Making it Better for Queer Youth:

Troubling (Neo)liberal Rhetorics of Visibility and Empowerment

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores the discourse of queer youth as it has emerged as a distinct identity category in the U.S. from the late 1980's onwards. During this time, queer young people have come to be treated as a unique population and, particularly, as an "at-risk" population demanding study and intervention across the Social Sciences (e.g. in Psychology, Social Work and Education) as well as outside academia, most notably in the media. Similar to discourses about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people (LGBTQ) generally, the discourse of queer youth has been profoundly shaped by a cultural politics structured through the metaphor of invisibility. My focus in this project is to look specifically at discourses of visibility as empowerment in order to better understand how the identities of LGBTQ youth are being defined within contemporary dominant discourses in the U.S.A. Given the higher incidence of suicide among LGBTQ young people, the dominant discourses in academia and media most commonly engage rhetorics of empowerment aimed at supporting and even 'saving' queer youth. While sharing these goals, I argue that the rhetorics of visibility and empowerment presented to young people are troubling in their use of narrow versions

of American liberal individualism that are often indistinct from, and/or aligned with, neoliberal ideologies that render *invisible* the material social differences and inequalities that shape the lives of many young people.

In pursuing this critique, I examine the discourse of queer youth in three specific discourse domains. First, I examine the epistemological frameworks in the discourse in the emerging field of Social Science research on queer youth over the last 30 years. Second, in the first of two case studies, I examine the rhetorics of empowerment in three large-scale media projects aimed at queer young people in the U.S.A. over the last fifteen years: *XY*, *Young Gay American* (YGA), and the It Gets Better project. Lastly, in a second case study I turn to photovoice, a community-based participatory research method in which I ask how, if given the tools, would queer young people visualize themselves and their communities.

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To my teachers, thank you for feeding my intellect and spirit.

Chapter One

Introduction: Making it Better for Queer Youth: Troubling

(Neo)liberal Rhetorics of Visibility and Empowerment

Different discourses are different perspectives on the world. ...Discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), but they are also projective imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied to projects to change the world in particular directions.
- Norman Fairclough (2003)

1.1 Introduction

Themes of visibility and invisibility have dominated discourses on scientific and

popular knowledge about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ)

sexuality for more than a century. This is also true for young LGBTQ people—a new

generation of youth who have grown up in what scholars have described as a "visual

culture"; or, put more plainly, an environment in which social practices are highly

mediated using visual means (Debord, 1977; Rose, 2001). Despite the recognition of the

powerful role the visual field plays in contemporary queer life, there is a remarkable

irony in the paucity of critical attention directed to it given its role in research on queer

culture and experience. Although a politicized rhetoric of visibility (e.g. "be out, be

proud") has dominated LGBTQ political discourse and queer life in the United States for

decades, the topic remains surprisingly overlooked (Meyers, 2006). For example, if

visual discourse is a fundamentally collective practice, do queer images in media

promote a social pedagogy for queer visibility? If so, how does this transect social

differences, such as race and gender amongst queer-identified people? And, where

rhetorics of visibility have been an organizing logic of identity-based politics and

community, how do visual social practices impact people's sense of belonging in different communities and different social spaces, particularly in terms of race, gender, and nationality? Lastly, how might empirical research be conducted on LGBTQ people's relationship to visuality (social practices of seeing and being seen) more broadly, and not simply focus on the role of visual representations? These are some of the questions animating this research on the discourses on young LGBTQ people.

This dissertation explores the discourse of queer youth as it has emerged as a distinct identity category in the U.S.A. from the late 1980s onwards. During this time young queer people have been established as a unique population, particularly, as an "at-risk" population demanding study and intervention across the Social Sciences (e.g. in Psychology, Social Work, and Education), as well as outside academia, most notably in the media. Similar to discourses about LGBTQ people generally, the discourse of queer youth has been profoundly shaped by a cultural politics structured through rhetorics of invisibility and visibility. My focus in this project is to examine discourses of empowerment and visibility in order to better understand and define how the identities of LGBTQ youth are being shaped within contemporary dominant discourses in the United States.

Given the higher incidence of bullying, isolation, and suicide among young LGBTQ people, the dominant discourses in academia and media most commonly engage rhetorics of empowerment aimed at supporting and even 'saving' queer youth. While sharing the goal of addressing LGBTQ youth suicide, my own research argues that the rhetorics of visibility and empowerment, as they are presented to young people, are troubling to the degree that they utilize narrow versions of American liberal individualism that are often indistinct from, and/or aligned with, neoliberal ideologies

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that render *invisible* and thus fail to address the material social differences and inequalities that shape the lives of many young people. As such, what *looks like* empowerment is often contradicted and/or radically limited in its capacity to produce viable, measureable social changes for young people. Thus, while focusing on queer youth, this research also speaks to larger questions of the transformations in identity politics under neoliberalism. My analysis shows that some of the rhetorical moves in discourses of empowerment also produce other, more complex frames of invisibility, especially the material inequalities structured through race, gender, and class. More importantly, by focusing on narrowly individualistic spheres of personal and social change forecloses larger frameworks for analyzing and understanding both the problem of queer suicide and efforts aimed at addressing it.

In pursuing this critique, I examine the discourse of queer youth produced in three specific and influential discourse domains. First, I offer an overview of the Social Science literature on LGBTQ youth focusing on the overarching epistemologies used to define and empower young queer people as they have taken shape in the field. Second, in the first of two case studies, I turn to media discourses in examining three large-scale media projects aimed at young queer people in the U.S. over the last 15 years: XY, Young Gay American (YGA), and the "It Gets Better" project. In this case study, I offer a critical textual analysis of the rhetorics of empowerment and visibility in this media drawing from critical discourse studies, Social Semiotics, and Visual Cultural Studies. Third, in a second case study, I turn to photovoice, a community-based participatory research method, in which I ask how would young queer people visualize themselves and their communities? Working with a small but diverse group of queer youth in Seattle, this project focuses on the role of visuality in their lives by using Holga cameras (a low-tech

film camera) to explore photography as a means of engaging in critical thinking and dialogue within a peer group and with strangers through collaboratively producing a public art exhibit and website on queer identity and community. In this study, I examined the visual communication resources young LGBTQ people used to represent themselves and 'read' others in regards to sexuality, gender, race, and national identity, as well as how visuality and visual representations mediate a sense of belonging to different communities.

I came to study LGBTQ youth after years spent working with young people in social service programs where I became increasingly concerned about the discourses about queer youth and youth of color as "at risk" in ways that did not appear to address the problems at hand. As an actor in that system (though technically employed by a non-profit program with federal funding), I became increasingly aware of two things: 1) The common disjuncture between how populations of youth were defined in institutional discourses and the actual 'on the ground' practices of young people; and 2) That the "solution" most often promoted engaging the client with more systems rather than addressing underlying problems. I also came to study young LGBTQ people after once (though many years ago now) being one myself. In that sense, this research also follows my own time spent in queer communities after "coming out" in the early 1990s and witnessing the increased mainstreaming of liberal LGBT politics in the U.S. since that time.

Important audiences for this project are researchers and practitioners working with LGBTQ young people. My intention is less about identifying a set of solutions and more about identifying sets of problems in order to begin asking productive questions. I recognize that some may perceive my critique of efforts to 'save' and empower youth as

obstructing much needed support for young people, or misinterpret my criticism as failing to recognize the positive effects these efforts may have. My goal is not to dismiss or deflate such efforts; however it is important to recognize that discourses about young LGBTQ people - including efforts to help and empower - are political projects with powerful effects. Rather than negate or evaluate the specific efforts behind discourses of empowerment for queer youth, I seek to contextualize the rhetorics they employ in order to better identify and analyze the directions such discourses may take. Ultimately, I hope to shift the conversations about LGBTQ youth dominated by questions of utility (e.g. What is being done about queer youth suicide? What should be done?) to questions of definition and power (e.g. how are queer youth being defined? What are the effects of these definitions?) that may open up greater analytical frames and a broader field of possible actions toward inclusive social change for young LGBTQ people.

In focusing on questions of definition, it is also important that I recognize the complexity and limitations of language in discussing same-sex sexuality and non-normative gender identities given the vastly different ways these are practiced across cultural contexts (Leap and Boellstorff, 2003) (cf. Elliston, 1999; Davis, 1999; Manalansan, 2003). While I have chosen to use the acronym LGBT in this dissertation to be consistent with the terminology most commonly used in the discourse sites that I study, I do so with an awareness of the culturally specific and catachrestic nature of the acronym. I have added the letter Q for "queer" to the end of this acronym and/or often simply use the term "queer" to describe young people for two reasons: First, the term "queer" is used as a recognition of its predominant use amongst young people with whom I have worked over the past ten years, particularly as they posit "queer" in politicized terms as more open and fluid, and resisting clear categorizations. Second, in

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following a common practice of including "Q" as standing for both "queer" and 'questioning' when talking about young LGBTQ people; doing so is not simply more inclusive but a recognition that sexual and gender identifications shift and change.

I also focus on describing 'LGBTQ youth' and 'young LGBTQ people' but attempt to do so while recognizing the diverse characteristics and needs of those who may fall under these catchphrases. Thurlow (2005) points to an emerging trend among scholars to avoid using terms such as 'youth' and 'youth culture' as shorthand for all youth. Such terms, he argues, tend to present young people as "uniformly oppositional and monolithic in terms of their social norms and values" (p. 2), and thus conceal the immense diversity among young people. Using more inclusive terms when referring to young people contributes to deconstructing static and totalized ideas about young people that exist not just in popular culture but academic research as well. Such a move is not merely linguistic but also theoretical and political: a great deal of studies on 'youth' and 'youth culture' have focused on White and heterosexual youth and it is precisely these types of social differences that tend to be the first rendered invisible in studies on "youth/culture." Thus, while I use either LGBTQ or queer consistently and, for the most part, interchangeably, it is important to point out that I do so with an awareness of the diversity and dynamism but also the limitations of such terms.
In fact, one of the ways in which this project aims to contribute to the research on young LGBTQ people is by countering the lack of research focused on the issues of young people of color and transgendered and transsexual young people (Ryan, 2004; Namaste, 2000), as well as aiming to de-center what has been recognized as the normalization of Whiteness in the current literature (McReady, 2003; Sunaina, 2004; Talburt, 2004). Foregrounding questions of racial and gender inclusion (and exclusion) can quickly

complicate the mythology that LGBTQ liberation has simply been a progression "up from invisibility" — to borrow from Gross' (2001) book title[1] - to visibility, acceptance, and equality rather than new frames of visibility and invisibility along with new frames of identity and social belonging.

There are several other significant ways in which this project contributes to the research literature on LGBTQ youth. One contribution this research makes is in providing a critical reflection on academic knowledge production as an influential site of social discourse. While I agree with Savin-Williams' (1990, 2005) critique that research on young LGBTQ people has maintained an overly narrow focus on issues of suicide and other mental health crises, I do so for very different reasons. Savin-Williams argues that such a narrow focus misrepresents the vast majority of young LGBTQ people, who otherwise experience few differences from other young people. Disagreeing with Savin-Williams, I find that young LGBTQ people as a group are at a higher risk for social issues, especially in being targeted for violence and social isolation. However, I do share the concern for the overly narrow focus on victimization and suicide for LGBTQ youth in dominant discourses, especially in the media. Not only do I think such a narrow focus occludes a recognition of other issues (and strengths) that affect queer youth, but I also follow Queer Studies scholars (Rubin, 1984; Foucault, 1978) in a concern for how the discourses produced about queer youth may reproducing the problem. Certainly, researchers can never be fully aware of the implications of research on the 'objects of study,' but a greater degree of reflexivity may be gained by critically examining academic research as a discourse site. Both Rubin (1984) and Foucault (1978) also argue that non-

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[1] I am referring to Larry Gross's (2001) *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men and the Media. I discuss his work beginning on page 11.*

normative sexualities are *anything but* marginal in modern discourses of identity, providing the groundwork for an argument that discourses about young LGBTQ people are not a marginal or exception topic but speak directly about how sexuality and identity is constituted in mainstream discourses in the U.S. today.

This research project contributes to another gap in the research literature on LGBTQ youth in examining young LGBTQ people's representational and communicative practices. In the current research, Sarah O'Flynn (2005) writes that young LGBTQ people's relationship to naming practices produces two contradictory demands: silence about their sexuality (in order to maintain safety) and the injunction to "come out" or self-identify their sexuality as other than heterosexual — a practice that can often be required in order to access social spaces in which they can find safety from harassment based on their sexual or gender identity. While LGBTQ people may face this paradoxical choice at any age, teenagers and young adults share limitations in their abilities to negotiate this challenge. Generally, most youth are legally, socially, and financially dependent on their parents until the age of eighteen. Understanding how young people negotiate "coming out" about their sexuality within the constraints of social institutions such as the family and education may apply to a greater number of young people. According to Savin-Williams (1998), the age at which young people become aware of same-sex attraction and begin disclosing it has been steadily declining since the 1970s, dropping "from the onset of junior high school to an average of third grade" (p. 16). While more people may be "coming out" about their same-sex attractions at younger ages, young people generally tend to be disenfranchised from both public and 'expert' discourses about what it might mean to be a young queer person in contemporary U.S. culture. Thus, another important component of this project is to point a critical lens on

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the under-examined experiences of queer youth and their relation to visuality, including visual representations through empirical research.

1.2 LGBTQ Rhetorics of Visibility

> Visibility is, of course, necessary for equality. It is part of the trajectory of any movement for inclusion and social change. We come to know ourselves and be known by others through the images and stories of popular culture.
> —Suzanna Danuta Walters (2001), *All the Rage:*
> *The Story of Gay Visibility in America*

As Walters describes, notions of visibility figure centrally in the political rhetoric of LGBTQ movements for inclusion and social change. In the history of mainstream LGBTQ movements in the United States, homophobic oppression - as well as the means to overcome it — has been conceptualized and articulated through the organizing metaphor of a move from invisibility to visibility. Beginning with the first organized political responses to the oppression of same-sex sexualities in the homophile movements in the U.S., a strong focus has been on combating oppression and gaining social acceptance and equality through 'becoming visible.' Despite the many differences that cut across political organizations, members, and agendas, LGBTQ politics have sustained this politicized rhetorics of visibility — a political framework premised on the idea that visibility can be a method and measure of personal and social acceptance and equality. Perhaps the most well known metaphor of LGBTQ invisibility is the metaphor of "the closet" - the "coming out" of which is posited as an epistemological and political gesture of self-recognition and acceptance, both on an individual and social level. While the idea that greater visibility of LGBTQ people will bring about social progress has been taken up quite differently by activists since the homophile groups of the 1950s and more

radical groups, like the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) that formed following the riot at the

Stonewall bar in New York City in 1969, it is an idea that has centrally shaped a great

deal of LGBTQ activism in the U.S. (Carter, 2004; Wasserman and McGarry, (1998)[2].

