns the loss of a loved one and works through the trauma of the loss via severing the connection the libido has with the love-object (Freud 311). The working through here is the gradual, and oftentimes painful, act of letting go of the love-object. In melancholy, on the other hand, the process is not so simple. Freud explains:

Melancholia is mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of the self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment. (311)
The difference between mourning and melancholia is precisely that in mourning there is a working through, in melancholia there is not an end to the mourning. Indeed, as Freud writes, “in mourning, the world has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego that has become so” (313). The libido does not detach itself from the love-object, but is rather drawn back into the ego, producing an identification with the lost love-object (Freud 316). In such an incorporation, “the loss of the object had been transformed into the loss of the ego” such that a conflict arises between ego and lost love-object (Freud 316). Eng and Han offer the result of the conflict: “In identifying with the lost object, the melancholic is able to preserve it but only as a type of haunted, ghostly identification” (346). As Eng and Han point out, Freud characterizes melancholia as potentially dangerous for the melancholic subject is often characterized by a tendency towards suicide, however, Eng and Han also supplement Freud’s warning by adding that suicide “may also be a psychical erasure of one’s identity—racial, sexual, or gender identity, for example” (346). Taken thusly, the melancholic attachment to whiteness in the It Gets Better Project manifests in the erasure of difference in the search for a return to the wholeness of the subject that, as Seshadri-Crooks argues, is predicated on whiteness as formulated in the order of the Symbolic.

If we return to the notion of whiteness as a condition, as Eng and Han formulate it in their understanding of racial melancholia, then the effect of a desire for whiteness that is coveted as a sense of wholeness yet not reducible to the color of one’s skin is part of the materialization of melancholia. Indeed, as Eng and Han argue, “melancholia presents a compelling framework to conceptualize registers of loss and depression attendant to both psychic and material processes of assimilation” (344). Assimilation, then, is the
incorporation of whiteness as a condition into the ego as an identification with the lost love-object. This psychical process is a damaging one precisely because “racial melancholia as psychic splitting and national dis-ease opens upon the interconnected terrain of mimicry, ambivalence, and the stereotype” and that within the violent imperative to assimilate there is a failure (Eng and Han 349). Drawing on Homi Bhabha, Eng and Han articulate that within a colonial regime, the imperative to mimic the “ideals of whiteness” constitute a mimetic impulse that can only ever be mimicry; or, as Bhabha writes, “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” or more precisely “almost the same but not white” (qtd. in Eng and Han 349 original emphasis). For racialized queer and trans people—those who do not fit the ideals of whiteness—the attachment to the condition of whiteness is predicated upon narratives of inclusion: “These include access to political, economic, and cultural privilege; alignment with whiteness and the nation; and ‘full’ subjectivity and a sense of belonging” (Eng and Han 362). Of course, these promises, like Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, are bound to fail. That is not to say that racialized queer and trans people are bound to a narrative of victimhood that aligns with the “assumption that minority subjectivities are permanently damaged—forever injured and incapable of being ‘whole,’” but rather that this narrative does exist and is the dominant one contained within the It Gets Better Project (Eng and Han 363 original emphasis). The next chapter will address how one might resist this narrative, but for now I want to stay with the current analysis of the project and its melancholic attachments.

I have thus far pointed to a melancholic attachment to whiteness, yet have not yet established the connection to the child. Melanie Klein’s work is useful here in describing
how the melancholic attachment to whiteness is also wrapped up in notions of the innocent child. For Klein:

While it is true that the characteristic feature of normal mourning is the individual’s setting up the lost loved object inside himself, he is not doing so for the first time but, through the work of mourning, is reinstating that object as well as all his loved internal objects which he feels he has lost. He is therefore recovering what he had already attained in childhood. (qtd. in Eng and Han 359)

Although Klein points specifically to mourning, the mechanisms by which the introjection of the lost love-object is completed is based on what Eng and Han call a “melancholic logic” (359). Thus, the work of melancholy is still present. However, this attachment is not necessarily negative, as I will argue in the next chapter, but offers a potential way through which subjects that are compelled to mimic the ideals of whiteness can resist this compulsion. The question, however, still remains what exactly is the attachment to the child. The attachment to the child that I am arguing for here is not new, Lee Edelman points out how oftentimes the image of the child is created in liberal discourse as the symbol of the future. Indeed, as Edelman argues, “that Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” and that as such, the child is “the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” (3-4). The It Gets Better Project can be seen, then, to rest upon a sort of melancholy fantasy for a future that is void of the trauma of the past. In doing so, there is a connection made to the figure of the child precisely because it is the children that the It Gets Better Project purports to speak to. However, one cannot help but notice that,
given what has been established above in the attachment to whiteness, such a speaking in the utterance of “it gets better” sounds quite hollow.

At this point, I would like to return to notions of whiteness. While the It Gets Better Project claims to be one concerned with the suicides of queer youth, and while I do not want to suggest that they are not, it still must be made apparent that there is something else that is lurking within the project. Psychoanalytic approaches can be helpful here. As Khanna, invoking Abraham and Torok, claims “the work of psychoanalysis is to identify the phantom, and bring it back into unhindered signification through assimilation” (24). Khanna notes that while, on the one hand, the work of mourning is the assimilation of the lost love-object—the working through of trauma—the work of melancholia, on the other hand, has to do with haunting (22-25). Following this formulation, Khanna argues that “if the critical work of melancholia manifests in haunting, the specter of colonialism is made apparent through psychoanalysis” (29).

Abraham’s theory of the phantom is useful in elaborating this point. For Abraham, “more often than not, the dead do not return to rejoin the living but rather to lead them into some dreadful snare, entrapping them with disastrous consequences” (171). A consideration of the phantom gives more depth to the idea of haunting that I have been gesturing to throughout this work. It is with the conceptualization of the phantom that comes a clarity that “what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (Abraham 171). The phantom takes the haunting away from melancholy since the haunting itself is not focused solely on the individual in this instance. Where melancholy invokes an understanding of a lost love-object, the phantom concerns itself more with “the burial of an unspeakable fact within the love-object (Abraham 172 original
emphasis). Again, the point here is to emphasize that whiteness signifies a sense of being and particularly a sense of wholeness that is sought after in the It Gets Better Project’s projection of healing. If whiteness is the love-object, then, I would argue that colonialism would be that unspeakable fact that lies within whiteness. Taking this point of view, what haunts the It Gets Better Project is the attachment to whiteness, configured as a melancholic attachment and as a desire for a better future for the child of trauma. However, through Khanna’s work and Abraham’s theory of the phantom, the attachment to whiteness is more than just that, it is an attachment to the specter of colonialism. Configured thusly, the It Gets Better Project becomes a rearticulation of colonial logics, a colonizing project based on the erasure of difference. The alignment with the figure of the innocent child, then, is precisely that which charges the It Gets Better Project with the energy to expand its grasp globally. The following chapter will further expand upon the claim made here that the It Gets Better Project is a colonizing project. A particular focus will be placed on notions of neoliberal futurity and queer liberalism to make the case that what I argue here is not unique to the It Gets Better Project. Indeed, by looking at how the It Gets Better Project is situated within queer liberalism, an alternative can be configured. That is to say, the beginnings of a better story can be written.
Chapter 3

Traumatic Citizenship: Trauma and Reinforcing Nation

“And following the events of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington this interest in trauma and memory has intensified and become personal for many. Two things are recognised. First, from work on trauma it is acknowledged that memories such as these are distinct—traumatic memory is not the same as everyday memory. Second, from work on collective memory it is argued that many contemporary forms of memorialisation function to reinforce the idea of the nation” (Edkins xiii).

“One of the habits of privilege is that it spawns superiority, beckoning its owners to don a veil of false protection so that they never see? themselves, the devastation they wreak or their accountability to it. Privilege and superiority blunt the loss that issues from enforced alienation and segregations of different kinds” (M. J. Alexander 2).

3.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to extend the arguments made in the previous chapter by situating the It Gets Better Project within the broader context of what David Eng terms “queer liberalism” (3). By doing so, this project is not seen as existing on its own, but alongside similar political projects. The first section of this chapter delineates Eng’s understanding of queer liberalism. Primarily of concern are the ways in which queer liberalism is premised upon the erasure of difference. This erasure is performed through the appeal to rights-based claims that seek to locate queer subjects as citizens with the nation-state. I build upon the assertion that a wound severed from history dislocates it from its context by arguing that the same is true of political projects that are built upon a notion of a wounded identity. More precisely, I am attempting to illustrate dehistoricizing and decontextualizing dynamics that wounded queer subjects enact qua whiteness. That is to say, the same ahistoric view of the wound is found in the It Gets Better Project.

