

Marriage Equality and “It Gets Better”: Neoliberalism and the absence of political feeling

By Kristi Carey

ABSTRACT. The fight for marriage equality and the “It Gets Better” campaign exist as two activist movements within contemporary gay liberation politics. This paper will understand these iterations of activism as both emanating from and perpetuating our neoliberal and capitalist present. Through striving for the politics of inclusion, both marriage equality and the IGB campaign merely rearrange the societal and rhetorical plane rather than undertake structural change—that which critically questions the very structures that individuals want to be included into. Using Foucault’s (1976) exploration of the repression of sex within marriage, as well as Cvetkovich’s (2012) theories of depression, I ask the reader to consider the space of emotional impasse that is sacrificed at the expense of these iterations of activism. Through critiquing the movements as absent of feeling and part of the veil of “progress,” this paper hopes to open up spaces for us to think together about what activism—saturated in feeling and with queer temporality—might look like.

The United States’ contemporary political, economic, and social climate can be characterized by the rise of neoliberalism and accumulation of capital. We live in a society that calls for multiculturalism, but disregards the need for reparations for slavery, promotes the inclusion of gay marriage but mandates the exclusion of employment non-discrimination clauses, and posits agency in the emergence of charter schools while enacting a war on public education. The materializations of activism that attempt surface-level change (e.g. multiculturalism, gay marriage, charter schools) are a palatable response to the symptoms of our neoliberal and capitalist present. In an

era that is also marked by inclusion/tolerance for some and exclusion/intolerance for others, these activist movements and their goals are, themselves reflective of the structural here and now. Given the recent histories of the inclusive and hopeful rhetoric of the LGBTQ¹ rights movement, this paper will draw upon the fight for marriage equality and the “It Gets Better” campaign as two materializations that emerge out of and perpetuate the neoliberal present².

The following paper will argue that while exchanging the pain of histories of marginalization, abuse, and exclusion for the presence of happiness, inclusion, and optimism is unsurprising in the current political climate, that exchange serves to maintain contemporary power structures and further marginalizes transformative political activism. These two movements, in dismissing the emotional/political impasse of *feeling*, contribute to the image of a “clean” society while reproducing normative models of who does and does not belong. Employing Foucault’s (1976) theories of the *History of Sexuality* to marriage, and Cvetkovich’s (2012) theories of depression and public feeling to the “It Gets Better” campaign (IGB), I will argue that Berlant’s (2007) imagery of being “starved” is critical to how one might think about these two forms of activism and their productions, marginalizations, and limitations. This paper will ask the reader to think about futures beyond activism that deals primarily with the politics of inclusion/exclusion, and rather, to consider the necessity of feeling in transformative politics.

As has been argued by queer and feminist studies scholars (e.g., Spade, 2011, Whitehead, 2012, Conrad,

¹ It bears mentioning that although these two movements are posited as the fight for LGBTQ rights, both have been similarly co-opted by the rights for the gay, white male in their inclusion/exclusion of certain bodies and the focus of their goals.

² I want to be clear that while this paper will prove to be critical of both of these movements, this isn’t to say that they are driven out of love for the community or love for individuals. However, this paper is a statement on the movement’s political lives, and how those are enacted/ing in the present.

2014), the fight for marriage equality has become the priority of the gay rights movement, often distracting from pressing issues of healthcare, employment rights, and other plagues that affect the LGBTQ community most heavily. While I subscribe to this argument, what I am interested in deconstructing in this paper is how sex and sexuality are not discussed as part of the institution of marriage, in general. Per Berlant (2007), sex is spoken about as a relation or a tie to kinship; the act is rather disavowed in order to organize identities by way of marriage. It is cleaned in a way that makes it legible to the productive mechanisms (i.e. family, normativity) of society. Similarly, Foucault (1976) terms the “repression hypothesis” in describing how the discourse of sex and sexuality has historically served a sanitizing function—to repress or limit sex as raw desire. By regulating how sex could be talked about, and with whom, the act itself became defined not by desire, but a technology of politics and the economy. It is spoken about with concern to marriage, birth and death rates, and population survival. Therefore, the push for gay marriage represents an exchange of feeling for inclusion into societal structures. That is, for the years of history of oppression and abuse for sexual practice and preference, (certain) gay couples are granted access to marriage rights and are simultaneously attached to warm ideas of what it means to be a “happy” family. Sex becomes legible only inside of marriage. Those who do not subscribe to marriage equality as substantive change are then considered too radical³, and those unmarried and having non-heteronormative sex, are “perverted” and further marginalized. The question remains as to what possibilities get lost in the portrait of “happiness” to which perhaps

³ One might consider thinking about how activists are often pathologized as “crazy” or mentally unstable, also. Further, and in conversation with the contemporary political climate, it can even be seen as *intentional*—it’s easy to prescribe these people as crazy so as not to disrupt the social and political order. It creates a sense of distrust around certain identities that feeds power to the state.

those who are too radical or perverted are in tune, and of which the bulk of populations are starved.