Despite the different ways in which this concept has been taken up, there remains

an uncomplicated mythology that LGBTQ people in the U.S. have experienced a

progression from invisibility to visibility bringing with it greater freedoms for all LGBTQ

people. One of the most recent popular examples can be found in the It Gets Better

Project designed for LGBTQ youth considering suicide (discussed in chapter three). The

project founder, Dan Savage (2011) promotes this idea as a premise of the central

message that "it gets better" writing: "Things get better – things *have* gotten better,

things *keep* getting better – for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. I knew

that to be true because things had certainly gotten better for me" (p. 2). The mythology

that the history of LGBTQ life in the U.S. has progressively become more visible and, in

a correlative fashion, brought greater freedom for all LGBTQ people is echoed in the

epigraph of this section by Suzanna Walters (2001). However, Walters both lauds

greater visibility and seeks to mark its limits. While acknowledging that she personally

shares the "celebratory glee" that has accompanied greater visibility, especially in

mainstream media since the 1990s, Walters also recognizes that greater forms of

visibility have resulted in a backlash in the form of anti-gay initiatives, negative media

coverage, and greater harassment (pp. 12-13). Importantly, she argues that few people

have engaged in critical discussions about visibility, such as questioning the mythology

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[2] For further discussions of at least two contrasting approaches to promoting visibility as a political act, see Armstrong (2002) for the debates about visibility in San Francisco's gay community in the 1950's, especially the homophile activists and Meyer (2006) for a discussion of the novel ways in which the Gay Liberation Front (or GLF) conceptualized and promoted visibility as a means of individual and social change.

that visibility is (or has been) a linear or wholly inclusive process. As Walters points out, certain types of visibility are privileged over others and visibility for some can come at the expense or endangerment of others. For example, a negative outcome of new visibilities has been what Walters calls the new form of homophobia pitting "the good marriage-loving, sexless gay vs. the bad, liberationist, promiscuous gay" — a form of thinking that "lends itself to a false and dangerous substitution of cultural visibility for inclusive citizenship" (p. 10). While agreeing with Walter's critique, one might add that the forms of visibility most often promoted are predominantly White, middle to upper middle class, and normatively gendered.

Although Walters does not focus exclusively on the media, she does point to the infusion of representations of LGBTQ people in mainstream media as an important indicator of visibility even as she questions the effectiveness of such visibility, suggesting that mainstream media reflects a "picture of society that embraces images of gay life without actually embracing the realities of gay identities and practices in all their messy and challenging confusion. ...We may be seen, but I'm not sure we are known" (p. 10). While Walters' recognizes a value in mainstream media representations of LGBTQ people, she questions the effectiveness of such representations in bringing about a more positive or greater knowledge about and subsequent acceptance of LGBTQ people. Another scholar who shares Walters' concern with media representations is Larry Gross (2001). However, Gross appears to engage in more of the "celebratory glee," as Walters describes it, about the increasing visibility of LGBTQ people in media over the last three decades in the United States. Gross titles his book *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men and the Media,* explicitly referencing and invoking Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* published exactly 100 years prior. As the title of Gross's book implies, he

promotes the narrative that greater visibility has been the key through which LGBTQ people in the U.S. have emerged "from the shadows of invisibility" to the "playing fields of politics and culture" (p. xiii) even while questioning the extent of stereotypical representations in media. Such representations, he argues, fail to accurately represent the complexities of LGBTQ individuals and culture.

Gross' and Walters' critiques raise interesting questions about how visibility is intimately bound up with questions of *knowledge.* A common premise in rhetorics of visibility is that visibility is not simply a means of gaining 'voice' and being heard for those otherwise silenced, but as a means of being seen and of having one's existence (or one's sexuality) known. The effects of this knowledge have been understood as inspiring others to "come out" and/or to educate others by dispelling incorrect and negative cultural stereotypes about LGBTQ people (e.g. that LGBTQ people do not exist in certain communities, or are dangerous to children, etc.). As Walters explains, visibility has been understood to be a means to promote knowledge about how others may relate to LGBTQ people as well as how LGBTQ people may relate to themselves and/or LGBTQ communities. Walters writes:

> So there is some merit in the idea that a simple *closeness* to gay people (through media images, through family relationships, through our gay coworkers, through teachers) creates a familiarity, and ease, that begins to overcome prejudice and irrational fear.... Yet, is 'getting to know us' a clear and untrammeled route to social change? (p. 11).

Ultimately, Walters questions whether the metaphor of visibility still allows us to ask the right questions and, "...if the problem was once invisibility, then how is the problem defined in an era of increased visibility?" (p. 9). In other words, what new frameworks for progress aside from rhetorics of visibility and invisibility are now necessary for social progress?

A question left unaddressed in Walters' and Gross's discussions of visibility and the media is how media practices and representations are shaped within capitalism. While both Walters and Gross employ familiar indexes of visibility and social progress (such as corporate sponsorships of gay events and advertisements targeted to LGBTQ consumers), they do not question that the far majority of these 'signs of progress' are explicitly based in capital, such as national magazines and news media, films, television, cartoons, advertisements; as well as the formation of businesses, and even "theme parks, rodeos, and the first ever National Gay and Lesbian Mastercard designed for LGBTQ consumers" (Walters, 2001, pp. 3-9). While I share the belief with scholars such as Walters and Gross who argue that popular culture and media are important social sites for LGBTQ visibility with both positive and negative effects, my analysis also raises important questions about how representations and messages in media about LGBTQ visibility and empowerment are shaped within a capitalist context.

1.3 LGBTQ Young People and Discourses of Visibility and Empowerment

Scholars such as Gross (2007) and Savin-Williams (2005) have recognized that young people in the U.S. today are "coming out" at younger ages and attribute this trend to wider social visibility of LGBTQ people in general but also posit that growing up in an age of greater cultural visibility and acceptance has created a generation of LGBTQ youth today with dramatically different experiences from previous generations of LGBTQ people. Media representations often serve as powerful identificational resources for young LGBTQ people (Thurlow, 2005) and shape popular knowledge about queer youth. In fact, media often serves as a first (and sometimes only) source of images and

representations of non-normative sexuality and gender expression for young people (Cover, 2000; Padva, 2007).

What kinds of representations do young people typically see in media? While young people today find more diverse representations of themselves than youth from previous generations, the representations they find are fairly narrowly focused on queer youth as victims of bullying (Padva, 2007) or as survivors who can endure and overcome bullying. For example, the most recent media project to receive national and international attention is the It Gets Better campaign which recognizes LGBTQ youth as victims of bullying that puts them at higher risk for suicide and simultaneously assigns them the task of overcoming it. In the initial Youtube video that started the campaign in 2010, Dan Savage and Terry Miller point out one of the important differences between LGBTQ youth and adults. They tell an imagined young viewer who may be considering suicide that if he or she can endure high school, life can then "get better"; that he or she will have the freedom to find more accepting people and places. In this video, Savage and Miller recognize some of the limitations that LGBTQ youth must deal with *until they are adults,* such as limited mobility and independence from families and social institutions, particularly high school.

Aside from exceptional circumstances, young people are not granted legal independence from their parent(s) or legal guardian(s) until they are eighteen and tend to be financially and socially dependent on families to a greater degree. When they are employed, they typically earn less money in lower skilled jobs. Thus, young LGBTQ people may very well have limited social and geographic mobility and less access to safer social spaces. However, one advantage that they have over LGBTQ youth of prior generations has been through the growth of educational and social service programs and

other spaces in which young LGBTQ people may find acceptance and safety from harassment. Even as such programs and services have grown dramatically since the mid-1990s, they are not available throughout public education systems in the United States. In fact, as Ryan (2004) notes, the greater opportunities for social support have been coupled with increased exposure to victimization and harassment; this is especially true for LGBTQ youth of color who experience a greater amount and more aggressive forms of bullying when they are "out" about their sexuality.

The concern for young LGBTQ people's need for a safe space from bullying and harassment as well as their higher risk for suicide, has been a central concern in academic research on LGBTQ youth in the Social Sciences, beginning with the earliest studies on gay youth beginning in the late 1980s (cf. Remafedi, 1994). Certainly, the growth of the educational and social services designed for young LGBTQ people has been, in part, in response to a greater awareness of suicide and successful identification of the potential causes such as harassment and isolation. In fact, in addition to growing up with greater a number of LGBTQ representations in media, young LGBTQ people today are also growing up in a social context in which national networks of social service and educational programs are designed specifically for them. Such programs are an important site of knowledge production about LGBTQ youth, and have played a key role in creating new understandings about young LGBTQ people as a research population in need of intervention and empowerment to overcome the effects of identified risk factors, such as bullying, isolation, and suicide.

Some scholars have critiqued the professional and academic discourses in social services and Education for narrowly focusing on suicide risk. Savin-Williams (1991, 2005), for example, posits that the narrow focus on suicide in the research literature has

rendered a distorted view of all LGBTQ youth, particularly by focusing on young people as victims and eclipsing other young LGBTQ people for whom this is not the case. In discussing educational programs designed for LGBTQ youth, Talburt (2004) and McCready (2003) argue that specific narratives about LGBTQ youth have emerged in educational programs that promote a 'normative' image of LGBTQ youth as Caucasian, thus excluding people of color either explicitly or inadvertently (cf. Rasmussen, et al, 2004). Although they make very different critiques, Savin-Williams, Talburt, and McCready all point to the power of academic discourse as an authoritative site of knowledge production about LGBTQ youth, specifically, in understanding how such knowledge wields great influence in establishing narratives about young queer people's self-development and identity, and has consequences for social practices -- especially the amount and form that adult intervention takes in young queer people's lives.

My research in this dissertation comes out of a similar recognition of the power of discourses in mainstream media and academic research that shape the knowledge that young LGBTQ people today receive about same-sex attraction and non-normative gender expressions and that these discourses are highly mediatized but also highly institutionalized. This is not to say that previous generations of young LGBTQ people did not also come to identify their desires and articulate their sexual and gender identities through drawing upon (and negotiating) highly institutionalized and mediatized narratives about of LGBTQ sexuality, but it is important to note that these narratives are dramatically different for youth today. My interest is in identifying what such differences might be and question their possible effects. Of course, young people today share with their elders the ability to creatively negotiate and subvert the images and narratives of non-normative sexuality and gender identities presented to them in

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discourse. I follow Susan Driver's (2008) approach of recognizing young queer people as not simply occupying a dominant *or* marginal space in culture, but as complexly crisscrossing "commercial mass media, grassroots sub-cultural, and activist realms" even as they "challenge us to rethink the very status of gender, generation, sexuality, and culture..." (p. 1). Lastly, while a few scholars have critically discussed young LGBTQ people's use and relationship to media (specifically, Driver, 2007, 2008; and Gray, 2009), my focus is on how young people are defined in these highly mediatized and institutionalized discourses as well as their relationship to visual representation.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This research project is fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature. Shaped through my training in an interdisciplinary Social Science program of Feminist Studies, I draw theoretically and methodologically from Social Science literatures, Queer Studies, and Visual Cultural Studies that transect the qualitative Social Sciences and humanities. Indeed, this project manifests my efforts in practicing a key strength of interdisciplinary research — namely, bridging and cross-pollinating intellectual conversations that might share an object of study but not a critical lens. I also recognize that the interdisciplinary nature of this scholarship will have limitations for some readers, although the perceptions of potential limitations of this research are likely to vary according to one's disciplinary training. It is my understanding that many practitioners working with youth value (and perhaps expect) research to discuss or even suggest specific practices. Thus, let me clarify here that although this dissertation is based in empirical analysis, my aim is not to provide specific actionable interventions for working with young LGBTQ people; rather, it is to provide a critical inquiry into the discourses in which such

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knowledge and practices are formed — both in academic and popular discourse. While the discourses that I examine typically figure queer youth identity as well as knowledge about queer youth identity in traditional humanist terms, my approach to identity and knowledge is informed by poststructuralist theories, predominantly Foucault's theories of power/knowledge (1979; 1983), as well as theorizations of queer (neo)liberalism and homonormativity, both of which I outline in the following two sub-sections.

1.4 a. Discourse and Power

My approach to discourse (and how LGBTQ young people are defined through it) draws predominantly from Foucault's theorizations of subjectivity, power and knowledge that I briefly summarize here. Foucault (1978, 1979, 1983) counters modernists understanding of the human subject in critiquing the enlightenment concept of the human subject as a self-determining, free, autonomous, and stable being. Rather, he views the modern human subject as reproduced through relations of power that are effected throughout social practices including discourse. *Discourse* in this sense is understood not only as a group of statements that provide a means for talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment, but also a body of knowledge that defines and limits what can be said about something. Discourses encompass entire fields of meaning that are constantly in flux. For Foucault, discourses also produce certain kinds of subjects that occupy, to varying degrees, the subject positions defined broadly within the discourses available to them in their particular cultural and historical context. Moreover, it is through the formation of subjects in discourse that modern societies enact power in what he calls, a "modern matrix of individualization" (1983, p. 215), in which power is exercised through normative modes of individualization. As he explains:

I don't think that we should consider the 'modern state' as an entity which was developed above individuals, ignoring what they are and even their very existence, but on the contrary as a very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns (p. 214).

The modern state for Foucault is constituted and perpetuated by the techniques of individualization that occur at the level of everyday existence. As Foucault also describes in *Discipline and Punish* (1979): "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (p. 170). Yet, Foucault expressed a desire to move away from the terminology and conception of power in terms of 'the state versus the individual' and explicitly refuted traditional conceptions of power in which one sovereign or one social class holds power. Instead, Foucault argued: "The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state" (1983, p. 214). Integral to wresting individuals from modern forms of power is understanding how power works *through* practices of subject formation, especially through modes of individualization.

While Foucault theorized that the workings of power tend to be naturalized and thus less visible *as* practices of power, visibility itself is key to how he conceives of power working on the individual and social body. In Foucault's (1980) concept of biopower, he argues that power operates through controlling and disciplining bodies by compelling individuals to signal their relationship to the social norm through their bodies and bodily practices (e.g. how to dress, talk, walk, what to do with one's body, such as

exercise, eat, couple, have sex, etc.) (1978). Thus, in the context of LGBTQ youth, the

practices that young people employ in signaling (visually and linguistically) their

relationship to a perceived social norm are not understood as simply individual choices

but important social practices that speak to how such social norms are established and

contested.