I then turn to the ways in which the singular narrative of trauma put forward by the It Gets Better Project congeals around an identity of queerness-as-sexuality. In the
articulation of queerness-as-sexuality, there is, as Cohen argues, a “single-oppression framework” that “misrepresent[s] the distribution of power within and outside of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities, and therefore limit[s] the comprehensive and transformational character of queer politics” (25). Cohen’s argument signals to a limitation of thinking about the It Gets Better Project solely on its own. More precisely, critiquing this project necessitates being attentive to the ways in which power is distributed within communities. The attention to communities, however, also brings in a limitation of this project, one that Viviane Namaste notes as limiting many of what she calls “Anglo-American” theory (Invisible Lives 56). While Namaste is specifically speaking to the consolidation of the identities and exclusions of transsexual people, I want to extend her argument vis-à-vis the It Gets Better Project. This limitation is precisely the focus on representing my arguments in the English language. However, it is not simply the representations of the arguments in English that is a limitation, but rather that such a representation signals a way in which the English language, operating within an Anglo-American world view, can obfuscate other world views. Rather than restricting this work, this limitation gestures towards the need to think about how political projects like the It Gets Better Project work on a national and transnational level.

The second and third sections seek to work towards thinking about the implications that the It Gets Better Project has on a national and transnational level. Specifically, the second section seeks to understand how trauma can be used to reinforce the boundaries of nation-states. Extending the arguments of M. Jacqui Alexander and Jasbir Puar, I put forward the idea of traumatic citizenship to illustrate the ways in which trauma is bound to notions of citizenship and how this notion of trauma is sutured to
ideas of sexual citizenship. Such an extension points to the ways in which, by constructing the story of a nation-state as linear, there is a simultaneous rendering of trauma as also linear. By adhering to such a linearity of history, projects based upon traumatic citizenship like the It Gets Better Project, I argue that the It Gets Better Project is itself a nation-building project.

Arguing that the It Gets Better Project situated within queer liberalism is a nation-building project, I turn to examine how these projects are thus energized by the death of racialized queer and trans people. Working through Lee Edelman’s disavowal of futurity, I also examine the ways in which resistances to these nation-building projects can themselves be complicit in the erasure of racialized queer and trans people. Such a disavowal, I argue, is premised upon the same severing of past/present/future that it seeks to critique. The remainder of the chapter is concerned, then, with how to remember the past. More precisely, how to remember the violence of the past without foreclosing the ways in which the violence is also always in the present. An attentiveness to the traumas of the past and how they circulate in the present is the beginning of a method wherein what José Esteban Muñoz calls a “concrete utopia” can be imagined (3).

3.2 Queer Liberalism and the It Gets Better Project

In The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy David Eng describes what he calls “queer liberalism” as “a contemporary confluence of the political and economic spheres that forms the basis for the liberal inclusion of particular gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects petitioning for rights and recognition before the law” (3). For Eng, the appeal to liberal fantasies of inclusion and equality are predicated upon a “logic of colorblindness” that seeks to render racial difference as
obsolete. Adding to this, Eng also notes how disparities of sex, gender, and class, are also rendered as obsolete within queer liberalism (3-4). He writes:

Indeed, our historical moment is defined precisely by new combinations of racial, sexual, and economic disparities—both nationally and globally—which are disavowed, denied, and exacerbated by official state policies that refuse to see inequality as anything but equality, and by a pervasive language of individualism, personal merit, responsibility, and choice. (5)

Situation the It Gets Better Project within this formation requires expanding on how precisely the project itself is also bound to the same disavowal, denial, and exacerbation of disparities. For Damien Riggs, liberal subjectivity invokes a singular notion of subjectivity. Indeed, as Riggs argues, “the primary model of subjectivity that informs human rights discourse presumes that we identify ourselves as individuals to the exclusion of all others—that we stand as autonomous individuals who are thoroughly enmeshed in particular cultural and historical contexts” (33). The disconnect here between subjectivity and the contexts in which subjects are produced calls to mind Ahmed’s warning against organizing around a wounded identity. To reiterate, Ahmed asserts that such organizational imperatives are at the risk of disconnecting experiences of wounding from history and context (Cultural Politics 32). The same sort of disconnect that Ahmed illustrates is present in the It Gets Better Project. That is to say, the disconnect of the wound from history, in this case, is an effect of the disconnect of individuals from their own cultural and historical contexts.

The link between political projects and notions of damaged, injured, or otherwise wounded identities is not new. As Wendy Brown argues, it is oftentimes the case that
social movements, in the search for freedom and rights, “problematically mirror the mechanisms and configurations of power of which they are an effect and which they purport to oppose” (3). For Brown, the liberal sense of freedom that these projects seek is:

Fitted to an economic order in which property and personhood for some entails poverty and deracination for others, is conveyed by rights against arbitrary state power on one side and against anarchic civil society or property theft on the other. As freedom from encroachment by others and from collective institutions, it entails an atomistic ontology, a metaphysics of separation, an ethos of defensiveness, and an abstract equality. Rendering either the ancient or liberal formations of freedoms as ‘concepts’ abstracts them from the historical practices in which they are rooted, the institutions against which they are oriented, the domination they are designed to contest, the privileges they are designed to protect. (6)

Important here is the repetition of the severing of something, in this case freedom, from history. Brown argues that it is in the articulations of an “I” vs. a “we” where this sort of depoliticization occurs. In fact, it is this very articulation that sustains liberal rights-based claims to freedom because it is the depoliticization of the “I” that then translates to the “we.” In effect, as Brown argues, “this subordination is achieved by the ‘I’ either abstracting from itself in its political representation, thus trivializing its ‘difference’ so as to remain of the ‘we’ . . . or accepting its construction as a supplement, complement, or partial outsider to the ‘we’” (56). The liberal fantasy of freedom, then, is achieved
through the negation of difference or the acceptance of a slight, morally insignificant sort of difference.

The similarities between the liberal sense of freedom that Brown outlines and the condition of whiteness that Eng and Han illustrate both are premised upon a severing from history. For Brown, it is freedom and for Eng and Han it is the self; both are premised upon the erasure of difference. What Brown claims in terms of political projects mirroring the power relations that they seek to subvert and the negation of the “I” in favor of the “we” is that these sorts of projects are entwined with what she calls “wounded attachments” (xii). These are the “logics of pain in the subject formation processes of late modern politics” wherein the identity of the subject is premised upon injury or wounding (55). In alignment with this attachment to the wound, I argue that the It Gets Better Project, situated within queer liberalism, is premised upon an erasure of difference. I also argue that this erasure of difference works through an appeal to neoliberal politics.

Neoliberalism, according to Lisa Duggan, “is often presented not as a particular set of interests and politics interventions but as a kind of nonpolitics—a way of being reasonable and promoting universally desirable forms of economic expansion and democratic government globally” (177). Concurrent with neoliberalism is a sexual politics of homonormativity that, for Duggan, “is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds them and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179). Duggan specifies gay here to signal that, within this political moment, “bisexual, transgender, or queer occur only as targets of ridicule, and the presumptive whiteness of the audiences
for these writers is unwavering” (192). Duggan’s argument here recalls Cohen’s own argument against the use of a “single-oppression framework” (25). Returning to Eng’s queer liberalism, the appeal to neoliberal politics resists “any acknowledgement of the ways in which sexuality and race are constituted in relation to one another, each often serving to articulate, subsume, and frame the other’s legibility in the social domain” (4).

For Roderick Ferguson, the emergence of homonormativity is concurrent with discourses of whiteness. He argues that this link can be traced to early sociological theories of sexuality that see sexuality as socially constructed in which “homosexuality is labeled a deviant practice so that the larger society can construct itself as heterosexual and pure” (52). Reformulating the sociological claim concerning the constructedness of sexuality, Ferguson argues

Sociological arguments about the socially constructed nature of (homo)sexuality index the contemporary entrance of white gays and lesbians into the rights and privileges of American citizenship. As they extend such practices and access racial and class privileges by conforming to gender and sexual norms, white gay formations in particular become homonormative locations that comply with heteronormative protocols . . . white homonormative racial formations claim privileges to the detriment of those communities marginalized by normative regulations—regulations that are racialized, classed, and gendered. (53)

In this way, homonormative constituencies emerge through broader discourses of whiteness that posit the proper queer subject as the white subject. As Ferguson makes
clear here, the white homonormative subject is one that is marked by exclusionary practices based on race, class, and gender.