Turning to the IGB campaign as a second iteration of surface-level/optimistic reform, I argue that while the discursive shifting that the campaign advocates for and tries to instill is important, it does not take the place of structural, political activism. Teens are told to believe that it gets better without the affirmation that political activism is unfolding in a way that will *make* it get better for even those that fall outside of the identities and preferences of white, middle-class, men. They must trade in the years of bullying and torment they've experienced in exchange for words of encouragement so that they may "move on" to a "happier" place. Again, there is an exchange of feeling forced without the transformation of structures that produce and re-produce that feeling. Drawing parallels to how the recognition of marriage forswears the act of sex, similarly, the IGB campaign halts the conversation surrounded around active and equitable political transformation. Cvetkovich (2012) speaks to an idea of "polite recognition," meaning that at the expense of examining histories of oppression and saturations of pain, individuals are asked to move forward and accept the hope articulated through discourse (p.12). She further states that those who refuse or are not able to live up to the demands of the present are then pathologized/medicalized as depressed, and their lack of being able to "overcome" is prescribed as their own, personal problem. In the same way that radical politics and/or identity is presented as too perverted to be included in society, depressed identities are similarly medicalized as lying outside of the possibilities of inclusion.

Marriage equality and the IGB campaign were born as a response to the symptoms of the structurally violent and exclusive present. Lauren Berlant (2007) describes certain political iterations of looking for "ways out"—what one might interpret as activism for change—as "motivated by a hunger not for satisfaction but for help in articulating different materializations of a scene" (p. 435). That is, in a

time where neoliberal and unsustainable solutions are proposed for historically entrenched problems (e.g. gay marriage and the IGB campaign), the way out becomes guided not by structural overhaul, but a rearranging of the societal plane—rhetoric of inclusion and recognition rather than transformation. The “hunger” that Berlant illuminates is, in some ways, a projection of that which we wish made us feel satisfied (e.g. justice, equality) but instead leaves us empty in the wake of their praxis. Both marriage equality and the IGB campaign serve as examples of “way[s] out” that rid the complexity of historical legacy in hopes of looking for immediate remedy⁴. They resonate as the only option when life seems helpless, otherwise. Thus, in a time where these types of antidotes have become commonplace (e.g. multiculturalism, charter schools, the non-profit industrial complex), it is unsurprising that these two movements have been co-opted and rendered legible by the state as “progressive” action⁵.

⁴ The emergence of these “immediate” responses to political struggle parallels to how pills and other treatments are immediately prescribed to treat depression. That is, both of these responses disregard the need for an evaluation of a larger politics—marriage equality/IGB and medication as both surface and/or superficial remedies to deeper, society issues.

⁵ Here we can draw on Foucault’s notion of governmentality and how power acts as productive (see Foucault, 1991). It is not only unsurprising that these movements arise with certain time-space interaction, but it is also intentional. Power is productive in the sense that it has the capacity to regulate how one might think about “activism” within the confines of society—it produces and gives rise to only certain kinds of movements. Lauren Berlant (2011), in her book *Cruel Optimism*, offers a paradigm that could be interesting to apply to society’s attachment to these two movements, as well. In defining cruel optimism, she states that it is a relation to objects that inhibits our own possibilities of the very thriving that motivates this attachment. In other words, marriage equality and IGB (as the objects) can be seen as kinds of optimistic reform that are provide “hope” as derived from pain (the motivator) in their wanting to achieve equality, but are ineffectual at addressing root causes of inequity. While the attachment is optimistic, it is cruel in that it is also disappointing—it doesn’t produce the “change” that one might desire. Thus, not only is it that we come to depend on these kinds of neoliberal political reforms, but we also begin to be

In both of these manifestations of forced exchange of pain for happiness, there exists a space of feeling that is all too easily dismissed. Referred to by Cvetkovich (2012) and Berlant (2007) as *impasse* (depressive and sexual), this space of feeling is one that is disorganizing, unstable, and painful. It asks for people to sit in the stuckness of what it means to feel, without trading those feelings over for ideals of happiness so quickly.

To contextualize this in terms of marriage equality, sex needs to exist as an entity outside of kinship—as a space of decomposition in itself. As per Foucault (1976), sex has a liberatory power were it not to be so attached to its discursive formation. That is, because of its pairing with the economic regulation or marriage, the act of sex is no longer thought of for what it is—a disorganizing, messy, and enigmatic act (Berlant, 2007; Foucault, 1976). Thus, we lose that sexual *impasse* and what it means to feel sex—what it means to be stuck in the chaotic mess of human interaction driven by uncontrollable desire. Foucault argues that sex has the capacity to be decompositional and a space of possibility beyond the current human condition. However, this space of pure feeling and sensation is disregarded and lost in our comprehension because of contemporary society's own neglect and preservation of that feeling.