Importantly, Foucault also asserted that power relations also determine what

counts as knowledge; and, in a circular fashion, knowledge systems generally serve to

reproduce dominant power relations. Institutional practices produce particular kinds of

knowledge about bodies and produce bodies with particular kinds of meanings and

capacities. As Biddy Martin (1996) describes in "Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault":

"For Foucault, representations are themselves acts of power, acts of division and

exclusion, which give themselves as knowledge" (p. 191). Following Foucault's lead, I

approach academic discourses, popular representations in media, and individual

practices of self-representation as expressions of the power relations that shape them. In

approaching discourse from a Foucauldian framework, I do not seek to privilege one site

of knowledge over another -- for example academic research over popular

representations, or the 'voice' of individuals in my photovoice study over academic

research. Rather, I am interested in identifying and understanding how power operates

differently in all three sites. My task is not to evaluate which individuals (researchers,

media campaigns, or young adults) provide a more accurate or truthful account of young

queer people's experiences, but to view each site as a manifestation of how power may

be operating in the creation of new definitions of queer youth. To take this view is not to

discount the unique knowledge that might be found in each site, but to view it through a

critical frame that all engagements with discourse are complexly constituted through

power. My aim is not to seek a truth, but to seek the "hazardous career that Truth has followed" (Foucault, 1972, p. 66)[3].

While a Foucauldian view of discourse includes recognizing how power is enacted on individuals and the ways in which it shapes and constrains agency, it also includes a recognition of discourse as dynamic and in flux - as a space in which meanings (including what counts as the 'truth' and who gets to speak it) are constantly contested. Power is never simply a force (or an act) of making an individual 'subject to' another but as a *relation between them* formed through "reciprocal incitation and struggle"; in other words, power is a "permanent provocation" (Foucault, 1983, p. 222) in which the actions of each struggle to structure the possible field of actions for both. In thinking about language and discourse as a particular site of struggle for queer subjects, Judith Butler (1997) describes the paradoxical aspect of a subject's relation to power in rather compelling terms; she writes: "Subjection consists precisely in a fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency" (p. 2). This paradox is particularly riddled with difficulty for historically marginalized subjects who must speak through racist, sexist, and homophobic discourses in order to change them. My interest is in tracing and learning from the ways in which such resistance occurs.

Issues of queer identities and their relation to discourse often play out through questions of definition (Who or what is queer?) and questions of representation and authority (Who can speak as queers?). What I find useful in Foucault's theories is a shift

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[3] Foucault's (1972) full quote is: "What is knowledge" or "What is truth?" ... Since Nietzsche this question of truth has been transformed. It is no longer "What is the surest path to Truth?" but "What is the hazardous career that Truth has followed?" (p. 66).

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from a focus on the individual (with a focus on individual rights) to a focus on the cultural and historical conditions that shape the power relations in which individual subjects emerge. In doing so, Foucault's theories prompt a more fundamental questioning and politicization of the epistemic foundations of how claims such as "who or what is queer" come to be made. By fundamentally questioning these claims, Foucault's theories also question the ground on which LGBTQ political platforms are based, allowing for recourse to greater theoretical and political self-reflexivity. The ability to self-reflexively examine the foundations on which queer identities, knowledge, and political movements are staked is, as Judith Butler (1994) asserts, "the very precondition of a politically engaged critique" (p. 39).

1.4 b Queer Liberalism and Neoliberalism

My understanding and analysis of neoliberalism centrally draws from Lisa Duggan's (2003) useful description of neoliberalism as it has taken shape in the U.S. since the 1970s as well as how it has manifested in a homonormatively focused LGBTQ politics since the early 1990s. At least since the 1950s both liberal assimilationists and more radical queer groups have overlapped in a focus on the expansion of rights to sexual privacy against the intrusions from the state (e.g. criminalization and police entrapment) as well from other institutions (e.g. medicalization) (Duggan, 2003) (cf. Armstrong, 2002; Meyer 2006; Shepard & Hayduk, 2002). However, as Duggan describes, a major (and still growing) segment of LGBTQ political activism *shifted* from activism aimed at 'privacy in public' (in other words, freedom from state surveillance, entrapment, etc.) to claims to a "domesticated" and "depoliticized privacy" (or, privacy contingent on narrow practices of coupling, work, and family based on 'responsible'

marriage/domestic partnership) (Duggan, p. 50) (cf. Warner, 1991 and 1999). Duggan, of course, is well known for describing this new political movement as the "new homonormativity." Homonormativity, in her words, is: "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (p. 50). In other words, homonormativity is a practice and promotion of neoliberal values. According to Ferguson (2007), homonormativity "...can be understood as the process by which queerness is put in the service of a hegemonic rationality that conveniently regards queerness as a satellite for citizen ideals and as a lever or the state's regulation of racial difference" (p. 115)[4]. Thus, homonormativity must be understood not only a sexual formation but also a racial one (cf. also Eng, 2010).

Key to homonormative politics, according to Duggan, has been a remapping of notions of public and private boundaries in which conservative gay politics has sought to bring an imagined LGBTQ public into "political salience as a perceived mainstream" by positioning it against the identity politics that has developed in the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 60s seeking widespread formal and social equality (Duggan, pp. 50-51). The identity politics that have emerged in the U.S., including those organized around LGBTQ identity, have followed what Duggan refers to as the 'ruse of liberalism.' This 'ruse' is based on liberal political thought that has provided a "set of

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[4] Susan Stryker (2008) also writes that transgender activists in the early 1990's used the term homonormative to express the double sense of marginalization and displacement they experienced within both dominant culture as well as queer communities that mostly aligned with the dominant constructions of gender (pp. 145-146). These activists raised questions about the structure of power along axes other than the homo/hetero and male/female binaries, and "identified productive points of attachment for linking sexual orientation and gender identity activism to other social justice struggles" (pp. 148-49).

metaphors, an organizing narrative, and a moral apologia for capitalism" (p. 4). In other words, identity politics has been complicit in promoting capitalism and class inequalities by consistently ignoring them or actively defining them as separate from identity politic agendas. Specifically, Duggan claims liberalism has sought to organize social life and equality around the divisions of public and private life defined by the state, the economy, civil society, and the family, all of which have: "consistently shaped and ultimately disabled progressive-left politics by separating *class politics* – the critique of economic inequality – from *identity politics* – protest against exclusions from national citizenship or civic participation –" thus limiting "the scope of radical politics since the early nineteenth century" (p. 7).

Importantly, Duggan argues that discourses of "diversity" and "tolerance" the liberal left promotes, including those in LGBTQ politics, have come to work in conjunction *with* rather than against neoliberal ideologies and policies by defining equality in the narrowest terms and entirely aligned with global neoliberalism (p. 21). For Duggan, neoliberal politics are not solely advocated by conservatives but manifested across the mainstream political spectrum (e.g. republicans and democrats, conservatives and liberals, religious and secular) through which equality is defined as access to normative institutions of domestic privacy, patriotism, and the 'free' market. As I demonstrate in my analysis, discourses that promote the empowerment and aimed at 'saving' LGBTQ young people very clearly define equality in these same narrow terms.

Duggan also outlines some of the negative effects of discourses of equality focused on neoliberal rhetorics of equality – the very type of discourses I have found in media produced for queer young people. One of the effects of neoliberal politics, she argues, has been a shrinking of the public sphere where civic participation is not based

on *actual participation* in grassroots movements accountable to democratic forms of participation. As I discuss in more detail, a great deal of media for LGBTQ youth appears to follow this practice in building publicity rather than publics. Three additional effects of neoliberalism noted by Duggan are that I will take up in my analysis of neoliberalism include: 1) Neoliberal values have manifested in culture such that acceptance becomes contingent upon normative behaviors aligned with limited forms of recognition by the state (for example, through marriage) and; 2) Neoliberal politics obfuscate and/or outright deny systematic inequalities; and 3) Neoliberalism has operated through the dismissal or erasure of radical visions for equality and a narrowing of agendas for social change overall. I discuss the relevance for each of these negative effects in media aimed at young LGBTQ people in more depth in chapter three.

1.5 Methodological Approaches

At the center of this dissertation are two case studies through which I employ very different research methods in order to reach different means. In the first case study, I analyze broad discourses about young LGBTQ people in popular culture. To do so, I perform a critical textual analysis of the largest media projects designed for a young LGBTQ people in the U.S. (discussed in chapter three). This study examines media discourses as they shape (and are shaped) in national contexts cutting across the boundaries of commercial enterprises, commercial activism, and non-profit organizations. In the second case study, I situate my inquiry on a much smaller scale in order to do an empirical qualitative study with young LGBTQ people about their relationship to visual discourses. To do so, I undertook a six-month ethnographically

informed study using photovoice, a community-based participatory action research method (discussed in chapter five). The second study differs not just in scale, but in the social context in working with LGBTQ young people to learn about how they engage with and actually produce their own images of themselves and their community. My analysis and interpretation of the data from both case studies draws from interpretive methods in Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Semiotics, and Visual Cultural Studies. In this section, I provide a more detailed discussion of these three methods to demonstrate how they align with my methodological aims.

In the first case study, discussed in chapter three, my critical textual analysis draws from the interpretive methods of Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Semiotics, as well as Visual Cultural Studies. Given my Foucauldian foundation and as a scholar in feminist and Queer Studies, my research focuses on understanding how knowledge formations in discursive practices shape or perpetuate social inequalities as well as efforts aimed at addressing them. More specifically, my research delves into how particular inequalities involving gender, sexuality, race, and class are discursively constituted in discourse, especially visual discourse. As both theory and method, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) encompasses a critical consideration of the ideological, economic, and historical context of language usage and production, focusing on the ways that social and political domination is reproduced in and through written and verbal language use (cf. Fairclough, 1989; 2003).

Because CDA studies focus on the continuing (re)production of social norms in individual and institutional practices, particularly through identities, relationships, and political economies through connecting micro level communicative practices to macro level social practices and ideologies, practitioners typically operate on the premise that

access to linguistic and social resources is unequal and greatly (but not wholly) controlled by dominant cultural interests. It is also a method informed by critical social theory that examines the role of power and ideology, including such theorists as Foucault, but also Pierre Bourdieu, Karl Marx, and Louis Althusser. In this respect, I have found CDA aligned with my research goals of examining the linguistic resources of texts and their relation to the *larger social context* (or meta-text) of ideologies and power/knowledge formations. CDA allows me to take *as a premise* that cultural texts are produced within discursive fields where meaning is never completely (and conveniently) stabilized or void of larger social power relations, but negotiated on unequal terms. As an interpretive method, CDA offers a means to engage complex social issues in cultural productions while maintaining a sense of their complexity and richness. As an empirical method, CDA enables me to make supportable claims based on observable data as evidence. Following CDA has also made me attentive to the text's production values including the role of the editing process, communicative medium, distribution process, and relevant political economies of production.

Similar to CDA, Social Semiotics is also a critical practice oriented to observation and analysis of language-in-use in specific cultural contexts. Social Semiotics also values a focus on social intervention in terms of the discovery of new semiotic resources and new ways of using existing semiotic resources. However, social semiotic approaches typically follow certain interpretive strategies for analyzing texts and how components of texts work from a broader social system of meaning, focusing on the layered meanings within texts. Roland Barthes (1978), for example, a foundational figure in Social Semiotics, looks at images as containing layers of meanings. These layers, called denotative (representational), connotative (symbolic) and narrative (conceptual)

meanings, combine to make meaning but also *naturalize* the ideological work done within texts. Thus, Barthes work has inspired many semioticians to utilize his interpretive model(s). However, in her chapter on visual semiotic research methods, Gillian Rose (2001) notes that there is no expectation that researchers will choose data sets that have representative value, but rather focus on producing extensively detailed case studies of relatively few images (p. 73). In my analyses, I focus first on identifying broad themes across the data sets and then provide some detailed analysis of specific images that are representative of these themes. In addition to images and written texts, Social Semiotics is also useful in analyzing the 'social' texts – specifically patterns in social behaviors of participants, spatial design, and dynamics.

Visual Cultural Studies is another critical body of work that informs my analyses here. Scholars in Visual Cultural Studies offer some important alternative ways of thinking about visual texts. First, they do not begin with the assumption that language is paradigmatic for meaning, but that images create their own meaning that works beyond language. In theorizing the relationship between images and written texts, Mitchell (1995) aims to replace binary thinking about images and written text with a dialectical relationship – what he calls an "imagetext" (p. 9) to question the division between words and images. For the photovoice project particularly, I chose a visual research strategy in order to engage the 'language' of photographic images that is free from conventional language, consequently freeing participants from conventional labels or narratives of queer identity.

A unique quality of visual representations is they raise the amount of ambiguity in interpretation precisely because of the ekphrastic difference; their interpretation also typically requires translation into textual description and analysis. Yet, scholars in

Visual Cultural Studies argue that there is a great need to have methods sensitive to the unique communicative functions of images. When referencing the shift in intellectual and academic thought as characterized by the 'linguistic turn,' W.J.T. Mitchell (2001) argues that a similar shift that he calls "the pictorial turn" has been taking place in western thought around a critical awareness of visual texts. The pictorial turn describes "the way modern thought has reoriented itself around visual paradigms that seem to threaten and overwhelm the possibility of mastery" (p. 9). Mitchell is among many authors (including Evans and Hall, 1999; Rose, 2001) who recognize the incredible dominance of visual images in cultures. In fact, Rose (2001) refers to the term occularcentrism to describe the "apparent centrality of the visual to contemporary Western life" (p. 7). She is among many scholars who comment that postmodern culture under advanced capitalism has been characterized as a 'visual culture'. As I have described already, issues of visibility and invisibility have been an organizing metaphor for LGBTQ identities in the U.S., and I have included visual representations in my research to reflect the 'visual culture' in which young people live today.

1.6 Overview of Chapters

Social scientific research on young LGBTQ people in the U.S. has become an emerging scholarly field over the last thirty years. In chapter two, I provide an overview of the dominant epistemologies within this field of study, and a list of some of the ways these frameworks enable and limit means of recognizing, understanding, and defining young LGBTQ adults. While recognizing the contributions of the research in addressing the emergent needs of LGBTQ youth, this chapter offers a critical discussion on how dominant epistemologies in literature also function to erase certain aspects of LGBTQ

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identity, specifically racial and national identity, that may contribute to shaping notions of LGBTQ youth as a unique identity group aligned with, rather than challenging, neoliberal and imperialist politics in the U.S.