The point here is not to make the claim that simply naming a practice or politics queer would ameliorate the exclusionary practices that I have outlined thus far. Invoking queer as a catch-all identity has its own problems of exclusion that are not too far removed from the exclusionary practices of homonormative constituencies. As Viviane Namaste argues, “Anglo-American discussions about transsexual and transgendered people habitually assume that we should be politically aligned with lesbian and gay communities, that we should organize ourselves according to their model” (Invisible Lives 65). For Namaste, the primary problem with this assumption is the alignment itself is predicated upon an erasure of difference that assumes the political goals of these communities to be the same. Additionally, there is also an implicit assumption that transsexual and transgender people are not participating in political organization unless it is aligned with the organization of lesbian and gay communities. This is not to suggest that the demarcations between transsexual and transgender communities, on the one hand, and lesbian and gay communities on the other are neatly defined. I am taking the time to parse out these particularities to avoid falling into the same sort of exclusionary practices I am critiquing. Namaste argues that much of the problems with the uptake of the experiences transsexual and transgender into queer theory and politics comes with language restrictions of primarily Anglo-American sources (Invisible Lives 60-65). These restrictions, she argues, primarily come with the limitations of the English language for understanding the ways in which transsexual and transgender communities outside of English-speaking ones are constituted through language (Invisible Lives 60).
Namaste’s attention to the limits of the English language point to a necessary move beyond thinking solely about the Canadian and American nation-states. More precisely, if the It Gets Better Project is situated within a queer liberalism that is predicated upon the reinforcement of citizenship within the Canadian and American nation-states based upon a condition of whiteness one must think about how this project works at a national and transnational level. Furthermore, attentive to Namaste’s argument about the limits of the English language, one must be attentive to the limits of language. In fact, Namaste’s argument urges a consideration for an attentiveness to multiple different languages. While I have gestured to the complex nature of language through the French and English interpretations of Freud’s concept of Nachträglichkeit, it is beyond the scope of this current work to engage more fully in multiple languages. This is precisely why I have chosen to move through the registers of affect and psychoanalysis when thinking about trauma. Ananya Jahanara Kabir argues that a challenge for trauma theory is developing ways of analyzing traumas that “acknowledge the myriad modes of consolation, memorializing and reconciliation which are deployed by traumatized subjects who may never have heard of Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis, and indeed, ‘trauma theory’” (64). Kabir is concerned with the ways in which the current “toolbox for the analysis of trauma” is limited by both cultural and geographical gaps that form between the different contexts in which trauma is produced (64). One of these gaps is in the language used to discuss and analyze trauma. As I outlined in Chapter One with respect to the translation of Nachträglichkeit from German-to-French and German-to-English, there is something lost in the translation of writing from one language to another. It is precisely the specificity of one’s wording in one’s language that is lost, as
shown with the different meanings that Nachträglichkeit takes on once translated from German. Thus, a new way of thinking about trauma and analyzing it needs to be developed. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to develop an entirely new mode of analyzing trauma that is attentive to the limits of language. However, it is within the scope to gesture towards such a method through an appeal to the framework of traumatic affect. Trauma theory’s “drive to generate connections that must work in, and despite, different contexts,” as Kabir points out, provides a good starting point. The transpersonal nature of affect is useful in articulating only the ways in which the boundaries of the nation-state are strengthened through the uptake of a white homonormative subject into the constituency of the nation-state. It is also useful in describing the ways in which resistance to these narratives occurs.

Equally important for thinking about how trauma is bound to the idea of the nation is a consideration for psychoanalysis. Both affect and psychoanalysis are part of the toolkit I am attempting to develop for analyzing how trauma is taken up in nation-building projects. More specifically, psychoanalysis clarifies how the “chosen trauma,” as Khanna calls it, is “an affect resulting from group identification (whether individually willed, or imposed externally)” (14 my emphasis). Khanna’s point about group identification being either individually willed or imposed externally is especially pertinent for my argument about the It Gets Better Project. The imposition of an identification based on a singular narrative of trauma relies both on an individually willed and externally imposed sense of group identity. As I have argued thus far, group identification is based upon a shared sense of trauma that is itself inundated with notions of whiteness. Thus, there exists a gatekeeping moment in which only some queer subjects
are incorporated within the discourse of the It Gets Better Project and by queer liberalism. However, the processes by which a project situated in queer liberalism works to impose its wounded queer identity does so in such a way that reinforces boundaries between both people and geographies. One of these processes is through language wherein queer as a wounded identity is externally imposed upon a collective. This imposition of a wounded identity is itself a harmful practice in as much as queer is not necessarily translatable cross-culturally. Recalling Morgensen’s argument that Foucault’s reading of sexuality is itself a biopolitics, it might be correct to suggest that a reading of queerness as a wounded identity itself is a function of biopolitics. The following section will elaborate on precisely how the imposition of a wounded queer identity in the uptake of homonormative constituencies within the fabric of the nation further solidifies boundaries between geographies.

3.3 National Trauma and Homonationalism

The borders between people and geographies in the deployment of a wounded (read: white) queer identity is strengthened by the invocation of national trauma. Jenny Edkins identifies a distinction between what is colloquially called ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ wherein the former refers to “the routine, regular processes that take place in parliaments, elections, political parties, and the institutions of government” and the latter to “the arena of innovation and revolution, a field of sudden, unexpected and abrupt change, a point at which the status quo is challenged” (xiii). The disruptions, Edkins goes on, can at times be traumatic in how they disrupt the normative flow of ‘politics’. Edkins terms this temporal shattering “trauma-time” (xiv). What occurs during trauma time is an event that does not fit with the linearity of the story of the nation-state. Thus, a narrative
account of the event must occur in order for it to be assimilated into the narrative of the
nation-state. As Edkins argues, “it [the event] doesn’t fit the story we already have, but
demands that we invent a new account, one that will produce a place for what has
happened and make it meaningful” (xiv). Important to her analysis, Edkins points to how
the linear time of politics is not a matter of fact, but something socially constructed that
must be (re)produced over time wherein the (re)production of one story becomes the
narrative of a nation-state. Edkins argues the story of the nation-state is constructed as
linear in ways that produce and maintain sovereign power:

Sovereign power produces and is itself produced by trauma: it provokes
wars, genocides and famines. But it works by concealing its involvement
and claiming to be a provider not a destroyer of security. It does this, of
course, directly, through discourses of international security that centre
around the state as well as through claiming to provide security internally
for its citizens. (xv)

Within this construction of a normative temporal understanding of trauma as that which
disrupts and is then assimilated into the narrative of the nation-state, there is an
anachronistic move in the association of traumatic events with linearity. Edkins points
out in her analysis, specifically the ways in which traumatic events are (re)scripted in
terms of “national heroism” thereby concealing the very traumas that the nation-states
create. As this project has endeavored to communicate, trauma and traumatic events
cannot be fixed to a normative understanding of temporality such as the supposed
linearity of the story of the nation-state. Thus, a reincorporation of traumatic events into
the story of the nation can be read as a move to assimilate the trauma into the fabric of the nation.

Such an assimilation is possible through the same sort of processes by which homonormative constituencies are folded into the narrative of the nation-state. Following Laplanche’s reading of “transitory identifications,” I argue that the processes of assimilating the traumatic event into the fabric of the nation work the in similar manners (80). For Laplanche, these identifications are those “taking place in crowds, when a group of individuals comes to place the prestigious person of a leader in the position of that agency of the personality called the ego-ideal” (80). In Lacan’s reading of Freud, he makes a distinction between the ideal-ego and the ego-ideal. On the one hand, the ideal-ego “stands for the idealized self-image of the subject (the way I would like to be, the way I would like others to see me)” (Žižek 80). On the other hand, the ego-ideal “is the agency whose gaze I try to impress with my ego image, the big Other who watches over me and impels me to give my best, the ideal I try to follow and actualize” (Žižek 80). If the wounded queer identity that is put forward by the It Gets Better Project is one bound to whiteness, and if reading the crypt within whiteness as the love-object of the It Gets Better Project leads one to identifying colonialism as the phantom haunting the crypt, then, the assimilation of the wounded identity into the narrative of the nation would signify the (re)inscription of a colonial narrative onto the nation-state. Simply stated, the It Gets Better Project is a nation-building project that seeks to reinforce the colonial boundaries of the nation-state.