In the IGB campaign, I have already mentioned that a similar exchange of pain and hope takes place. The *impasse* of feeling, here, can be best understood through Cvetkovich's (2012) concept of political depression. In her work, she attempts to “depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as a possible resources for political action rather than as its antithesis” (p. 2). Cvetkovich understands depression not as a personal problem, but rather as feeling the effects of the very unjust systems that

blinded to the possibilities of something more—of radical change. To break away from this kind of reform, when it is the only “hope” that one can see, is world-destroying. However, so is to stay with the movements. They are simultaneously loving and destructive.

we exist within. She presents depression as “historical category, a felt experience, and a point of entry into discussions...about how to live” (p. 23). The impasse, then, comes in when we begin to saturate in the feelings of this political depression. Rather than understand negative feelings as a kind of hopelessness, Cvetkovich encourages individuals to sit in that emotion, to understand feelings as public, and letting those public feelings open one’s imagination to the possibility of structural transformation and action. In the same vein as Cvetkovich, Berlant (2007) describes her search for political transformation not as a “way out” (re: marriage equality/IGB campaign), but instead as a “way in”—a searching for a way to let pain and creative conceptions of temporality guide action.

As Berlant (2007) notes, cited in Cvetkovich (2012), “An impasse is a holding station that doesn’t hold but opens out into anxiety...An impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the lag one hopes to have been experiencing all along (otherwise it’s the *end*), it marks a delay” (p. 20, emphasis original). This space of impasse that Cvetkovich attaches to political depression, and that Foucault (1976) attaches to the possibilities of sex, is what has the capacity to reach outside of the normative, legible limits of societal change. It is framed as a space of stuckness and potential—considering the idea that slowing down and moving in non-linear time (as time gets messy with feeling and emotion) may not signify failure, but rather, possibility.

The fight for marriage equality and the IGB campaign exist as an eradication of that impasse—as a palatable response to the symptoms of our neoliberal and capitalist present. In logics of efficiency, productivity, and increasing privatization, it is somewhat commonsensical that these spaces of stuckness or public feeling are not reproduced or preserved in the spirit of “progress.” The erasure of impasse is also productive. On one hand, there exists the image of the “polite” and “happy” agenda into which sex and gay liberation need be included. This is one that aligns with the logic of capitalism, and continues to

benefit the state in how they are rendered legible. However, and simultaneously, non-normative identities or feelings are pathologized as further marginal to the society. As Foucault (1976) argues, with the normalization of certain bodies into a polite imaginary, there exists an increased focus on the world of perversion that exists outside of this realm. And, similarly as Cvetkovich (2012) states, individuals that are deemed to be either crazy or (politically) depressed are told to seek medication, and kept outside of the realm of polite society, as well. In both the push for marriage equality and the IGB campaign, there is negativity surrounding those who do not participate in the inadequate and surface remedies that are offered by gay liberation politics, when in fact it is the saturation of impasse of feeling that is needed for political transformation.

Berlant (2007) offers that we are “starved” in relation to the lack of feeling that sense of sitting with our emotionality—that to which these “perverse” identities are so in tune. In the case of sex, she relays that we miss the “emotional time of being-with” that gets lost in the relationality of sex to reproduction and the family (p. 440). In terms of depression, one can similarly state that in the forced exchange of pain for optimism, individuals are asked to give up that space of sitting with feeling. The “formal suspension that can allow for spreading vigilance in sociality,” meaning the impasse that fosters emotional awareness of societal injustice, is what has the capacity to drive transformative action—a politic that does not merely look to find hope in inclusion (p. 440). Rather than attempting to be part of the “polite recognition” or sanitization of a present happiness⁶, what would it look like to embody queer politics and allow feeling to lead the struggle for a transformative kind of activism?

⁶ Sara Ahmed (2010) speaks to this idea of the pursuit of happiness and ignorant wonder as having a sanitizing function in society—that is, eliminating that which is “unclean” or intolerable, and therefore perpetuates a similar condition of social and political purity.

Transforming the dichotomy of the un/productive time and space, this action would embody a radical politic worth fighting for—a future drenched in desire, feeling and basic human rights.

Kristi Carey is finishing her B.A. in Educational Studies and Peace & Conflict Studies at Colgate University. Her research interests lie in the political lives of institutions (e.g. the state, the school, the family) and their cultural and discursive productions and epistemologies. Moreover, she is interested in the potential for queer theory to disrupt the violence such institutions do onto individuals through their daily and systematic interaction. When not thinking about ways to enact a transformative politic, she is an avid fan of hot sauce, frolicking, and thunder storms.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2007). Starved. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106(3). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- In Conrad, R. (2014). *Against equality: Queer revolution, not mere inclusion*. Oakland: AK Press.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2012). *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1976). *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*. New York: Random House.
- Foucault, M. (1991). "On Governmentality," pp. 87-104. In *The Foucault Effect*.
- Burchell, G., C. Gordon, and P. Miller, eds. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press
- Spade, D. (2011). *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. New York: South End Press.

- Thompson, E.P. (1993). "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," In *Customs in Common*. (p. 352-403). New York: The New Press
- Whitehead, J.C. (2012). *The Nuptial Deal: Same-sex Marriage and Neoliberal Governance*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.