In chapter three, I shift my focus to broad discourses used in the three of the largest media projects designed for a LGBTQ youth audience in the U.S.: XY, Young Gay America (also known as YGA), and the It Gets Better campaign. Drawing from Visual Cultural Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Social Semiotics, I offer a critical cultural analysis of a range of linguistic and visual strategies used in this media. This chapter's title is "Looking like a Revolution," because I have found that what often looks like empowerment is often contradicted and/or radically limited in its capacity of producing widespread change for a diverse population of young people. Thus, while recognizing that there have likely been many young people who have been helped, inspired, and perhaps even saved by these media organizations, this media also paints a very troubling picture of dominant discourses available for young queer people today — these same queer youth whose high rates of suicide clearly demonstrate how much real wide-scale intervention and empowerment is needed.

Chapters four and five focus on how queer youth use and theorize their own visual practices and their relationship to visuality (ways of seeing/being seen) based on the case study I did with a group of young LGBTQ people in Seattle using photovoice, a participatory research method. In this project, we used low-tech film cameras to explore the uses of photography as a means to engage in critical thinking and dialogues with peers and strangers through a six-month project culminating in a collaboratively produced public art exhibit and website. Chapter four is a visual essay version of the photovoice exhibit I produced in collaboration with participants in June 2009; it is

composed of the eighteen images and accompanying textual comments displayed in the exhibit. Chapter five, describes the project (the 'making' of it) as well as reflection on the process and analysis of the photographic archive based on ethnographic data.

In the conclusion, I provide an overview of key points and themes threading across the three sites of discourse that I examine here. As a retrospective chapter, I offer reflections on my experience with interdisciplinary research practice as well as my own visions for the kinds of research projects that could be done with and for young LGBTQ people.

Chapter Two

Finding the Misfit: Epistemologies of LGBTQ Youth

> Researchers, educators, and mental health professionals "invented" gay adolescence in the 1970s and then watched it flourish in the 1990s. Gay adolescence came to be what we researchers wanted it to be – what we were.
> - Rich C. Savin-Williams (2005) *The New Gay Teenager.*

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I inquire into the dominant epistemologies in the Social Science research about young LGBTQ people as they have developed over the last 30 years in the United States. As Savin-Williams (2005) points out in the epigraph above, academic researchers wield a great degree of authority and influence over those whom they research. While academic research is not the only social site of knowledge production about LGBTQ youth, it is a primary site of discourse in which what Foucault refers to as 'expert knowledge' (1978, 1979) is produced. In this chapter I do not provide a traditional or detailed review of the literature on this topic; rather, my approach is more philosophical. In approaching the literature as a specific discourse domain, I examine different epistemologies as the common conceptual frameworks and modes of understanding that have emerged in the field. Although I discuss what is known about young LGBTQ people, my aim is to explore the epistemologies that shape and limit what *can be known* and the ways in which this knowledge is constructed. Thus, in this chapter I begin to map some of the ways in which dominant epistemologies about LGBTQ youth may enable and/or limit ways of and defining, recognizing, and understanding young LGBTQ adults. Epistemologies frame not simply knowledge practices, but modes of visibility and invisibility - in other words, which youth are

addressed, and how both the problems and solutions for queer youth are structured. In the sections that follow, I first provide a brief overview of what I identify as four dominant epistemologies in this field of study. In this discussion, I point to the many ways in which epistemological frameworks have emerged in response to others, often out of a recognition of the first type of "misfit" that I address here, a disjuncture between the epistemological frameworks offered in the field and what scholars argue are the actual complexity of the issues experienced by young LGBTQ people. These disjunctures point in important ways to the frames of intelligibility structured through each epistemology; I trace them here to emphasize who may be left out of these frames including who is addressed by this literature as well as the kinds of questions asked. The second section is a critical reflection on these epistemologies including additional conceptual 'misfits' that may open up alternative modes of inquiry.

2.2 Epistemologies of LGBTQ Youth in Academic Research

Research focusing on young LGBTQ people and their lived experience in the U.S.A. has had a relatively short history. Beginning with a handful of empirical studies in the late 1970s, the field has continued to develop mainly in the Social Sciences, particularly Psychology, Social Work, and Public Health (cf. Ryan, 2004), experiencing most of its growth since the mid 1990s. In general, a great deal of the research done in this area since the 1970s can be understood as loosely fitting into four relatively distinct epistemologies in which LGBTQ youth are framed through the concepts of: 1) Risk; 2) Resilience; 3) Normalcy; and 4) Diversity. A great deal of early research studies focused on defining LGBTQ youth as "at risk," or as having a higher risk for suicide and other serious social issues, including being the victims of violence and harassment,

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homelessness, and drug abuse compared to their heterosexual peers. An understanding of LGBTQ youth as "at risk" continues to be a central organizing framework in this research to the degree that the following three epistemologies have emerged as responses to it in differing degrees. The second epistemological framework includes work in which researchers have shifted and/or expanded a focus from risk and hardship to young people's resiliency in the face of hardship. A third framework also responds in part to the "at risk" frame but focuses on young LGBTQ people as "normal" in the sense that they are not problem-ridden but well-adjusted and thriving "normally" or essentially indistinct from their heterosexual peers. The fourth framework describes a good deal of more recent publications that enact what I call the epistemology of diversity as it loosely describes work done with a greater focus on the racial and gender diversity as well as a greater diversity of topics studied, moving beyond young people's risk for harm.

Certainly the earliest and most salient frame of thought in studies on young LGBTQ people has focused on young LGBTQ people as "at-risk" for harm. In its history, the general tenor of a great deal of this research has been focused either explicitly or implicitly on questions of definition, particularly: Do young LGBTQ people constitute a specific population of study based on shared characteristics? Are there unique issues and needs for young LGBTQ people? And, if so, how can or should these issues be addressed by the profession(s)? Because much of the research on young LGBTQ people has emerged in the professional disciplines, these questions of definition have been shaped by disciplinary practices that focus on identifying issues and conceptualizing professional intervention practices. Where research models are based on identifying a social problem and strategies for intervention, it is perhaps not surprising to find that

much of this research has provided strong arguments for recognizing LGBTQ youth as an underserved and yet overly vulnerable population.

As implied by the title of the first well-known anthology on the topic, *Death by Denial: Studies of Suicide in Gay and Lesbian Teenagers* (Remafedi, 1994), a powerful theme that runs throughout this literature is that young LGBTQ people's risk of suicide and other social issues is perceived to be directly related to issues of invisibility, specifically, invisibility understood as the enforced social invisibility and denial of "the closet" and a broad lack of institutional recognition. Importantly, this work has pointed to the invisibility of young LGBTQ people within Youth Studies that remains a significant issue. As K. Ryan (2004) found in her review of the literature, less than 1% of all adolescent research in the last 30 years has focused on young LGBTQ people. Within this epistemological frame, a commonly advocated strategy for addressing young people's issues is in promoting self-acceptance while also creating visible social spaces or "safe spaces" where youth may, in effect, practice this self acceptance and be "out" about their sexual or gender identity in an accepting and supportive environment.

A focus on creating "safe spaces" where LGBTQ youth may "be themselves" has been the response to the lack of safety available to most LGBTQ youth. Whether young people are explicitly "out" or simply perceived by their peers as not conforming to sexual or gender norms, they face an extensive amount of violence and harassment. In their studies of public schools, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2004) reported that 84% of self-identified LGBT young people report being verbally harassed and that 82.9% of the time school faculty and staff failed to intervene (or intervened only some of the time). Moreover, multiple studies have found that harassment in schools based on perceived non-conformity to gender and/or sexuality norms is more

vicious and occurs with greater frequency than other types of harassment, with young

LGBTQ people of color being at even higher risk for violence and harassment (Davis,

1999; Hunter, 1994; Kerr & Sanford, 2001). This research has contributed to many

relatively successful campaigns in educational and social services settings aimed at

bringing greater inclusion and awareness for some young LGBTQ people in these

environments.

The epistemology of risk has been critiqued through a second epistemology

focusing on resiliency, arguing that a narrow focus on risk promotes an overly grim view

of young LGBTQ people and fails to account for and support their strengths (Kivel &

Kleiber, 2000; Talburt, 2004). For example, as D'Augelli and Grossman write: "the need

for new approaches to the analysis of LGB lives is clear" (p. 13) and that: "little research

has departed from a problem-focused risk paradigm to identify young people's

resiliency, strengths, resources, and coping competencies" (p. 5). This second

epistemology does not negate the epistemological of risk but seeks to expand research to

focus on young people's resiliency in the face of such challenges and provide a more

positive and accurate image of queer youth.

Rich Savin-Williams (2001, 2005) is one scholar who has critiqued the "at-risk"

and thus problem-based focus of research on young LGBTQ people. His work

exemplifies a third epistemological framework of understanding young LGBTQ people

as defined by perhaps having some unique needs but otherwise still being "normal" or

the same as everyone else. More so than any other epistemological framework, this third

framework of LGBTQ youth as normal is based largely on Savin-Williams' work.

However, Savin-Williams' novel argument of young LGBTQ people is clearly influential

in research as well as in popular culture. Savin-Williams has published seven books on

the topic (most aimed at non-academic audiences)[5] and been engaged or referenced in a number of mainstream media outlets, including MTV, 20/20, the Oprah Winfrey Show, and CNN; his work has been cited in *Newsweek, Time, Rolling Stone, Parent Magazine, Utne Reader, New York Magazine, Fortune, New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, USA Today, and Chicago Sun Times.* He has also received professional recognition, particularly for his book, *The New Gay Teenager* (2005) that was given the 2005 Outstanding Book Award from the American Psychological Association (Division 44). Savin-Williams is also quoted by the editors of YGA (Young Gay America), a media organization that produced a range of publications for LGBTQ youth that I discuss in chapter three. As one of the only nationally and transnationally distributed media, YGA was an influential cultural production that not only quotes Savin-Williams as an expert but also appears to have been strongly influenced by his theories of LGBTQ youth in their media.

A central argument in Savin-Williams' work is not only that a narrow focus on risk of harm has rendered a distorted view of all LGBTQ youth, but also that it is simply not true for the vast majority of young LGBTQ people. Curiously, while consistently defining the ways in which LGBTQ youth are unique as a group (and while carving out a research career based on researching this population), he also argues that these

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[5] Dr. Savin-William's other books include: *"Mom, Dad. I'm Gay." How Families Negotiate Coming Out"* (American Psychological Association, 2001); *" . . . And Then I Became Gay." Young Men's Stories* (Routledge, 1998); and *Gay and Lesbian Youth: Expressions of Identity* (Hemisphere, 1990); The *Lives of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals: Children to Adults* (co-edited with K. M. Cohen, Harcourt Brace, 1996), an undergraduate textbook. He is also a licensed clinical psychologist with a private practice specializing in identity, relationship, and family issues among sexual-minority young adults and, as such, has served as an expert witness on same-sex marriage, gay adoption, and Boy Scout court cases and is on numerous professional review boards.

differences are spurious and often detrimental. In fact, Savin-Williams (2005) declares in introducing his book:

> I write for 'pregay' young people, in the hope that they will never had to 'act gay' or mold themselves into a stereotype or feel that their personal integrity must be sacrificed. If they can be convinced to relegate the idea of gayness to the dustbin, its previous existence forgotten except by those who will ask 'What was *that* all about?', then the lives of millions of teenagers will be enhanced (p. x).

In other words, Savin-Williams contends that the measure of progress for LGBTQ youth to which researchers (and others) should be aiming is that young LGBTQ are not defined by their difference from other youth, at least not by differences in sexuality or, one assumes, gender. For example, according to his research, young people today treat identity labels with more playfulness, ambivalence, or even resistance. He also argues that young LGBTQ people's ambivalent relationship to identity labels is likely because these labels were more or less imposed on them rather than organically emerging from them. As Savin-Williams (2005) was quoted in the epigraph to this chapter: "Gay adolescence came to be what we researchers wanted it to be--what we were";"... who researchers say is gay and who they chose to provide data determine the outcome" and thus that "gay or pro-gay researchers" "invented" the gay teen (p. 23). A bold declaration, indeed, but put forth in support of his argument that the group from which young people of today are *most* different from are past generations of LGBTQ people (including those of us doing research on LGBTQ youth) rather than their heterosexual peers.

Largely absent in the three epistemological frameworks of LGBTQ youth as at-risk, resilient, and normal is a focus on social differences within LGBTQ youth; most conspicuously absent in these frameworks is a recognition of social differences of

gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. For example, within Ryan's (2004) review of the research literature on LGBTQ youth, only 3.6% addressed the issues of young LGBTQ people of color. Since the earliest studies on young LGBTQ people, many researchers have consistently noted the diversity within the category of LGBTQ youth, but, as Ryan's statistic indicates, many have simply not addressed this diversity. Because issues of LGBTQ youth of color have not been centrally addressed in the literature within these other epistemological frameworks, I have chosen to highlight some of the key issues for LGBTQ youth of color raised in the literature and the ways in which scholars have begun to formulate an expanded (and expanding) epistemological framework for understanding not only the experiences of LGBTQ youth of color, but also how constructions of race intersect with gender and gender roles, ethnicity, nationality, family formation, religion, and class status.

Several scholars have addressed the 'double bind,' or double exclusion of young people of color for whom it can be difficult to find acceptance in both their racial or ethnic communities, but also in predominantly White LGBTQ communities (Cross, 1991; Davis, 1999; Ryan, 2004; Wilson, 1996)[6]. Another well documented issue that LGBTQ youth of color may face in struggling with self acceptance is the mythology that homosexuality does not exist within their culture, or, when it is acknowledged, is viewed as an effect of contamination by White or western cultures and thus not only a byproduct of oppression but potentially a betrayal of one's race (Arguelles & Fernández, 1997; Estuar Reyes & Yep, 1997; Gibson, 1994; Kumashiro, 1999; Letts & Sears, 1999;

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[6] There are a number of scholars who echo the issue of the "double bind" or double exclusion on LGBTQ youth of color. See also: Athanases, 1996; Campos, 2003; Gibson, 1994; Hunter, 1994; Letts & Sears, 1999; Lipkin, 1999; Sears, 1992; and Sears & Williams, 1997.

Lipkin, 1999; Monteiro & Fuqua, 1993-94; Sears, 1992). As Townsand Price-Spratlen (1996) writes, when he is asked: "Which are you, African American or gay?'" (p. 216) the question expresses not simply an inability to conceive that he may be both, but also that he must make a choice to be one or the other.

However, some studies do point to possible positive effects of the belief that homosexuality comes from White culture. A small-scale study by Tremble, Schneider & Appathurai (1989, cited in Ryan, 2004) interviewed ten participants in Toronto and found that a family's views of queerness as stemming from outside of the community rather than within it may sometimes facilitate parental acceptance. However, the same study also noted that acceptance can come in varying degrees: the youth who reported that their families accepted their sexuality still "felt distanced from their culture to some extent, and usually excluded themselves from cultural activities to avoid shaming their families" (Ryan, 2004, p. 11).