Thinking about trauma and the nation-state—trauma as being constitutive of the nation-state—is a good entry point into analyzing the mechanisms wherein wounded
white queer identity is assimilated into the identity of the nation-state. Writing on how sexuality is taken up in the formation of the nation-state, M. Jacqui Alexander posits that the investment on the part of nation-states in sexuality, specifically in a colonial imperative to heterosexualize nation-states, is not unique but complementary to other forms of nation building (181). As she argues, of particular importance is “the complicity of state and corporate processes in the manufacture of citizenship normativized within the prism of heterosexuality” (181). Thus, much in the same way that race plays a central role in the configuration of who is afforded certain rights within nation-states, so too does the deployment of sexuality matter with regards to the construction of citizens of the nation-state. Alexander furthers this argument by noting how configurations of citizenship are not solely demarcated by processes of heterosexualization (70-71). Rather, Alexander argues that “the contiguity between heterosexual and homosexual male desire under the seal of a shared colonialist appropriative approach vetted through race and ultranationalist representations of the West demands close scrutiny” (68). Building off of the racial articulations of homonormativity, Alexander’s own arguments here illustrate the ways in which white homonormative constituencies are becoming increasingly globalized thereby not only reinforcing barriers between people, but also barriers between geographies. More precisely, one’s belonging to a group is also indicative of one’s belonging to the nation-state. If one successfully adheres to the narrative of trauma that the It Gets Better Project puts forward, as situated within queer liberalism, then one might also gain a sense of belonging within the nation-state. I want to avoid establishing a fixed causal link here, as the attachments themselves are not guaranteed and might be better thought of as aspirational. Thus, the sort of politics of citizenship outlined above is not
one based only on racial exclusion, but a form of sexual exclusion that itself is always already racialized. Furthermore, this citizenship is also marked by trauma.

Jasbir Puar describes this unification of nationalism and homonormativity through the framework of “homonationalism.” Puar grounds her framework in three distinct organizing constructs: sexual exceptionalism, queer as regulatory, and the ascendency of whiteness (3). For Puar, a national acceptance and inclusion of homosexuality into the formation of the nation—or, in Puar’s terms, a national homosexuality—is a key component in the expansion of American empire. Puar defines homonationalism as a “regulatory script nor only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects” (2). Puar further argues that the “fleeting sanctioning of a national homosexual subject is possible, not only through the proliferation of sexual-racial subjects who invariably fall out of its narrow terms of acceptability . . . but more significantly, through the simultaneous engendering and disavowal of populations of sexual-racial others who need not apply” (2 original emphasis). Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s understanding of queer as a modality, Puar builds her framework of homonationalism on the understanding of how queerness comes to encapsulate a certain understanding of freedom. As she argues, “individual freedom becomes the barometer of choice in the valuation, and ultimately, regulation, of queerness” (22). From this viewpoint, the homonormative subjects that are folded back into discourses of nationhood and nationalism on the basis of their proximity to liberal understandings of freedom become therein members of the nation-state. Thus, activism that seeks out equality on the bases outlined above are themselves nation-building projects.
I draw attention to the sort of nation-building projects attentive to racial and sexual logics in connection to queer activist projects because I want to point out that the processes I describe here are not unique to the It Gets Better Project, but rather are a part of a larger narrative of queer activism that itself is based upon exclusionary politics of sexuality and race. Morgan Bassichis and Dean Spade argue that “more progressive queer politics participate in white supremacy’s tactics of pitting ‘good gays’ (white, middle class, gender normative, able bodied) against ‘bad queers’ (black, brown, poor, disabled, which necessarily means gender non-normative)” and that by doing so these politics and their projects also “unwittingly reproduce and are productive of the fundamental structures of anti-blackness, settler colonialism, and permanent war undergirding the United States itself” (194). Bassichis and Spade point specifically to the It Gets Better Project as a key site where their claims manifest: “The project illustrates how a form of gayness implicitly linked to whiteness and upward mobility stakes its claim to the future” (169). As Bassichis and Spade argue, however, the implicit connection between gayness and whiteness is not contained within the It Gets Better Project, but itself is symptomatic of a larger issue in much of queer politics. Bassichis and Spade identify this issue as the implicit linking of sexuality to whiteness (196). Criticizing the It Gets Better Project’s placement within this issue, Bassichis and Spade argue:

Savage’s story generalizes a particular narrative in which white queers can ‘escape’ homophobia by moving to gay enclaves in urban areas, a trajectory out of reach for so many queer and trans people who will remain

11 The same logics of anti-blackness, settler colonialism, and war are also formative of the Canadian nation-state. See, for example: The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925 by Mariana Valverde.
targets of policing and immigration enforcement, even and perhaps especially in white gay neighborhoods where they are read as dangerous outsiders. (196)

In the push towards equality, these projects end up reproducing rather than circumventing systemic oppression. In fact, one could make the argument that the implicit goal of these projects is to reinforce systemic oppression through the investment in neoliberal politics. This argument comes through most prominently in how many of these projects seek reparations in legal reform. Sarah Lamble names this focus on equality under the law “queer investments in punishment” (151 original emphasis). For Lamble, one of the main shifts in the context of progressive queer politics is “how the neoliberal carceral state has shifted from being a key target of queer protest, to instead becoming a celebrated guardian of a narrowly defined sexual citizenship” (151 original emphasis). The demarcation of sexual citizenship is not new and neither is the consequential investment in the carceral state. In fact, Lamble argues that the definition of sexual citizenship cannot be reduced to “another story of queer assimilation and co-optation,” but that we must pay attention to how queer investments in punishment reflect “a deeper reconfiguration of sexual politics, where citizenship norms and practices are increasingly infused with a chillingly punitive and deathly logic” (“Queer Investments” 151). For example, Lamble shows how the Matthew Sheppard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, passed by former United States President Barack Obama and supported by various LGBT groups, was not concerned with the prevention of homophobic violence but with prosecution (“Queer Investments” 154). Indeed, she argues, “the Act dramatically extends federal powers to prosecute hate-motivated
incidents by providing additional resources for investigating and prosecuting hate-motivated crimes and enabling harsher sanctions for individuals convicted of such crimes” (“Queer Investments” 153-154). The form of equality that is put forward in the push towards legal reform is one based upon neoliberal notions of freedom and rights. Coterminous with legal reform as reparation, then, is the establishment of a victim-perpetrator relationship that is itself sexualized and racialized. Said differently, the production of a wounded queer identity that is read as white and thus assimilable to the nation-state is constructed as the victim, whereas, to borrow Puar’s term, “sexual-racial others” are demonized (2).

Yet, the oppositional construction of an innocent white queer victim with a demonized sexual-racial subject is not enough to be attentive to the ways in which trauma comes to signify citizenship in the nation-state. Most immediately, it assumes the intelligibility of death for all sexual-racial subjects. As Sima Shakhsari points out, “not all queer bodies are necessary outside the heterosexual hegemony, but may, in fact, be integral to maintaining forms of nationalism that reify hetero and homonormative hegemonies” (102). Indeed, Shakhsari argues that examining the production of queer death and how queer death invigorates these projects is imperative to understanding how the deployment of life and death work transnationally (102-103). For the purposes of my argument, thinking about how queer death invigorates neoliberal queer projects is necessary in thinking about how trauma is bound to notions of citizenship.

3.4 The Subject of Trauma and the Nation

I want to extend the arguments made here concerning the politics of citizenship to an understanding of how trauma itself is integral to these formations and plays a role in
creating what I term traumatic citizenship. The mechanisms by which homonormativity and homonationalism operate to fold the white queer subject back into discourses of the nation are analogous to the ways in which whiteness is desired and sought after to heal the wound of white queer identity. Recall, the desire for whiteness exists as a desire for the wholeness of the subject. Building on the previous section, I have argued that this desire is also the desire for the death of sexual-racial others. Returning to Jenkins, traumatic events are often themselves deployed as nation-building events such that their disruptive nature is assimilated back into the narrative of the nation-state. In this way, at the nexus of citizenship, sexuality, and race is located a politics of citizenship that is based on trauma. Therefore, the politics of citizenship deployed by the It Gets Better Project is at once about both the assimilation and the negation of queer people. Adapting this politics onto the broader context here I want to thereby extend my argument to account for the ways in which resistance to liberal queer political projects like the It Gets Better Project can inadvertently reinforce the exclusionary practices outlined above.

Before I expand on how the dismantling of the figure of the child can play a part in reinforcing exclusionary practices, I want to first illustrate how the child is figured within critiques of liberal queer political projects invested in futurity.