Common among discussions of LGBTQ youth of color has been that same-sex sexuality is seen as threatening family continuity (through traditional marriage and children) and thus the continuity of the racial community; taken to the extreme, this becomes a fear of racial genocide (Estuar Reyes & Yep, 1997; Kumashiro, 1999). Many authors also make an explicit link between homophobia as supporting patriarchal sexist and heterosexist gender roles (Arguelles & Fernández, 1997; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 1993-1994; Rhue & Rhue, 1997). As Paul Gibson writes: "Gay youth are the only group of adolescents that face total rejection from their family unit with the prospect of no ongoing support" (p. 19) and that: "Ethnic minority youth have tremendous fears of losing their extended family and being alone in the world. This fear is made greater by the isolation they already face in our society as people of color" (p. 38). For many youth

of color, their church community is an integral part of their extended family. Thus, intolerance to homosexuality in many religions but particularly in Christian and Muslim sects is a significant and common cause of painful struggle for young LGBTQ people of color. (Arguelles & Fernández, 1997; Estuar Reyes & Yep, 1997; Davis, 1999; Gibson, 1994; Kumashiro, 1999; Letts & Sears, 1999; Lipkin, 1999).

Scholars, of course, have raised many other issues for LGBTQ of color, but my point here is that the failure of a great deal of literature in addressing LGBTQ youth of color is not simply manifested as a lack of inclusion of racially diverse youth (and thus could be fixed by an imperative to simply study more youth of color) but has fundamentally shaped knowledge of and about LGBTQ youth as having dominantly White qualities, experiences, and issues, thus positing them as a "norm" within these epistemologies. For example, in her examination of policies in Toronto schools, Snider (1996) warns that White defined stereotypes of LGBTQ people translates in both the White queer community and educational policies for multicultural programs as a "blind insistence" (p. 295) for students to "come out" or publicly divulge their sexual orientation. This kind of approach, she and other scholars argue, thus renders young LGBTQ people of color's sexuality invisible and fails to account for the complexity of "coming out" for young people of color that may involve culturally specific issues and risks (cf. Cross, 1991; Davis, 1999; Wilson, 1996).

The negative effects of this type of exclusion in dominant epistemologies of LGBTQ youth are also illustrated well by Lance McCready. Based on his ethnographic work in high school settings, McCready (2004) argues that working with young LGBTQ people of color requires first de-normalizing the Whiteness already structured into program policy practices and epistemologies. Based on a five-year participant

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observation in California and in-depth interviews with African American male students, McCready found that educators and administrators failed to meet the needs of queer students of color in part arising from the normalization of Whiteness in queer student programming. Administrators and educators essentially normalized Whiteness through defining the problems of queer students of color as a "special issue" in relation to those of queer White students, thus presuming Whiteness to be the norm (p. 46). Queer students of color were figured as a 'complexity' that was perceived as 'too much to deal with' and extra-ordinary (where ordinary is recognizable, manageable). McCready argues that programs and services offered by the school thus narrowly catered exclusively to: "White students whose identities are viewed as normal and more understandable compared to queer youth of color" (p. 47). As a result, LGBTQ youth of color were not perceived as the proper population for both LGBTQ White educators and heterosexual educators of color who defined young queer people of color as needing special knowledge and thus beyond the scope of what their own frame of knowledge as professionals could offer.

Another important social difference not addressed within this body of work, however, are gender differences. A large part of the early literature focused on young gay and bisexual men and masculinity, leaving questions of young women's experiences of all races relatively unattended. Ryan (2004) and Grossman & D'Augelli (2006) also write that transgender and transsexual youth have received very little attention in research as well as social and health services. Although her focus is not on youth, Namaste (2000) provides a cogent critique of the invisibility of transgender and transsexual people in academic scholarship in general. Several scholars have begun to address this gap in the research in the last several years, including Susan Driver, whose

Queer Girls and Popular Culture (2007) centers on young queer women's experiences. While Driver focuses attention on young women, she approaches young LGBTQ people as a broadly diverse group and, in fact, takes a diverse epistemological approach to gender as well in applying queer theories of gender (specifically Butler, 1991) that recognize gender as a complex and potentially unstable social phenomena. Driver's (2008) anthology *Queer Youth Cultures* addresses a wide array of issues for queer and transgendered youth. Driver's work is thus an important one in expanding inquiries into LGBTQ young people beyond the frame of "risk" in at least three ways: 1) In expanding epistemologies of gender and sexual identity not currently central in the research literature 2) In reflecting on knowledge production practices about young LGBTQ people in scholarship; and 3) And, in also expanding of the topics addressed (e.g. she looks at the under-studied topic of young queer women's relationship to media representations and their media use. Driver is among the few scholars who have examined LGBTQ young people's relationship to and use of media (cf. Gray, 2009) and language (cf. O'Flynn, 2005; Thurlow, 2005).

In the rather short narrative of the epistemological frameworks within studies of young LGBTQ people that I have provided here, I have pointed out several ways in which certain frameworks have taken shape and 'speak back' to others, particularly through asking broader questions about who is included and who is excluded in this research, the type of issues that may or may not be taken into account (e.g. racism, transphobia, and sexism), and the implications of such exclusions (e.g. failing to recognize and support young people's resiliency in the fact of struggle; centering the experiences of White youth as a cultural norm). In the next section, I turn to a discussion in which I raise questions about broader factors that have influenced how

epistemologies in the field have likely been shaped as well as other ways in which these epistemologies may continue to be challenged and expanded.

2.3 Finding the Misfit: Critical Reflections on the Field

Some scholars have pointed out that studies on LGBTQ youth could benefit from having a critical understanding of the field's relationship to the broader fields of study in which it is situated, including that of Youth Studies. Filax (2006) describes how young LGBTQ people are often positioned as either invisible or as the 'misfit' within the field of Youth Studies:

> It was only when faced with the juxtaposition of mainstream youth studies and queer youth studies that I realized that research about sexual minority youth is an inconsequential to research about youth as are sexual minority youth are to a community's understanding of itself. ...Sexual minority youth are produced through their absence or as a special area of interest, as the abject Other; that is, as a deviant outsider within the realm of youth studies. (p. 59).

Thus, Filax points to LGBTQ youth being treated in two extremes — either as inconsequential and thus invisible and neglected, or as a misfit or Other that may require containment. Certainly epistemologies of LGBTQ youth are shaped by the disciplinary and institutional contexts in which they are practiced, thus Filax's dire picture of how LGBTQ youth are situated in the larger field raises important questions about what the effects of these larger contexts may be on researchers and the research they produce. Some scholars have addressed the effects of homophobia within disciplinary contexts on how they and their research are received. As Grant, Elsbree & Fondrie (2004) point out, research on sexuality in the context of Multicultural Education "carries risks for both researcher and participants" (p. 197). In his research

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into African American boys in middle school, Davis (1999) expresses a salient theme within the Education literature:

> The timidity of teachers, school administrators, and educational researchers to highlight these more complicated social spaces reflects a broader intellectual ambivalence to engage in and problematize this intersectionality ... sexuality and its representation regarding young people has a history of censorship and intellectual discomfort, particularly black youth sexuality" (p. 51).

As Davis describes here, by engaging with the taboo topic of non-normative sexualities, researchers risk institutional or disciplinary neglect and/or resistance to their work. The institutional resistance and/or neglect of research on taboo topics of sexual queer youth of color may account for the marginalization of youth of color – and may similarly be the case for the neglect of research on young women, and transgender youth in the literature more broadly.

A few scholars have addressed the way in which dominant epistemologies within specific disciplines in the Social Sciences have shaped work on queer youth. Alex Wilson (1996) has observed that predominantly White "psychological theorists have typically treated sexual and racial identity as discrete and independent developmental pathways" (p. 303). Echoing Wilson that this kind of divisive categorization is Euro-Western centric, Montiero & Fuqua (1993-94) argue that a critical difference between European and African centered approaches to human behavior is that European thought has historically centered on a Cartesian reductionism, empiricism and dualism, that categorizes concepts, people and things in terms of opposition. Although their work does not address LGBTQ youth, Burman, (1994) and Canella and Viruru (2004; 2008) put forth useful critiques of norm-based models of youth development commonly employed in many of the Social Sciences. As Driver (2008) points out, this norm is not only a White/western and typically male young person, but is also heteronormative, so

even where young LGBTQ people are included in the research, the epistemologies used to address young LGBTQ people (of all races) tend to be treated as an "add on" and thus defined in relation to an already established (White, heteronormative) norm.

In providing this overview of the field, I recognize that I am narrating a version of the history of the field – one that is still very much in the nascent stages of development as far as academic fields of study are concerned. The field of LGBTQ youth studies is, of course, a loosely aggregated body of work that has taken specific formations through the type of topics, methods, and other epistemological practices. For me to tell such a narrative of the history of the field implies that LGBTQ youth were not studied before the studies explicitly concerned with gay youth in the 1970s. However, more historical work is needed to flesh out the exact history of this field. Certainly there is interesting scholarship on the history of adolescence and adolescence studies in the U.S. although such work has typically ignored same-sex sexuality. However, scholarship such as that done by Lesko (2001) provides an engaging history of the emergence of western notions of childhood and adolescence at the turn of the 20th century that raise provocative questions about how modern epistemologies of same-sex sexuality have been produced, especially in relation to epistemologies of race and gender. Although Lesko does not examine same-sex sexuality in her history, she does contextualize modern notions of adolescence in nationalistic ideologies promoting the development of the White race coeval with the discourses on adolescence. Discourses at this time fixated on adolescence as the central social site where fears about the weakening of national and racial strength and progress were projected. Thus, adolescence became not simply an individual phase, but a time in which a specific segment of the population became vulnerable to social problems (and/or threatened to pose their own); thus was the

justification for the demand for exerting greater social control of adolescents though institutional practices aimed at intervening to 'save' young people (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004; Burman, 1994; Foucault, 1978; Kline, 2001; Lesko, 2001). As Lesko writes: "As part of the move toward a new modern society, citizens needed to become more self-determining, individualized, and reasoning.... Adolescence became a very useful public problem (p. 5-6), a "switching station in which talk of racial degeneration could easily be rerouted to issues of nation or gender" (p. 22).

Modernist notions of purportedly normal and abnormal sexuality and gender identities were deeply influenced by the eugenics movement. Eugenics discourses focused intensely on sexual practices, particularly sexual reproduction. In eugenicist thinking, deviant sexuality was a core symptom of poor intellectual and moral development – two traits thought to be genetically passed through sexual reproduction. The eugenicist fixation on sexuality and intellectual and moral development was predicated promoting the development of the White race. Many authors of the time, including Ellis (1895), Howard (1904), Reckless (1926), and Park (1925; 1950) speak to the explicitly racial fears that drove the concern over not just racial but national development 'gone awry.' Homosexuality was identified among the threats to development, amongst the purported proliferation of other "sexual perversions" such as miscegenation, and promiscuous sexuality – in other words, sex outside of White, heteronormative reproduction. In exploring these histories, both Lesko and Burman (1994) go to pains to show the ways in which this history still shapes current studies on youth and children today. In speaking about Developmental Psychology, Burman (1994) writes that a "remarkable lack of sensitivity to cultural and class variation in life expectancy" has persisted in a view of youth in which attributes of "white middle-class

US society" are "mapped onto models of development which are then treated as universal" (p. 50). Somerville (2000) work directly addresses how studies of race and sex in the modernist era were mutually influencing although she does not discuss if distinctions were made between same-sex sexuality amongst youth and adults.

According to Sunaina (2004), social ideologies about youth have continued to be a site where social anxieties about nationality are distilled and projected – including the more current fears about young people's diminishing role as bearers of national and cultural identity perceived to be happening through increasingly globalized social and economic practices and transnational and transborder citizenship – all topics that have received far too little attention in LGBTQ youth studies and, in effect, been rendered invisible in this field. Unfortunately, Sunaina (2004) research on youth studies also fails to address young LGBTQ people specifically but she does offer an important critique of the neglect in Youth Studies broadly in attending to how youth are treated within and across national contexts. Current epistemologies of queer youth are almost always structured through a national imaginary but with little explicit recognition as such. Despite broad recognition that economic and political development does not happen linearly, such arguments are nevertheless framed through arguments about "desired end goals" and 'progress' that continue to center young people (and their sexual practices) in nationalistic projects (Sunaina, 2004, p. 207). Although her main body of work is not focused on LGBTQ youth, Puar (2012) also discusses some of the ways in which social attitudes about queer youth today are configured through what she refers to as a "liberal eugenic of lifestyle programming" that functions through capitalist, neoliberal ideologies. The well-known youth scholar Henry Giroux (2010) does take up the effects of neoliberalism on youth although without attention to LGBTQ youth. Thus, what I am

pointing to here are the many ways in which scholarly work may be put into conversation to address the gaps in each – for a more intersectional and holistic approach to studying youth and youth culture.

As Sunaina also writes, young people are also tied to notions of globalization via their relationship to popular culture (a large cultural export) and as a hyper-commodified niche market. And certainly, global media rely on young people not just as a consumer market, but also as objects for selling products, cultures, and ideologies. I am unaware of published research on media representations of LGBTQ youth in national and transnational contexts, which is part of the motivation for my own research on three such media outlets discussed in chapter three.

In chapter three, in addition to situating media representations of young LGBTQ people within the frame of neoliberalism, I also examine how these media projects fit within another often neglected context: LGBTQ political movements in the U.S.A. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in what I refer to as the politics of visibility that follows a rhetoric of empowerment through visibility. The most well known metaphor of LGBTQ invisibility is the metaphor of "the closet" -- the "coming out" of which is posited as both an epistemological and political gesture of self-recognition and acceptance, both on an individual and social level. This particular kind of epistemology is evident in some of the academic research following the first two epistemologies discussed in section one (the epistemologies of youth as "at-risk" and as resilient) in which self-acceptance and "coming out" may be conflated. However, configuring self-acceptance with "coming out" and being visible about one's sexuality works through another epistemology that is often neglected in accounts of research on LGBTQ youth: a liberal logic of individualism in which "coming out" is framed as an individual choice or matter of will power. This view

tends to render invisible the complexities of "coming out" for young people, especially

for young people who may have a higher vulnerability to the risks associated with being

"out" such as violence and harassment, loss of family, community, and employability.

The epistemology of liberal individualism often requires an erasure of social differences

within LGBTQ youth as well as a bracketing of the material and structural inequalities in

which they live in order to uphold an image of an 'equal field of opportunity.'

The persistence of liberal epistemologies and their degree of influence is

concerning given the economic status of young people today. Males (2002) urges

researchers to situate today's young people in a broader historical perspective focusing

on political economy. For example, today's generation of young people are, for the first

time in U.S. history, growing up much poorer than previous generations. Government

subsidies largely increased from the New Deal through the 1970s reversed in the mid-

1970s to favor the baby boomer generation. Where the 'average' baby boomer has had

greater overall availability of government subsidized programs in education, home and

business ownership, today's generation has much less access to social supports like

financial aid and TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) while paying higher

taxes, including social security taxes, and increased college tuition. As Males cites, the

poverty rate of young people in the mid 1990s was 50% higher than young people in the

1970s (p. 307). Males also points to large chasms in the income and wealth of today's

younger generation who have proportionally lower incomes and home ownership (p.

307). In fact, Males reports that the median income for those under age 25 has fallen by

19%, compared to the 2% drop in median income for those over age 25 (p. 300-301).

The "average young male" in 1970 reached lower-middle-class income by age 22,

whereas the young man of the 1990s did not reach it until age 35 (p. 307). Contributing

to this is the fact that, in young family median incomes, the portion of income required for college costs has quadrupled and for homes has tripled (p. 307). The current "class gap," is also substantially broken down by race, where people of color make up a higher percentage of low-income households. Males is in a minority of scholars in youth studies who emphasize understanding young people within politico-historical context. Similar to many of the other scholars whose work I have included here even, his work does not directly address LGBTQ youth; however, it is relevant to their experience and provides another framework through which scholars might build a more accurate picture of LGBTQ youth.

Chapter Three

Looking Like a Revolution: Queer Liberalism and the

Mediatization of Queer Youth

> It was really, really hard. And, probably one of the darkest points in my life
> because it just kept getting worse and worse every day, and I wondered why I'd
> even wake up in the morning. Why am I alive? Things are not getting any better
> for me, and they're just getting worse and worse. Things are not *going* to get any
> better for me, they're just going to get worse. But I was so wrong. I was *so wrong*.
> - Justin Shakeri, age 19, It Gets Better Video[7]

> The movement has already begun, and just by living your life, and being
> yourself, you're a critical part of it.   YGA (2004/05, p. 34)

3.1 Introduction

The higher rate of suicide among LGBTQ young people is both an important issue

in its own right, as well as a central organizing principle in representations of them. As I

have just discussed in chapter two, addressing suicide and the risk factors for suicide

has been a dominant topic in academic research on queer youth since the first anthology

on the topic nearly twenty years ago, *Death by Denial: Studies of Suicide in Gay and*

Lesbian Teenagers (Remafedi, 1994). Indeed, the title of this anthology could also be

used to describe a dominant framework for understanding LGBTQ young people's risk

of suicide (as well as risk for other social problems) that has shaped this entire body of

research: That the enforced denial and social invisibility of LGBTQ people, especially

young people, is a key cause of suicide. As I discussed in chapter two, a common feature

of academic discourses on LGBTQ youth has been to understand LGBTQ youth suicide

(as well as the of isolation, depression, self-hatred that may lead to suicide) as an issue

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[7] http://www.itgetsbetter.org/video/entry/9232/

of social invisibility, with greater visibility commonly posited as the means to address and overcome it. This same understanding of queer youth has shaped media projects produced for them. Thus, in this chapter, I turn to popular media representations of and for LGBTQ people, all of which share the aim of empowering LGBTQ young people in overcoming their challenges - perhaps even saving their lives - through using and promoting greater visibility. In this chapter I take up questions of *how* visibility is defined and promoted as empowerment in complex ways in media. Media representations are central to contemporary culture and serve as powerful identificational resources for LGBTQ young people (Thurlow, 2005), as well as shaping popular knowledge about queer youth (Walters, 2001; Driver, 2007 and 2008). In fact, media often serve as a first (and sometimes only) source of images and representations of non-heterosexual desire, identities, and communities for young people (Driver, 2007; Cover, 2000).

This chapter offers a critical cultural analysis of a range of linguistic and visual strategies used in the three of the largest media projects designed for a LGBTQ youth audience in the U.S.: XY Magazine, Young Gay America (also known as YGA), and the It Gets Better campaign. Although there may be local or even regional media projects that have been created for LGBTQ young people, these are the only three media projects to have reached national, and even international, audiences. And, while there seems to be a greater amount of online media about and for LGBTQ young people, no other websites or media organizations have produced media at such a large scale, including multiple publishing formats and genres, or have reached as wide an audience (both of LGBTQ young people and the general public). All three have published online websites as well as printed materials, such as magazines and book, and received news coverage in gay

and/or mainstream press. In the case of YGA and the IGB project, the producers have received awards and recognition for their work. These media projects are the first nationally distributed projects aimed at an LGBTQ readership. They are also relatively recent, only emerging since the mid 1990s. XY magazine was produced between 1996-2007 with its website xy.com closing in 2009; YGA was active between 2001-2007; and the It Gets Better project, begun in 2010, is still growing as I write this in 2012.

More importantly, all three media projects powerfully share several key commonalities that paint, what I find to be, a troubling picture of the mediatization of LGBTQ young people. All three projects have explicitly articulated that their mission, either in whole or part, was to create media projects for LGBTQ youth in order to intervene in youth suicide through promoting self-acceptance and self-esteem, as well as a sense of belonging to a larger community and future. While recognizing that such representations may have given many of their viewers much needed support, the representations of individual and social empowerment promoted within these media are wrought with contradictions that may ultimately serve to *undermine* the empowerment of LGBTQ youth rather than save them. As this chapter's title, "Looking like a Revolution," might suggest, I have found what often *looks like* empowerment is usually contradicted and/or radically limited in its capacity to produce social change for a diverse population of young people. As I argue through this analysis, empowerment and social change tend to be represented through a familiar, but overly narrow version of American liberal individualism that is indistinct from, and/or aligns with, neoliberal ideologies that effectively *disempowers* large numbers of queer young people -- the very same queer youth whose high rates of suicide clearly demonstrate how much real wide-scale intervention and empowerment is needed.

Critiquing projects aimed at saving "at-risk" youth has its own risks. To critique

efforts to 'save' youth may be perceived as obstructing much needed support from

reaching the young people in need, or simply failing to recognize the positive effects

these efforts may have[8]. My aim is not to dismiss these efforts. Rather, I find the

spectacular participation in making videos in IGB somewhat awe-inspiring, and have, in

moments, salved my own alarming sense of urgency that action must be taken to

address the tragic number of youth suicides. But the necessity and urgency of the

situation should demand greater critical reflection on actions taken to address this

problem rather than render them immune from such reflection. To be clear, my aim is

not to critique or evaluate the efforts behind these media projects for queer youth, but

rather to contextualize the rhetoric they employ in larger discourses to identify and

analyze how knowledge and power come to bear in these discourses. As I clarify in the

introduction, my project is to shift the conversation about LGBTQ youth suicide from

strict questions of utility (e.g. 'What is being done?' 'What should be done?') to a meta-

analysis that asks: "What is the range of effects of what is being done?" and "How might

these open and/or foreclose possibilities for effective social change?"

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[8] Some of these risks were demonstrated in responses to Jasbir Puar's (2010) online editorial in
The Guardian "In the Wake of It Gets Better" in which she critiqued the project for promoting a
"narrow version of gay identity that risks further marginalization" of other young people. While
her editorial received positive comments, it elicited several comments strongly expressing
disdain for her critique; for example, a user with the name "davidabsalam" wrote "God it's just
winge winge winge from some people. Not been on CiF long? Though I have to say I agree with
the sentiment. There must be a way of pointing out the special difficulties some people face,
without whining about the deficiencies in a campaign designed to do something about it"
(posted in the "Comments" section, 16 Nov, 2010); or, this post from "Krizsztoff": "I would love
to see the author of this pessimistic and mostly inaccessible article devise a better campaign
than what Savage created but I am sure she is much more equipped to bring down ideas than
create her own" (posted 17 November 2010).

While studying discourses on LGBTQ youth over the last several years, I have found few critiques with similar aims as my own, particularly those interested in examining neoliberal impulses in discourses on queer youth. Although I do not apply her critique explicitly here, Jasbir Puar's (2012) short article "Coda: The Cost of Getting Better: Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints" offers a distinctive perspective on the It Gets Better project that is worth sharing briefly as one example of how the conversations about queer youth suicide might be considered differently. Puar is explicit in her aim to "shift the registers of this conversation about 'queer suicide'" in several ways so as not to dismiss the issue of LGBTQ suicides, but to offer an alternative understanding of what these suicides might mean, as well as account for the popularity of the project's message. First, Puar wants to redirect the conversation "from pathologization versus normativization of sexual identity to questions of bodily capacity, debility, disability, precarity, and populations" that serve neoliberal capitalist interests (p. 152). By functioning through questions of bodily capacity and debility, the project tends to situate certain viewers as debilitated (e.g. by homophobia) and/or capable (of overcoming it) and, in doing so, promote and sustain neoliberal capitalistic accumulation that works precisely through organizing populations through these categories (p. 153). As Puar explains, capacity and debility are "seemingly opposites generated by increasingly demanding neoliberal formulations of health, agency, and choice," or what she calls a "liberal eugenics of lifestyle programming." This programming produces, along with biotechnologies and bioinformatics, population aggregates that function through a calculus in which "those 'folded' into life are seen as more capacious or on the side of capacity, while those targeted for premature death or slow death are figured as debility" (p. 153).

Puar aims to redirect the conversation about queer suicide by accounting for the ideological and economic underpinnings (and consequences) of continuing to frame the conversation through what she calls the "spurious binarization" between bodily capacity and bodily debility, rather than seeing and engaging it as an interdependent relationship. Puar critiques IGB for working through this same neoliberal economics of capacity and debility, refiguring LGBTQ people, "along with other bodies heretofore construed as excessive/erroneous, as being on the side of capacity, ensuring that queerness operates as a machine of regenerative productivity" (p. 153). Simultaneously, the message of empowerment in IGB and YGA figures these same LGBTQ young people as debilitated but poised to do the work of overcoming from it. As Puar states: "Debility is profitable to capitalism, but so is the demand to 'recover' from or overcome it" (p. 154). While recognizing that the populations upon whom "slow death" is imposed are produced through systematic inequalities based on race, class, gender, and sexuality (and thus are likely to carry a greater burden in overcoming the deficit of their social position), Puar also points out that all bodies fall into the economics of capacity and debility. She writes: "...all bodies are being evaluated in relation to their success or failure in terms of health, wealth, progressive productivity, upward mobility, enhanced capacity. And, there is no such a thing as an 'adequately abled' body anymore" (p. 155). Instead of a binary of normative and non-normative, or capable and debilitated bodies, Puar argues that there are "variegated aggregates of capacity and debility" across all bodies (p. 154).

One of the more important ways in which Puar's critique shifts the conversation about queer youth suicide is it prompts different kinds of questions, beginning with two questions that she poses: What kinds of "slow deaths" have been ongoing "that a suicide

might represent an escape from"? (p. 152) and which bodies are made to pay for the modes of progress advocated in media projects like IGB? Although I do not directly take up Puar's analytic focused on capacity and debility, these two questions, along with her aim in shifting the conversation to larger question of how projects aimed at saving queer youth may operate in neoliberal frameworks strongly resonate with my own critique.

Before discussing my critique of these three media outlets in detail, I first discuss my theoretical and methodological approach and provide description and background information about each organization and their projects. Next, I provide a critical discussion of common themes and discursive strategies employed in their publications. Lastly, I provide a summary discussion in which I outline what may be the real "price" of these representations and the limited frameworks of visibility that they offer of and for LGBTQ young people.

3.2 Three Media Projects for LGBTQ Young People: XY, YGA and It Gets Better

XY was the first nationally distributed magazine for gay men. *XY magazine* and it's online corollary, xy.com were launched by Peter Ian Cummings in San Francisco in 1996. Between 1996 and 2007, *XY* published 49 issues of the magazine. Although marketed as a quarterly magazine, the publication dates tended to be irregular. A high-gloss, full-color magazine, each issue of *XY* was focused around a specific theme such as "Hope + Dreams" (no. 44) " School Issue" (no. 4), "Antigay Issue" (no. 22), and "Smoking, Drinking and Screwing" (no. 40). Issues typically included a short editorial by Cummings, articles on a range of issues, letters from readers, book and movie reviews, a horoscope (called "Homoscope"), photo shoots, and a regular piece written and submitted by a reader. However, the dominant content in the magazine was mostly

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full-page photographs of models wearing little clothing. Both *XY* and its spinoff

magazine *XY Foto,* an all photo magazine, could be described as erotic and/or "coffee

table" soft porn, with the images of young men almost always highly sexualized. *XY*

Foto published eight issues between 2003-2007 on a roughly bi-monthly schedule. *XY*

also published three special anniversary issues: *Best of XY* (2001); *1994-2001*: *The*

Photos (2002); and a second *XY The Photos* (2007).

　　　XY also operated xy.com and xymag.com between 1996 -2009. These websites

featured content from the magazines as well as a point of purchase for subscriptions and

back issues. With a magazine subscription, readers could also access instant messaging,

webcam, and chat rooms (*XY Foto,* 2004). Although I am unable to find regularly

published subscription or sales numbers, in their Winter 2005 issue, XY editor Peter Ian

Cummings reported a circulation of 62,615 magazines which echoes a comment *XY* gave

to the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2002, stating: "We sell over 60,000 copies per issue

and have more than 200,000 readers from all over the world. Our average reader age is

22, according to our last reader survey, and XY is officially targeted toward 12–29 year

old young gay men" (quoted in Gross, 2007, p. 127). Departing greatly from the form

and content of their magazines and website, *XY* also published two advice books: *The*

XY Survival Guide: Everything You Need to Know about Being Young and Gay

(Nycum, 2000) and the *XY Survival Guide 2* (*XY*, 2003). The first edition of the

Survival Guide, written by *XY* writers Benjie Nycum and his then romantic partner

Michael Glatze (Glatze provided editing) won a Lambda Literary Award in the

Children/Young Adult category in 2001.

　　　After working at XY and having some success with the first edition *XY Survival*

Guide (2000), Benjie Nycum and Michael Glatze decided to start their own media

organization in 2001, which they called YGA, or Young Gay America. The two met while

working together at *XY magazine,* and recruited Ted McGuire who also provided the

design and layout for the *XY Survival Guide.* Between 2001-2007, they led YGA, with

sometimes no more than a handful of staff members, to produce a number of different

media projects aimed at LGBTQ young people, all of which they framed as having a

more political than commercial focus on empowering LGBTQ youth.