For Lee Edelman, the figure of the child comes to represent what he calls “reproductive futurism,” which are “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (2). An engagement with reproductive futurity, according to Edelman, is antithetical to queer politics. Indeed,
Edelman argues that queerness itself signals an oppositional view on the centrality of the child in queer political configurations. He writes that “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’” and that what is needed instead is “the embrace of queer negativity” (5-6 original emphasis). Edelman’s configuration of queerness, then, bears a resemblance to Cohen’s in the rejection of a monolithic politics of identity. Although similar, Edelman’s own understanding of queerness here is rooted in Lacanian psychoanalysis, which itself has some theoretical similarities to queer theory with a number of queer theorists drawing from psychoanalysis. As Tim Dean argues:

> Queer has no essence, and its radical force evaporates—or is normalized—as soon as queer coalesces into a psychological identity. The term ‘queer’ is not simply a newer, hipper word for being gay; instead it alters how we think about gayness and homosexuality. Its anti-identitarianism gives rise to both the promise and the risk that queer offers for progressive politics—the promise that we may think and act beyond the confines of identity, including group identity, and the risk that in doing so the specificities of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity might be overlooked or lost. (240-241)

The psychoanalytic leanings of Edelman’s own work align well with what Dean outlines as a connection between Lacanian psychoanalysis and queer theory. Edelman’s project of rejecting the figure of the child would, in his estimation, realign queer politics with the promise of queer while also accounting for the potential risks that Dean warns about. Indeed, as he argues, the political potential of queerness is not within the realm of liberal discourses of rights and freedoms, but rather “in the capacity of queer sexualities to
figure the radical dissolution of the contract, in every sense social and Symbolic, on which the future as putative assurance against the jouissance of the Real depends” (16). The child and the futurity it represents therein is meant to give the subject an “always about-to-be-realized identity” that is reflective of how the subject is understood psychoanalytically as “subjects of the signifier, [we] can only be signifiers ourselves, can only ever aspire to catch up to whatever it is we might signify by closing the gap that divides us and, paradoxically, makes us subjects through that act of division alone” (Edelman 13, 8 original emphasis). The figure of the child gives the subject something to aspire to in order to close the gap. The promised futurity that the figure of the child signifies carries with it the promise of meaning for the subject and, as Edelman argues, this centering of reproductive futurity is equated with a stability of identity that replicates a heteronormative way of being wherein queer becomes emptied of its potential by upholding social order rather than attempting to subvert it: “The Child, that is, marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” (Edelman 21).

Edelman’s argument figures queerness as an attack on the social order. If the social order is that which is invested in reproductive futurity, and if the figure of the child is symbolic of the repeated appeal to the reproduction of a social order based upon a fantasy of cohesive identity, then, queerness would oppose the fantasy of a cohesive subject (Edelman 22). For this queerness to properly oppose the fantasy of a cohesive subject, it must disavow the child. Queerness, in Edelman’s psychoanalytic understanding, is attuned to the death drive. “As the constancy of pressure both alien and
internal to the logic of the Symbolic,” Edelman argues that the queer subject “in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (9). For Freud, the death drive is the compulsion towards repetition. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Freud describes this compulsion as a drive to “repeat the repressed matter as an experience in the present, instead of remembering it as something belonging to the past, which is what the physician would much rather see happen” (145 original emphasis). Freud locates the drive towards death in entropy and that repetitions “give pleasure by reducing tension or conflict” (Ragland 88). For Lacan, on the other hand, the death drive signifies a drive toward death that is result of an excess in jouissance. Indeed, as Ragland argues, “we cling to fetish objects (the object a) which we identify as our Good” and that through this attachment to the object a “humans aim for a consistency of meaning that protects the imaginary body from encountering the holes where the pain of the real—qua impasse—enters thought” (88). For Lacan, the repetition of the death drive signifies a loss of pleasure because the repetition only ever refers to a prior moment of pleasure that cannot be recovered (Ragland 89). Through repetition, one might retrieve “wisps of jouissance” via the fetishistic attachment to the object a, however, “the lost object stays lost” (Ragland 89). Thus, the repetition compulsion drives us towards closing a gap that cannot be closed. As Ragland argues, “one cannot satisfy the desire for the new—for change—by repeating the known, for this grounds individuals in something they value above all else: the consistency of the expected. This is the death that drives us all in our daily acts” (90). For Edelman, the object a is the “fantasmatic Child” that holds the promise of wholeness attained in the future. The fetishistic attachment to the figure of the child is resolved, in Edelman’s
argument, with an alignment with queerness. This attunement to the death drive is integral to conceptualizing queerness as a refusal. Specifically, the link here is with the refusal of identity, as Edelman argues “the death drive refuses identity or the absolute privilege of any goal” and thus “queerness could never constitute an authentic or substantive identity . . . queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a jouissance that social reality and the futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed” (22, 24-25).

Edelman’s incisive text provides a useful way to think about the politics of futurity and the investment of futurity in the figure of the child. However, by centering his argument on queerness as sexuality, there is an erasure of how queer death invigorates the very project that he is proposing. The focus on sexuality as the sole signifier of queerness, then, gives credence to my argument that queerness-as-sexuality ignores the ways in which experiences of class, race, gender, and other axes of identity shape one’s experience of sexuality. If queerness-as-sexuality is thought of as an alignment to the condition of whiteness, then, we can think of the approximation of queerness to whiteness. Thought of in this way, a rethinking of Edelman’s argument might then configure whiteness as the object a to which there is a fetishistic attachment. Queerness, then, does not so much signify a refusal as much as it does a repetition. This repetition can be found within how Edelman configures queerness as a refusal. Integral to this refusal is a refusal of both past and future; the future is, for Edelman, the repetition of the past. Encapsulating Edelman’s intricate work is his development of what he calls “sinthomosexuality” (33 original emphasis). This combines Lacan’s use of the sinthome and Edelman’s placing of queerness as a site of refusal:
I am calling *sinthomosexual*ity, then, the site where the fantasy of futurism confronts the insistence of a jouissance that rends it precisely by *rendering* it in relation to that drive. *Sinthomosexual*ity, also speaks, as a neologistic signifier, to the ‘sin’ that continues to attach itself to ‘homosexuality’ . . . and materializes the threat to the subject’s faith that its proper home is in meaning, a threat made Real by the homosexual’s link to a less reassuring ‘home’: the synthome as a site of a jouissance around and against which the subject takes shape and in which it finds its consistency. (38-39 my emphasis)

The assumption that queerness-as-sexuality also signifies a link to a sense of home is questionable. To borrow Nael Bhanji’s question: “But what do we mean by home?” (513 original emphasis). Noting the absence of discussions of race in some trans scholarship, Bhanji interrogates notions of home within trans scholarship to argue for a trans politics that is critical of notions of home (513). Indeed, as Bhanji argues, “if home is where the heart is, then some of us are actually out of place. And if to ‘haunt’ is to frequent a place habitually, then home, in a sense, is always already haunted” (514). Returning to my assertion that what haunts the It Gets Better Project is whiteness and what is buried within the crypt is colonialism, what energizes this project then is the death of trans and queer people of colour. The It Gets Better Project does not exist without queer death. However, while there is a privileging of the death of white queer youth, the construction of a queer identity predicated upon the condition whiteness is itself dependent upon the death of trans and queer people of colour. For Snorton and Haritaworn, “trans death—and most frequently the deaths of trans women or trans-feminine people of color—act as a
resource for the development and dissemination of many different agendas” (66). Both texts by Bhanji and Snorton and Haritaworn point to thinking about working at an intersectional and transnational level that is attentive to time and place. For, ignoring time and place in the memorialization of the death of queer and trans people of color can slip into what Namaste terms a “broader project of imperialism” (Sex Change 140). Namaste identifies imperialism as the “imposition of a particular worldview and conceptual framework across nations, languages, and cultures” (140). This is particularly true, Namaste argues, in terms of rights-based claims that themselves are reflective of imperialism. Indeed, these claims are oftentimes bound to the imposition of what Namaste calls “certain economic and cultural understandings of the world, which in turn reflect specific national and ethnic values” (160).

The notion of time and place is important here for a consideration of trauma as being constitutive of citizenship and of the ways in which the figure of the child is deployed on behalf of queer political projects in an allegiance with reproductive futurism. If, as Cvetkovich argues, trauma is “both a national and transnational category” then it would require attention to time and place, precisely because, as she argues, “an exploration of the intersections of migration and trauma is thus consonant with the critiques of nationalism and globalization that have emerged in discourses of transnationalism and diaspora” (120). Furthermore, an understanding of time and place does not allow for queerness to slip into the sole signification of sexuality, as it appears in Edelman’s text. At the same time, it would not lose all account of sexuality, but instead provide an avenue through which sexuality can be discussed in tandem with notions of nation and race. This sort of work, according to Cvetkovich, “has had the important
benefit of moving gay and lesbian studies beyond its location in metropolitan centers and the United States, and embedding categories of sexuality and sexual identity more fully within racial and national contexts” (121).