In 2001, the pair moved to Nycum's hometown in Halifax, Canada and started

their first major project, documenting road trips across Canada and the United States

and posting content to ygamag.com. With the intention of capturing a sense of "real

young people," they arranged to meet with groups of young LGBTQ people in cities and

towns of all sizes (*YGA magazine* 2004/2005), conducting interviews and taking over

8,000 images[9]. In seven trips, they covered 44 states and three Canadian provinces,

gathering a large amount of material that eventually fed several other projects, including

Jim in Bold (2003), a documentary by award-winning filmmaker Glenn Holsten,

produced by Equality Forum in collaboration with PBS, Young Gay America, and MTV;

Exuberance, a travelling photography exhibit (2003); and *YGA,* a bi-monthly print

magazine that was distributed across Canada and the United States between 2004-

2006. Although YGA did not publish distribution numbers, their magazine was

distributed across Canada and the United States through Barnes and Noble, Borders

Books, general interest newsstands, as well as LGBTQ bookstores, LGBTQ youth

programs, Gay-Straight Alliances, and public school libraries. Glatze and Nycum were

engaged in speaking tours, received a significant amount of media coverage in both the

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[9] http://www.equalityforum.com/2003/press-rolemodel.cfm

U.S. and Canada, and received the Equality Forum's National Role Model Award in 2003.

The It Gets Better campaign (IGB), initiated by Dan Savage, is the most recent and by far the most successful media coverage of LGBTQ youth to receive national attention. In his introduction to *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living*, Savage (2011)[10] explains how he came up with the idea to create a short Youtube video aimed at LGBTQ young people. Moved by the deaths of Justin Aaberg and Billy Lucas in the summer and early fall of 2010, Savage had been inspired by a comment on a blog post he had written about Billy Lucas that read: "My hear breaks for the pain and torture you went through, Billy Lucas. I wish I could have told you that things get better." (p. 2). "What a simple and powerful truth" Savage writes, "Things get better — things *have* gotten better, things *keep* getting better — for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. I knew that to be true because things had certainly gotten better for me" (p. 2). This inspiration moved Savage to start thinking about how to get this same message across to LGBTQ young people — a target audience that he had experienced difficulty in accessing given the conservatism of middle and high schools, and the common response by "homophobic parents and bigoted 'Christian' organizations" to gay speakers and/or topics in schools (p. 4). Savage realized that he could use social media to speak directly to LGBTQ, and simply bypass parents and school administrators.

Savage, who is an author, newspaper editor, and columnist of the nationally syndicated sex advice column "Savage Love," along with his partner Terry Miller, made

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[10] For a similar account, see also: Savage, D. (2011, April 13). How it happened: The genesis of a Youtube movement. *The Stranger, 20.32,* pp. 17-20.

a short video for Youtube aimed at providing a personal message directly to young

LGBTQ people who were perhaps considering suicide[11]. Savage and Miller discussed

their own difficulties with being bullied in high school, their own despair at being

rejected by their families, and how their lives had gotten better than they had ever

imagined they might since finding more accepting places to live, friends, finding each

other, and having a son. Within one week, there were one thousand additional videos

posted in response. Tragically, in that same month, five more young men took their lives

and received national news coverage bringing a greater awareness of the problem of

LGBTQ youth suicide to a national audience. IGB, it would seem, was poised as the right

message at the right time. According to the project website, within two months of

Savage and Miller's original video post, IGB "turned into a worldwide movement,

inspiring over 10,000 user-created videos viewed over 35 million times.[12]"

The project continued to grow and within six months of the original video post a

long list of famous and influential people had added their videos to the project,

including: Anne Hathaway, Colin Farrell, Ke$ha, Tim Gunn, Suze Orman, and Ellen

DeGeneres, President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and

Representative, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, the San Francisco Giants, the

Boston Red Sox, the world champion boxer Sergio Martine, Yale Divinity School, the

Gap, Google, Apple, Facebook, and Pixar. As mentioned, the greatest majority of video

responses have followed the same narrative format as the original post: People share

their personal story about overcoming difficulties and encouraging young viewers that

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[11] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IcVyvg2Qlo

[12] Within 18 months these numbers, according to the website, had reached 40,000 videos viewed over 40 million times. http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/ (March, 25, 2012).

they can endure and that life does get better. By June of 2011, Old Navy produced a line of Pride shirts specifically in support of the IGB Project. Other high profile mainstream accolades followed: Savage and Miller were asked to serve as the New York City Pride March Grand Marshals 2011 and the IGB website won a webby award.

The project also produced a book, *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living* (2011) edited by Savage and Miller with short essays contributed by some of the same celebrities who posted videos, including President Barack Obama. This book made the *New York Times* Best Seller List within four weeks of publication. IGB is now operated through the Iola Foundation, a registered 501(c)3 organization with donations and sales from merchandise (such as T-shirts) and the book funding the IGB Project, the Trevor Project (a suicide intervention organization), GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian Straight Education Network), and the ACLU LGBT Project. On February 21, 2012, IGB expanded to television through a one-hour special of the same title that aired on MTV and Logo. The special focused on the stories of three young people struggling with and overcoming the challenges they faced because of their gender and sexuality[13].

3.3 Situating this Study Theoretically & Methodologically

Following Foucault (1978, 1979, 1983), I approach discourse as broadly including all forms of social practice that engage in meaning making, specifically, a means for talking (and ways of representing knowledge) about a particular topic at a particular historical moment. Discourses produce and operate through bodies of knowledge that

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[13] http://www.mtv.com/shows/it_gets_better/series.jhtml.

both define and limit what meanings can be made. Foucault also argued that discourses are not simply fields of meaning and power in which human subjects engage, but that subjects are *produced* through discourse. From this perspective, discourses shape how identities are defined (including LGBTQ young people) but also profoundly shape future possibilities for these identities. I find Fairclough's (2003) description of the *power* of discourse particularly useful in this regard:

> Different discourses are different perspectives on the world... Discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), but they are also projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied to projects to change the world in particular directions (p. 124).

Fairclough also points out a key characteristic in Foucault's concept of discourse emphasizing that power in discourse "does not foreclose agency, resistance, and transformation of meanings" but rather that "discourses are fluid and dynamic, meanings are produced (and constantly reproduced) dialectically through use" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 224); because power is not wielded in discourse unilaterally or uniformly, there are constantly new formations of power and resistance.

Working from this understanding of discourse, I undertook this study with the following guiding questions:

- How are LGBTQ young people discursively defined and visually represented in nationally distributed media made by or for an LGBTQ youth readership?
- Specifically, what visual communication resources and rhetorical strategies do the magazine producers use to define young people in terms of sexuality, gender, race, and national identity?
- What are some of the effects of the increased visibility of LGBTQ young people and what other frames of invisibility might it produce and/or rely on for its own production?

Having become familiar with the research literature on LGBTQ young people, I also viewed these media with an eye on where the media discourses might overlap or differ from the research literature. I asked: Is queer youth identity defined and visually represented differently across these different sites? Thus, my inquiry was informed by an awareness of the four broad epistemological frames discussed in chapter two: 1) Queer youth defined as "at risk"; 2) Queer youth as resilient in the face of struggle; 3) Queer youth as unique yet still the same as a perceived heterosexual majority; and 4) Recognizing queer youth as racially and gender diverse.

To answer these questions, I analyzed all texts for how LGBTQ young people are discursively defined and positioned through visual and textual representations. In analyzing the format and the content, I focused on identifying key discursive themes and rhetorical strategies with a focus on visual discourse. My analysis of the linguistic and visual strategies used in all three media projects is informed by Fairclough (1989; 2003), Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), Van Leeuwen (2005), and Rose (2007). The data sets for this analysis vary according to how many published texts were accessible for each media outlet. All three outlets have produced a core content that is re-published through their other products spanning multiple genres, including websites, books, videos, films, and print magazines, each of which consistently follows a highly specific and legible format and content formula.

The data set for IGB includes the website, the video by Savage and Miller originally posted on Youtube, videos posted by users, and the framing of the project and transcripts of user videos published in the book *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living* (2011), as well as the *It Gets Better* one-hour video special aired on MTV/Logo that aired on February 21, 2012. As I

note below, the IGB website as of this date currently hosts well over 10,000 user-created videos. I have viewed a random sample of videos (roughly 60 videos, seeking a mixture of celebrity, non-celebrity, and youth video posts). I do not make claims that my data set is a representational sample and, indeed, question if such a sample could be drawn given the variety of individual stories. What is apparent in my data set is that nearly all of the videos follow the format, narrative content, and narrative structure of Savage and Miller's original video with an amazing consistency. Because of how consistently users followed the original video, I have also focused on the original video and the other media publications in which Savage has provided the same message and/or reflected upon it.

Because XY stopped publishing in 2007 and deactivated its website in 2009, I have a smaller data set from *XY.* Out of the 49 issues of XY magazine published between 1996-2007, I have had access to two and a half years of publication between Summer 2003 and Nov-Dec. 2005 (issue numbers 40 through 44) and one of the eight issues published of *XY Foto* (Issue 3, Autumn 2004), as well as access to their website active between 2005 – 2006. I have also included the first *The XY Survival Guide: Everything You Need to Know about Being Young and Gay* (Nycum, 2000). I could not access a copy of the *XY Survival Guide 2* (*XY,* 2003) as it appears to have been published as a special issue and back issues of the magazine are no longer available for purchase.

The data set for Young Gay America (YGA) includes: YGA's website active between 2005 – 2007; all six issues of *YGA Magazine,* a bi-monthly print magazine that was distributed across Canada and the United States between 2004-2006 (issues one through six); images from *Exuberance,* a travelling photography exhibit (2003); and a

documentary film titled *Jim in Bold* (2003) produced by Equality Forum that tells the story of YGA, along with the story of Jim Wheeler, a gay high school student from Pennsylvania who committed suicide in 1997 after experiencing ongoing harassment about his sexuality at school.

All three media organizations organize their message through rhetorics of empowerment, but, of course, articulate empowerment in divergent ways and promote quite different means to achieve it. As the only media projects of this size and scope, they form a key archive of how LGBTQ young people - as readers and viewers — have been imagined and constructed in mainstream media. One could potentially look at the history of these projects since XY began in the mid 1990s and argue that they, indeed, fit the mythology that LGBTQ people in the U.S.A. have moved 'up from the shadows' of invisibility: Each media organization successively gained a broader reader/viewer base as well as wider recognition in mainstream culture. However, another overall movement that could be traced through these projects is from an explicit and celebratory "in your face" approach to sex and sexuality that saturates XY's magazines, to the notion of "erotic power" in YGA that is wholly abstracted from sex and almost always framed within a romantic committed couple, to IGB — a space in which explicit discussion or representations of sexuality and eroticism would be unseemly. Even if one does not buy XY's version of empowerment through celebratory sexuality, this archive shows a marked shift away from addressing sexuality directly and explicitly as well as the "in your face" type of representations and activism more commonly associated with the "queer nineties" (Wasserman and McGarry, 1998, p. 243). These media are not only an archive of what has changed but also what has also persisted, particularly around

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conceptions of empowerment and LGBTQ identity – a detailed discussion of which, I turn to next.

3.4 Analysis of Key Discursive Themes

This section is organized around four key discursive themes that run strongly throughout the media produced by all three organizations, IGB, YGA, and XY Magazine. The three themes are: 1) Queer Youth at Risk: Saving Youth through Media; 2) Empowerment: Envisioning the New and the Better; and 3) Belonging and New Social Movements: Is this What the Revolution Looks Like?

Theme One: Reaching Out: Saving Queer Youth

> We here at XY don't know who you are, or why you are reading this page. We only know that for the moment, you're reading it, and that is good. I can assume that you are here because you are troubled and considering ending your life. If it were possible, I would prefer to be there with you at this moment, to sit with you and talk, face-to-face and heart to heart. But since that is not possible, we will have to make do with this.
> — xy.com

> If there are 14 and 15 and 16 year olds, even 13 year olds, 12 year olds listening out there, what I really want you to take away from it, really is, it *gets better*. However bad it is now, it gets better. And it can get awesome, it can be amazing, but you have to tough this period of it out, and you have to *live* your life so that you're around of it to get amazing. And it can, and it will.
> — Dan Savage, It Gets Better Video: Dan and Terry

> Our mission was simple: to save lives by educating and informing queer youth about their importance in society...and promoting positive self-image and sense of belonging.
> — *YGA magazine*

As the quotes here illustrate, an explicit rationale of media aimed at LGBTQ youth has sought not simply to entertain or inform, but to directly intervene and prevent

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suicide through establishing a relationship with the reader and providing a sense of belonging and hope for the future. IGB and YGA explicitly define their rationale as seeking to intervene in gay youth suicide. In the words of the YGA (2004-2005 Dec/Jan) editors, their aim was to "speak directly" to Young LGBTQ people and "save lives," through offering them a hopeful, positive self-image, sense of belonging, and hope for the future (p. 4).

Whereas XY did not explicitly frame its mission as suicide intervention, it clearly addresses suicide and frames its existence as a crucial resource for young gay men to see a positive representation of and affirming message about gay male desire. For example, each issue of XY contains a short editorial comment by Peter Ian Cummings in which he consistently posits his intentions of the magazine, such as: "I started this magazine back in 1996 to try to improve everyone's karma. I felt at the time that young gay men were so mean to each other. I wanted to show how to have a more positive attitude" (Summer 2004 Summer, p. 7); and "In a time of world-wide turbulence and shadyness, I aim to make this magazine a beacon of goodness" (2005 Nov-Dec., p. 8). Cummings goes so far as to position XY as altruistic, "There is just XY Magazine, trying altruistically to do the best we can to improve life in this country..." (*XY Foto*, 2004 Autumn). Cummings claim to altruism is premised on the idea that XY provides a crucially needed, if not explicitly political visibility to young gay men that is otherwise denied or denigrated. And, XY's intention in providing resources for suicide prevention is expressed clearly in its two publications of the *XY Survival Guide* - the title of which is both literal and figurative, playful and serious.

Of course, XY also sought to directly intervene in suicides in its magazine and website. Placed as the first hyperlink in the XY.com website is a box that reads:

"Suicidal? XY cares about you. If you are thinking about suicide, please read this first."

Published as an article authored by XY as a collective in issue 44 (Nov/Dec. 2005), they

continue: "While you're at it, you can still stay with us for a bit. Read through your

XY.com or the XY Survival Guide twice and three times. Hopefully we can give you some

hope for your gay life, and for the future" (p. 47). The article also includes resources

such as crisis hotlines, an insert titled "69 reasons" listing 69 reasons to live and another

insert "The light up ahead" with a photo of its 15 year old author Danny Malakhov from

Tarzana, CA explaining why he goes on despite the amount of pain he feels.