As Halberstam argues, “our relations to place, like our relations to people, are studded with bias, riven with contradictions, and complicated by opaque emotional responses” (22). Halberstam focuses on queerness as aligned to “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (1). As Halberstam points out, this understanding of queerness comes closer to Foucault’s argument that “‘homosexuality threatens people as a ‘way of life’ rather than as a way of having sex’” (qtd. in Halberstam 1). In this way, Halberstam keeps with the useful formulation that Edelman offers in associating queerness with refusal, yet this refusal, by virtue of an attention to temporality and place, does not foreclose either the future or the past. For Halberstam, an understanding of queer time is about “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (2). However, an alignment with this sense of a life unscripted by these supposedly normative conventions begs the question to whom are these conventions normative. What seems to be suggested here is that there exists a certain queer ‘way of life’ that, while not necessarily bound to normative temporalities, is in some way subjected to a certain narrative. As such, what Halberstam suggests here seems to slip into the same sort of argument as Edelman’s disavowal of the future. This intervention here provides a good counterbalance to Edelman’s insistence on a disavowal of the future and, by extension, the past. Such a counterbalance necessarily invokes a question that I have repeatedly asked over the course of this work: Who are these projects for? Clearly, a future based upon
reproductive futurism—what the It Gets Better Project in particular focuses on—is one in alignment with the exclusionary logics of liberalism, and in Eng’s formulation, with queer liberalism. Yet, a disavowal of futurity does not ameliorate these concerns and more closely resembles the very logics from which it seeks to distance itself.

It is important to look at the ways in which queer death is memorialized to examine how queer death invigorates queer projects embedded within queer liberalism. Halberstam offers an interesting reading of the ways in which trauma is mobilized in queer political projects, arguing that communities often select who’s deaths matter (2). Indeed, in reading the deaths of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard, Halberstam argues that “such figures are made to stand in for the hurts and the indignities that are so often rendered invisible by the peculiar closet structure of homophobia” (16). On the one hand, there is a more generous reading here by which “a community selects a violated member to represent otherwise unrepresentable damage” wherein the community “would see a transformation of a personal affront into a political one” (16). On the other hand, there is something more nefarious underpinning who is selected:

A less generous reading might argue that the process of selecting (white and young) martyrs within urban queer activism allows for an increasingly empowered urban middle-class gay and lesbian community to disavow its growing access to privilege in order to demand new forms of state recognition, and to find new ways of accessing respectability and its rewards. Many of the gays and lesbians who attended candlelit vigils for Brandon, and even more so for Matthew Shepard, were indeed people who would never involve themselves in political activism, and who certainly
would not be organizing on behalf of gender-variant queers or queers of color. (16-17)

Thus, we must be attentive to the ways in which memorialization of queer death is performed. Sarah Lamble also remarks on forms of memorialization, but with a focus on the Transgender Day of Remembrance. For Lamble, “transgender bodies are universalized along a singular identity plane of victimhood and rendered visible primarily through the violence that is acted upon them” (31). Such a reading of violence does not account the ways in which this violence is also marked by specific contexts, both temporal and geographical, and the distribution of power along the lines of race, class, and sexuality (Lamble 31). Indeed, as Lamble argues, “deracialized accounts of violence produce seemingly innocent White witnesses who can consume these spectacles of domination without confronting their own complicity in such acts” (31). As such, there exists a hierarchy of trauma wherein queer death is entrapped within what Lamble, following Razack and Fellows, calls “competing marginalities” (33). In this competition, there is an assertion of one group as both the “most oppressed but also most innocent” and thus there is also an attribution of “good and bad victims, and these categories tend to fall along particular class, gender, and racial lines” (33). What I am outlining here is reminiscent of the previous chapter’s argument about a normative teleological narrative of sadness-to-happiness. Lamble notes a similar teleological narrative exists in the memorialization of the death of transgender people with a cause-and-effect relationship that centers transphobia as a cause and the death of transgender people as the effect (35). Yet, it is the representation of death that is important for Lamble, because oftentimes it is the violent representations of the death of transgender people of color that both advance
the agenda of the Transgender Day of Remembrance, but also reinforce preexisting racial hierarchies (35). Earlier critiques of the Transgender Day of Remembrance are relevant here for how they point to a different political project that is attentive to these hierarchies. For instance, in an interview with Namaste, Mirha-Soleil Ross is also critical of how violence against trans people is decontextualized. She argues:

The Transgender Day of Remembrance, with its sister project, the Remembering Our Dead, is a big, bold, and sickening political fraud. It sure makes for a powerful street performance: candles, tears, hugs, and snuggles over cardboard pictures of butchered members of a marginalized minority produces emotionally charged images. But it functions, both theatrically and politically, to benefit a privileged subsection of the trans community. (Sex Change 125)

I am not attempting to argue that the Transgender Day of Remembrance and the It Gets Better Project are the same, or even that they represent queer death in the same way, but rather that they both can slip into the neoliberal currents of queer liberalism. Consequently, parallels exist between both projects in the ways in which depictions of violence are used to further their own political agendas.

It is here where my argument returns to an understanding of trauma and temporality. Additionally, this return will connect the threads of thought concerning queer liberalism with my argument about trauma and temporality. Disavowing the future and the past, much like trying to fix trauma to a normative understanding of temporality, does not account for the ways in which psychoanalysis works in terms of temporality. By extension, an understanding of a wounded queer identity that seeks to disavow the future
and the past remains only accessible to those who can focus on sexuality as a primary axis of identity. If we connect the arguments concerning the Transgender Day of Remembrance and the arguments I am making against the It Gets Better Project, the common concern between both is in the representation of trauma. More precisely, the ways in which these representations are used to forward political agendas that tend to only ever benefit a privileged part of a collectivity. I argue that one of the most significant problems with these representations of trauma is how they depict the violence of trauma in a decontextualized manner. In decontextualizing the violence of trauma, there is an attempt to know for certain the cause of the violence. In this move, then, there is an implicit privileged claim to knowledge. For the Transgender Day of Remembrance, there is the assumption the violence is caused solely by transphobia. For the It Gets Better Project, there is the assumption that the violence is caused solely by homophobia.

This focus on one facet of one’s identity at the expense of other identities is reminiscent of a problem Hortense Spillers identifies through her distinction between body and flesh. For Spillers, this distinction is “the central one between the captive and liberated subject” and that “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (67). Spillers terms this separation “hieroglyphics of the flesh” through which one can then see how cultural texts are written into the flesh. Spillers focuses specifically on the ways in which the privilege of naming, precisely the sort of power that operates through colonial logics, an “American grammar,” that has ruptured and reconfigured cultural formation around a colonialist narrative with specific reference to Chattel slavery (68). As Spillers argues:
The captive body, then, brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for the value so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless. Even though the captive flesh/body has been ‘liberated,’ and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is ‘murdered’ over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (68 original emphasis)

The conceptualization of the subject, then, is dependent upon the logics of those with the privilege of naming. This privilege of naming, the privilege wielded by the progenitors of colonial logics that initiated imperialist expansion of Europe, fixes those that are named, Spiller’s captive bodies, in a particular time and space. I would extend this argument by asserting that the privileged naming that Spillers is delineating here fixes those it names as artefacts of the past that are then folded into the narrative of the nation-state. While not the same, similar logics of privileged naming takes place within the It Gets Better Project as well as in other queer liberal projects. Particularly in the memorialization of trauma and resistance. As Che Gossett argues, we must be attentive to the ways in which memorialization is also implicated in remembering sites of resistance (580). In an age of
neoliberal inclusivity, as Goesset writes, the memorialization of radical events of resistance:

Have been folded narratively into the techniques of governance whereby the state apparatus manages for its own ends the differences of its heterogeneous population—conferring inclusion, belonging, and citizenship to (hetero-, homo-, and trans-) normative subjects while violently disenfranchising others who are noncompliant with racialized gender norms. (580)

Specifically, Gossett argues that by memorializing and archiving sites of radical resistance there is a simultaneous rendering of this resistance to violence as existing in the past. Regarding the memorialization of Stonewall, Gossett notes that there seems to be an implicit gesture that signals “the closure of an era characterized by institutionalized police violence against queer and trans people of color—trans women, homeless, poor, and sex workers in particular” and that while “such violence may be called forth and then safely archived through memory of the past for some, for others criminalization and police violence are an ever-present reality” (581). Such is the story of the It Gets Better Project; the trauma of suicide of these queer youth is folded back into the narrative of the nation-state in the form of traumatic citizenship. In the appeal to reproductive futurity, trauma and violence is something located in the past. In the privileged naming of the traumatic past as traumatic, there is an implicit promise for ‘it’ to ‘get better.’ Yet, as this work has shown, this promise is only extended to a privileged homonormative constituency.
Central to Gossett’s concerns is an understanding of the violence of archiving, a violence that “imposes a structuring law and order upon memory, domesticating and institutionalizing history, while also homogenizing and flattening its topography of difference and heterogeneity” (581). This is not to dismiss the archive, but to draw attention to its potential for violence. There must, then, be a change to the ways in which we practice memorialization. We cannot simply forget the violence nor the resistances to it, the very nature of trauma will not allow for such an occurrence. At the same time, we must be wary of how practices of memorialization can render violence as a condition of the past. How might we begin remembering differently? How might a remembrance of violence occur that is attentive to the quotidian nature of trauma while at the same time does not seek to render all those that experience violence as merely victims?

3.5 Remembering/Reading Differently

If we return, for a moment, to the metaphors of water I used in the first chapter with respect to trauma and affect, I think a method of remembering the past and reading it differently can be established. In Civilization and Its Discontents Freud described what he calls an “oceanic feeling” that he describes as “a sensation of eternity, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded” (I original emphasis). Spillers adapts Freud’s conceptualization to what she calls “an analogy for undifferentiated identity” to explain the processes of ungendering that African persons were subjected to via transport through the Middle Passage (72). The process of ungendering necessitates a process of unknowing, a disconnect from time and place wherein those subjected to these processes were remade into the images based upon a colonial order. Fanon too points to this scene of subjectification, but with a metaphoric of fire as opposed to water. He writes, “the
white man is all around me up above the sky is tearing at its navel; the earth crunches under my feet and sings white, white. All this whiteness burns me to a cinder” (*Black Masks* 94). Spillers is attentive to the desubjectification of a collectivity, while Fanon gives more attention to the ways in which this desubjectification works at the level of an individual. I want to extend the processes of desubjectification illustrated here to the *It Gets Better* Project, while being attentive to the fact that not all colonial logics and projects are the same. If the *It Gets Better* Project is implicated in these particular colonial logics of desubjectification, then, the queer subject, always already white, through acts of memorialization like the *It Gets Better* Project comes to not just symbolize, but embody, colonialism. Disconnecting itself from time and place, from history itself, this queer subject projects its own subjectivity upon the world through the same logics that structured colonialist expansion. Thus, the queer subject configured here embodies the trauma of colonialism, but more specifically what Fanon describes as the colonization of the mind:

> When we consider the resources deployed to achieve the cultural alienation so typical of the colonial period, we realize that nothing was left to chance and that the final aim of colonization was to convince the indigenous population it would save them from the darkness. (*Wretched* 149)

This savior complex—a white savior complex—is ever present within queer political projects rooted in Eng’s notion of queer liberalism. In relation to those outside the *It Gets Better* Project’s normative imaginary, the mobilization of this white savior complex vis-à-vis queer and trans youth of color signals towards processes of desubjectification
similar to the ones that Spillers and Fanon illustrate. This marks a paradox of the It Gets Better Project that I have gestured towards throughout this work, especially in this chapter. The alleged purpose of the project is saving the lives of queer youth, while at the same time, the project cannot exist without their death. The archiving of their death renders the violence as something of the past and doing so energizes the colonial imperative to (re)make subjects in its image. This colonial imperative is also dependent upon an understanding of trauma in a linear temporality.

What, then, might resistance look like? The work of José Esteban Muñoz, shows us that resistance can be figured within hope for the future; a hope attentive to both the past and the present; a hope for things to ‘get better.’ For Muñoz, queerness is the symbol of this hope for the future. As he argues, “queerness is not yet here” and that it “exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (1). The futurity here is not one that is disavowed and disconnected from the past, but one attentive to it. As I have established, the temporality of trauma cannot be fixed to a specific time. This is especially evident how trauma circulates between past and present as an event that returns to the traumatized. The futurity that Muñoz describes, through its attention to past and present, is also one that can be figured as attentive to experiences of trauma. What I have described as traumatic citizenship above can be linked to the way Muñoz reads Berlant’s formulation of dead citizenship as one that is “formatted, in part, through the sacrifice of the present for a fantasmatic future” (49). Contesting this point, Muñoz instead urges for a consideration of a queer present. Indeed, as he argues “certain performances of queer citizenship contain what I call an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility.
within a stultifying heterosexual present” (49). At the heart of Muñoz’s argument is an understanding and appreciation of time and place, or, as Muñoz writes “a study of the future in the present by turning to the past” (49).

Despite this investment in the future by way of present engagement with the past, Muñoz remains critical of some of the ways in which futurity has been taken up in queer political projects. The main charge that Muñoz brings forward is through the invocation of abstract vs. concrete utopias. Abstract utopias are “untethered from any historical consciousness” while concrete utopias are “relational to historically situated struggles” that are grounded in “the hopes of the collective” (3). Criticizing the homonormative imperatives that adhere to an assimilationist rhetoric that is itself entwined with neoliberal politics, Muñoz argues that this form of “gay pragmatism” is itself a sign of “fake futurity” and that this futurity is not, as is commonly argued, an investment in children but an investment in “an assimilation that is forever over the rainbow” (55 my emphasis). For Muñoz, these investments in a neoliberal sense of futurity are disconnected from history and represent abstract utopias. Adapting Muñoz’s critique here to the It Gets Better Project, I contend that the It Gets Better Project represents an abstract utopia in that it is disconnected from a historical consciousness that would foreground the violences experienced by queer and trans people of color. Muñoz, to properly account for a multiplicity of identity categories, uses “minoritarian to index citizen-subjects who, due to antagonisms within the social such as race, class, and sex, are debased within the majoritarian public sphere” (56). The concept of the minoritarian subject, then, also accounts for the ways in which gay constituencies might themselves, in their efforts to dismantle oppressive regimes, (re)produce the same exclusionary
practices. Can a project effectively seek to address violence and trauma without effectively addressing the past? By not addressing the past, is it not the case that there is a simultaneous rendering of violence as existing in the past? Does hoping for a better future necessarily entail dismissing past and present trauma? Can a future without trauma exist? Muñoz insists that it is within the realm of performance that resistance to fake futurity can take place. As he argues:

Minoritarian performance—performances both theatrical and quotidian—transports us across symbolic space, inserting us in a coterminous time when we witness new formations within the present and the future. The coterminous temporality of such performance exists within the future and the present, surpassing relegation to one temporality (the present) and insisting on the minoritarian subject’s status as a world-historical entity. The stage and the street, like the shop floor, are venues for performances that allow the spectator to access minoritarian lifeworlds that exist, importantly and dialectically, within the future and the present. (56)

In the conceptualization of both minoritarian subjects and their performances there is also a consideration for the severing of the past from the present, unmarked by temporality. For Muñoz, this unmarkedness means whiteness (57). It is precisely this whiteness that, rather than offer the promise of pulling one from the darkness, instead is itself a brightening, indeed a whitening, so intense that it is blinding. It is this blinding quality of whiteness that attempts to disconnect subjects from their histories to write new ones for them, (un)marking and (un)making them through colonial logics. The move to disconnect from history through colonial logics works to create a dominant collectivity
that is itself ahistorical. I contend that this blinding, by being ahistorical, also renders the future as unmarked. The future, then, is blinding. However, it does not have to be and the radical potential in the establishment of collectivities is important in resisting this blindness. Muñoz knows of the importance of collectivities, and asserts that “the state understands the need to keep us from knowing ourselves, knowing our masses” (64).

Muñoz’s imagined futurity here is one more attuned to an understanding of utopia:

Our criticism should, like the cases I have surveyed, be infused with a utopian function that is attuned to the ‘anticipatory illumination’ of art and culture. Such illumination cuts through fragmenting darkness and allows us to see the politically enabling whole. Such illumination will provide us with access to a world that should be, that could be, and that will be. (64)

The illumination here stands in contrast to the blindness I mention above. It does so through an attention to history and to the collectivity that can emerge in an attentiveness to history. Where the whiteness is blinding, the illumination is revelatory. Thus, contrary to the futurity proposed by Edelman, the one that Muñoz envisions is one that does not attempt to fix a subject in a static temporal state and thus one that does not adhere to colonial logics. Instead, an attunement to temporality and geography allows for the path of a better future to be envisioned.
Chapter 4

Coda: Towards a Future of Getting Better

“This book is haunted by the memory of many people for whom growing up didn’t necessarily mean getting better, people who couldn’t figure out how to wait until things got better, people who are not that different than me” (Cvetkovich *Depression* 207).

“I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing” (hooks 59).

At the onset of this work, I noted how Cathy Caruth situates psychoanalysis as a statement of survival (*Trauma* 9). From this declaration, I situated my thesis amid two approaches to trauma. On the one hand, there is the approach to trauma that seeks to fix trauma as a structured phenomenon. This formulation is what Stef Craps names the “events-based model” of trauma (31). This model of trauma is critiqued based on the premise that it fixes trauma and the event of trauma to a normative temporal timeline of before-during-after. This critique, however, is based in a historicist model of trauma that seeks to render trauma as knowable through contextualization. As this thesis has endeavored to show, such a temporal alignment does not account for the ways in which psychoanalysis is not bound to a normative understanding of temporality. Furthermore, the assertion that historicization is needed also puts forth the idea that trauma, as a concept, is one that is trans-historically and cross-culturally stable. Yet, one must be attuned to the different ways in which trauma manifests. Thus, a return to psychoanalysis is required to be attentive to the different ways in which trauma is made manifest.

While much of this work launches a harsh, yet well-deserved, critique at the It Gets Better Project, I do not wish to dismiss the It Gets Better Project completely. More
accurately, I do not want to deny the critical potential available in messages of hope. In the introduction to his monograph *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Neil Lazarus asserts that he wants to “move from the ‘negative’ moment of critique to a more ‘positive’ moment of reconstruction” (1). With this in mind, I think there is something to recover from the remains of the critique I have launched: a message of hope. Hope is a powerful entity and the hope for a better future is a strong motivating force that can effect change through the formations of collectivities. I want to be clear here that I am not advocating for the inclusion of those excluded by the It Gets Better Project. Such an inclusion would only ever function to further normalize the deaths of those heralded by the project while leaving those deaths that the project is invigorated by unrecognized. At the same time, simply recognizing death as death does nothing to question the conditions that made this death possible or necessary. In fact, as Glen Coulthard argues, the politics of recognition does more to reinforce “the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power” than it does in terms of “ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of *reciprocity* or *mutual* recognition” (3 original emphasis). Thus, the simple recognition of trauma is not sufficient lest we desire to (re)inscript colonial logics onto the trauma of others. In moving through the analytic registers of psychoanalysis and affect, I have attempted to point to how there needs to be an understanding of trauma in its own context. Atkinson and Richardson consider affect in how it “allows exploration of the prospect that trauma may not be inherently, or merely, a discrete subjective experience, but rather it might primarily be a cultural and transgenerational operation” (15). An attentiveness to the transgenerational transmission of trauma, indeed an attentiveness to the affective stickiness of trauma, would be one that is grounded in the
understanding that trauma needs to be addressed on its own terms and in its own contexts. If we are to take seriously Caruth’s claim that trauma can be a mode through which cross-cultural communication can be undertaken, then we must remain hopeful that things can get better. Yet, this hope must not be grounded in the (re)inscription of colonial power. It must be one grounded in a collective movement towards a better future. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Friere writes that hope is “rooted in men’s incompletion, from which they move out in constant search—a search which can be carried out only in communion with others . . . dialogue cannot be carried on in a climate of hopelessness” (91-92). For Sara Ahmed, hope signals the difficulty of moving towards a better future: Hope is not at the expense of struggle, but animates struggle; hope gives us a sense that there is a point to working things out, working things through. Hope does not only or always point towards the future, but carries us through when the terrain is difficult, when the path we follow makes it harder to proceed. Hope is behind us when we have to work for something to be possible. (Feminist Life 2)

It is here, with a renewed understanding of a hope for a better future, one that, through Muñoz’s work is grounded in an understanding of historical context, that I return to the mantra of the It Gets Better Project. In this return I think there needs to be a slight change from the supposition of a getting better to an understanding of the potential for a getting better. In other words, it can get better. This sort of getting better is not one that can be displaced onto an imagined future detached from present and past. Getting better, indeed resistance to colonial power, is not an easy process. As noted in the introduction, resistance is not easy nor is it necessarily safe. A different iteration of this project might
have placed more focus on the multifaceted resistances to the It Gets Better Project, further nuancing the many approaches to the project. In fact, future research should seek to understand these critiques and I would hope that this work would be put in conversation with those critiques in the further exposition of the cracks and fissures in the It Gets Better Project. Decolonization, as Fanon points out, “is always a violent act” that itself is always “an agenda for total disorder” (*Wretched* 1-2). The utopian future that Muñoz insists that be strived for is also one that understands this violence, especially in the various performances of utopia that he uses to illustrate his vision. These performances are unsettling and unstable, they call for an understanding of queerness that “is not quite here yet” or one more akin to “a potentiality . . . which follows the event as the thing-that-is-not-yet-imagined” (Muñoz 21). The disruption here is one of the ontological status of queerness; that is, the being of queerness. Specifically, this disruption is a violent refusal of the unmarked queer subject enveloped in whiteness. Indeed, as Muñoz argues “performativity and utopia both call into question what is epistemologically there and signal a highly ephemeral ontological field that can be characterized as a *doing in futurity*” (26 original emphasis). A utopian understanding of queerness, one that understands queerness as not something here yet, maintains an understanding of past, present, and future: “The present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds” (Muñoz 27). Such a relationality, following both Coulthard’s and Fanon’s insistence upon territorial decolonization alongside a decolonization of consciousness, would necessitate thinking about how the notion of moving forward might be implicated in colonial occupation. A utopian sense of queerness, in its refusal of
whiteness, is helpful, but not sufficient in beginning to think about territorial
decolonization. What is offered here is merely the introduction to a better story.

The instability of this sort of queerness, then, is not one that seeks to fix the
wound nor is there an imperative to know the wound precisely because of this instability.
By aligning with instability as what Muñoz calls “a queer utopian hermeneutic,” I argue
there is a need for a return to Freud’s mourning and melancholia. What if we instead
choose to read melancholia as not something pathological? Ahmed points to this potential
(re)reading of melancholia, arguing “melancholia should not be seen as pathological; the
desire to maintain attachments with the lost other is enabling, rather than blocking new
forms of attachment” (Cultural Politics 159). Mourning, on the other hand, can be
(re)read as enabling “gradual withdrawal from the object and hence denies the other
through forgetting its trace” and that this understanding of melancholia as preserving the
other or “keeping the past alive, even as that which has been lost, is ethical; the object is
not severed from history, or encrypted, but can acquire new meaning and possibilities in
the present” (Cultural Politics 159). For Eng and Han, melancholia represents an
“absolute refusal to relinquish the other” and that “the loved object is so overwhelmingly
important to and beloved by the ego that the ego is willing to preserve it even at the cost
of its own self” (364). Furthermore, a (re)reading of melancholia that is premised on the
“belief that the refusal to view identities under social erasure as individual pathology and
permanent damage lies in the communal appropriation of melancholia, its refunctining
as a structure of everyday life that annuls the multitude of losses continually demanded
by an unforgiving social world” is one that seeks to push towards a better future while
remaining attuned to the losses that motivate this push (Eng and Han 366).
What I am pointing to here is not a dismissal of the It Gets Better Project but rather thinking about a future project that does not attempt to seal the wound of trauma and does not attempt to present a whole queer subject. To quote Donna McCormack, “I want to end where I began, and yet I will end differently” (190). At the beginning of this project I followed Dina Georgis’s notion of the better story as one that is always being written (1). Further, I emphasized Georgis’s use of “ghostly affect” to illustrate the ways in which these stories are constantly being (re)written (11). The objective of this work was never to write the better story, but to present a potential avenue through which the better story can be (re)written. A melancholic attachment to our ghosts, then, might, in posing a threat to the supposed wholeness of the queer subject produced by the It Gets Better Project, allow for such a story to unfold. Perhaps we need not heed Ahmed’s warning against organizing around the wound, but instead question not “whether to grieve but how to grieve” (Cultural Politics 161 original emphasis). Returning to Freud’s initial ruminations we find that he also questioned this process. Indeed, the initial premise of “Mourning and Melancholia” is a question of how to grieve and how loss is incorporated into the ego. A queer subjectivity configured through loss is not one that we necessarily must turn away from. Indeed, as Georgis argues, we ought to instead look to an aesthetic of queerness “not interested in a queer identity or lifestyle” but one that “offers an incitement to new beginnings from the site of queer loss and an ambivalence to security” (14). This work itself is not a better story, yet it is vested with the hope for a better story. In its completeness this work itself is incomplete precisely because, alongside Georgis, there is not a finality to the story here. To end with her words, “if
there is no final story, if the story never ends, there is always a better story than the better story” (26).
Bibliography


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