Perhaps the most common message in all three media organizations is that the

media producers care *deeply* and *personally* for their viewer or reader, and that the

relationship established between the writers and producers can build hope and save

lives. There are several rhetorical strategies that these media employ in an attempt to

establish a relationship with the reader or viewer. Of course, in Visual Cultural Studies,

all texts, and especially visual texts, can be understood to interpellate viewers, following

Althusser's (1989) concept of interpellation. According to Althusser, ideologies work

through texts to "hail" subjects in particular ways that promote recognition in individual

viewers as socially positioned in relation to the text or the meaning of the text. Typically,

the viewer comes to recognize him or herself as among the class or group of subjects for

whom the image's message seems to be intended. However, these media texts

consistently promote specific types of interpellation through specific rhetorical

strategies.

One such rhetorical strategy aimed at establishing a relationship with the viewer

is what Norman Fairclough (1999) calls synthetic personalization by which textual and

visual strategies are used to create the impression that each reader (or customer) is

addressed as an individual, despite the fact that the text, such as a website or magazine,

is distributed on a large scale. As Fairclough (1999) puts it, this is "a compensatory

tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people 'handled' *en masse* as an

individual (p. 62). Synthetic personalization works in these media following all three

forms through which Fairclough outlines: 1) Through directly addressing the

reader/viewer; 2) Through the use of informal, personal and expressive language; and

3) Through presenting a singular and personal voice (e.g. the magazine speaking as a

collective voice or as an individual, not as a generic, corporate, or abstract "we"). Each of

these strategies create the impression not only that the meaning in the image is

personally directed at and intended for the viewer, but positions the reader/viewer as

engaged in a personal, even intimate relationship with another 'voice' in the text.

    In both YGA and XY, we also see extensive use of synthetic personalization

through the editors or authors speaking as one voice and directly addressing the reader,

particularly in YGA through engaging the reader with direct questions (e.g. "What would

you do?" or, as we see in figure 3.1, "How do you tell if that person likes YOU?").

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Figure 3.1

Both magazines commonly use slang and informal language to convey a familiarity, in addition to explicit and repeated expressions of care and concern for the reader as if she or he were a close friend. For example, a few of Cummings editorials are printed in a font that simulates a hand-written note and/or with a hand-written signature. One begins "Zzzzzzzz. Hey, what's up? Peter here. I figured as a special holiday treat for you, I would write this month's editorial while laying in bed. Anyway, it's a personal note from me to you. I just wanted you to know that you matter to me" (p. 8). In other editorials, Cummings shares personal stories from his life, such as difficulties with the business and mistakes with his first boyfriend in the kind of informal language typically used in conversation with a friend and an equal.

All three media directly address the reader, using language as well as visual conventions of address, which is put to particularly powerful use in IGB through the audio-visual medium. In this case, speakers are typically positioned close to the camera with a focus on the speaker's face (typically with little else in the image that might draw attention away from the speaker's face), speaking to and looking directly at the intended viewer. A vast majority of the IGB campaign follows a fairly consistent format and narrative established by the original Savage and Miller video, in which the creators speak directly to an imagined audience who is presumably an individual LGBTQ young person considering suicide. Certainly, speakers make comments such as "for all the gay youth listening" or, as Savage is quoted as saying in the epigraph above: "If there are 14 and 15 and 16 year olds, even 13 year olds, 12 year olds listening out there, what I really want you to take away ...", but these same speakers will move back and forth between

addressing an imagined single viewer and a collective. The clear rhetorical convention

established for the videos is for the speaker(s) to address an imagined individual viewer,

and to do so in a highly personal way through sharing what may otherwise be very

private emotional difficulties they have experienced before overcoming or working

through them. The move to seek an individual relationship with the viewer based on a

sincere and deep concern for their well-being is established not just through the format

(speaking in a close-up frame to the viewer) and the content (sharing personal

information), but also in the strongly emotional delivery and tone found in many of

these videos, one example of which is Kristin Bauer Van Straten's video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdGq0KukZfM). Bauer Van Straten's video is also

available on the website for the HBO series *True Blood* alongside videos by many of her

fellow actors, which points to another powerful aspect of IGB: the opportunity for the

imagined viewer to share what seems intended to feel like they have had a personal

'exchange' with famous and powerful people.

It is also helpful to understand how these media seek to interpellate their readers

and viewers into a specific type of relationship using concepts from Social Semiotics. In

Social Semiotics, the social meaning of images is understood to be interactional,

deriving from the visual articulation of social meanings in face-to-face interactions. In

other words, the non-verbal communication that happens in face-to-face interactions,

such as physical distance from each other, sitting side-by-side, or facing each other head

on is represented (rather than enacted) in visual images, creating meanings based on

familiar social codes and conventions (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 116). For

example, in figure 3.2 below we see an image from YGA magazine in which the young

men in the image are positioned very close to the camera (and by extension, the viewer), thus representing a fairly intimate interaction with the viewer.

Figure 3.2

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) distinguish between two kinds of participants in an interaction between the image and the viewer: *represented* participants (the people, places and things represented in the images) and *interactive* participants (the people who communicate with each other through visual images, the producers and the viewers of images) (p. 114). The images in all of these media overwhelmingly seek to interpellate the viewer as an interactive participant, and they do so not just through framing but also through the use of what Kress and Van Leeuwen call the "demand gaze" that represents a "visual form of direct address" and constitutes an 'image act' in which "the producer uses the image to do something to the viewer... it demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her. Exactly what kind of relation is signified by other means..." (pp. 117-118). Figure 3.2 above is also an example of a demand gaze, such that the viewer is compelled to meet the direct gaze of the young men in the image. A demand gaze can be distinguished from

an 'offer' gaze in which the viewer is positioned as an observer only and the producer is offering the image as merely 'informational.'

Similar to figure 3.2, images most commonly center a close up image of other young people exhibiting a friendly demand gaze that conveys that the viewer is both liked and welcomed by those in the image; the reader is also thus positioned at the center of the image (and, metaphorically, of the magazine) through her or his relation to the gaze. Whereas, in *YGA* this relationship is often portrayed as friendly, happy, and inclusive, in XY, which has a greater amount of photographs including full-page photographs, the demand gaze is almost always highly eroticized and demands desire of the viewer. It should be noted that viewers exercise choice in whether or not they identify with how they are addressed in images and the rhetorical tactics used in them, but, as Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) write, "All the same, whether or not we identify with the way we are addressed, we do understand how we are addressed, because we do understand the way images represent social interactions and social relations" (p. 116).

What might be the effects of these discursive strategies? Certainly, if the aim is to intervene in suicide, a highly personalized message that directly addresses and establishes a relationship with the viewer seems an effective strategy. It is important to note that Fairclough (1999) also argues that synthetic personalization is used where "relational and subjective values are manipulated for instrumental reasons" (p. 217). A danger of synthetic personalization, he argues, is that it simulates solidarity yet this form of 'solidarity' functions as a "strategic containment" in that it constitutes a veil of equality between the different social actors and social classes, leaving the material inequalities between them unaddressed (p. 195). In other words, its a manipulation of subjects in a "simulated equalization" (p. 221) that can then serve to make invisible the

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real inequalities structuring the relationship, a concern I take up further in the following discussions.

Theme Two: Empowerment: Envisioning the New and the Better

While all three media organizations stated an interest in 'saving' LGBTQ youth, they also strongly promoted a theme of empowerment, albeit in very different ways. Certainly, in current U.S. culture the notion of empowerment is not unique to media for LGBTQ young people; discourses such as "girl power" seem ubiquitous. Among youth and children, discourses of empowerment seem particularly strong, if not hegemonically positioned as unquestionably good and essential. My interest focused on specifically *how* empowerment was defined and framed in each project and how this framing spoke to definitions of LGBTQ youth as an identity; this realization raised several critical questions that I outline below.

Empowerment is the prominent and driving idea throughout these media and centrally operates within the other two themes discussed in this chapter. While empowerment appears to be an organizing logic of all three media organizations, it is most strongly the case in the IGB campaign and YGA, whose image of empowered young people overlapped with promoting ideas of the "new" and the "better" through being "normal" and "natural, " and through erotic and sexual power. One striking aspect of all three media is the absence of discussions of other types of power, such as collective power, wielding social influence, and economic power. Power is almost wholly presented as a quality to be found and wielded by an individual for individual ends; each of these forms of empowerment function through a framework of extreme individualism that is

both implicitly and explicitly framed as "American," creating complicated and contradictory messages for queer youth about empowerment.

Although both YGA and IGB promote the "new" and the "better," they position their reader/viewer quite differently. While the primary message in IGB – to give the viewer a life saving hope that life can get better than it is right now – positions the viewer in crisis and in urgent need of support, YGA seems to go to great pains in positioning the reader as already happy, 'normal,' and well adjusted in what seems to be an effort in combating the dominant narrative about queer youth as troubled and at risk. This is a contradictory line that YGA walks fairly carefully. Thus, while clearly acknowledging their purpose as saving lives and empowering young people, they also do so through promoting their reader as a "new kind of young person" that belongs to a new social movement for which YGA was a public voice.

The basic premise of the "new kind of young person" promoted by YGA is that LGBTQ youth are different today because of large-scale social changes that have occurred in mainstream culture. Put more directly, gay, lesbian and bisexual youth of today are "normal for the first time" which, according to the magazine, differentiates them from past generations of gay people who have grown up in a culture of disapproval and exclusion. This argument is overwhelmingly consistent in all of YGA media except for the documentary *Jim in Bold,* as clearly articulated in their opening editorial for their first issue, titled "Brave New World," authored by Mike Glatze and the YGA staff (2004/05):

> 1994. 'Queer,' as a word people like, is beginning to be used. ...a 15 year old discovering his or her same-sex feelings immediately deals with the belief that his or her feelings are unnatural. That he or she, deep down, is somehow flawed.

> Fast-Forward. 2004. ... As the millennium turned, so too, did the status of the young (13-27) non-straight American. Once a struggling minority...Young gay, queer, non-defined, trans, bi, lesbian, whatever people are everywhere; we've reached critical mass. There will be no more going back in the closet (p. 31).

Granted there are multiple ways in which this editorial describes the 'new young gay American' but the important point here is that YGA positions this new LBGTQ young person as being fundamentally different and, in fact, better than past generations of LGTBQ people. Young people today, YGA argues, have benefited from large scale social progress that has seemingly taken place in the ten year span between 1994 and 2004, as noted through the reference to the millennium turn and the changing status of young people (and perhaps also in the idea of "fast-forward"). Notice here the transition from singular to plural, the shift from an isolated individual in 1994, to a "critical mass" of non-straight Americans, a bold and presumptive statement.

In YGA, young people of today (or at least after the turn of the millennium) are not positioned as part of a minority limited by "the closet" and struggling with internalized homophobia as people in the past, but part of a much larger majority (repeatedly, as "Americans"). The editors continue to explain:

> Gay identity becomes increasingly integrated into mainstream life, and, as this happens, the phenomenon of the closet is quickly eroding. Ten to fifteen years ago, a closeted person experienced total isolation, existing completely apart from the normal world around them, unable to feel included in any aspect of teenage life. They escaped to a faraway city, often years after discovering their identity, where they could finally find the resources to understand their deepest desires. Today's closet is sometimes no more than a one – or two- week experience, followed by a quick crisis, which ends and then focus shifts to more pressing concerns such as midterms, school dances, or getting picked for the JV team. "When I came out to my parents, they said they already knew, and they didn't care," said Jacob, 16, from Kansas. And his story is common (pp. 32-33).

The editors go on to point out that a result in this shift is a new meaning for the word gay: "Gay means your different... and everyone wants to be different...different is cool"

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(p. 33), thus explaining the shift from "queer" collocated with "1994," to the generic description of "non-straight American" in 2004. Yet, in a somewhat circular move, the editors also quote Rich C. Savin-Williams a noted developmental psychologist and "queer youth researcher" (whose work I have discussed in chapter two), in the same article in describing an advantage of being LGBTQ: That college admissions boards: "... see (out students) as more likely than their straight peers to question norms, questions assumptions, assume positions of leadership, and achieve" (Savin-Williams quoted in YGA, p. 33). Thus, in a contradictory move, Glatze both denies that queer youth are any different than "the norm" while ascribing them as a group with shared characteristics that distinguish them from their straight peers, if only with positive traits. This particular quote illustrates well the contradictory and complicated rhetorical messages that run *throughout* YGA's media in defining the new kind of young person as following the epistemological framework put forth by Savin-Williams (2006), as discussed in chapter one, as "different but the same." In fact, YGA quotes from Savin-Williams on more than one occasion, implying a familiarity with his work. There is also a question as to why "out students" are placed in parentheses and whether this was by Savin-Williams or YGA. Either way, it is literally a form of bracketing the "out" students while also relying on their "outness" (that presumably relies on conventional signals to indicate membership as a minority status) to make a claim to difference.

This contradictory message about LGBTQ young people as being unique but also 'the same as everyone else' is deployed along with a strategic essentialism around LGBTQ identities which, one might argue, is key to the genre of a niche marketed magazine that must successfully engage in the conventions of the genre and sell magazines in an identity-based target market. So, what we see in the magazine is a

constant tension and contradictory play between proclamations that 'you are normal' and an intense stylization work on 'how to be gay,' including how to behave, what to look like, how to desire, and what to buy (Cameron, 2000). Such questions are positioned as the real 'issues' of life for gay youth today who have predominantly 'normal' concerns as homophobia is figured as a concern only for the older generation.

The message of the "normal youth of today" not facing real difficulties, especially homophobia, is, frankly, hard to buy. One wonders how many LGBTQ young people there are whose main concern is not going to the high school dance? Or whose parents aren't so accepting? The picture of what is 'normal' for queer youth presented here is alarmingly narrow for the diverse and assumedly complicated lives that queer youth live today, given that it is now widely recognized that LGBTQ young people *are* in need of empowerment, do suffer from bullying, depression, and isolation that lead them to suicide at higher rates than their peers. Yet, YGA – along with IGB and XY – consistently side step such issues while also positing their message (and their existence) as addressing it. YGA and XY, specifically, work to present a 'positive' image of queer youth, and do so through promoting an image of youth abstracted from lived material realities. Surely, LGBTQ young people deal with the same issues that other teens deal with, such as drugs, abusive relationships (with parents as well as with partners), financial issues, depression, teen parenting, and STD's. Yet, they must additionally negotiate homophobia and other institutionalized inequalities arising out of racism, sexism, able-ism, classism, etc. that pose limitations and challenges to minorities. The "new" 'normal non-straight American' reflected in YGA is premised on the mythical norm of an American as Caucasian, classless, gender normative, and unencumbered by institutional inequalities. Such abstraction, while not benign, is possibly part of XY's

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aim, which is focused on the fantasy of desire, but YGA goes further and presents such an image as an authentic representation of 'real' queer youth, as well as an integral part of a political platform for a new social movement.

Empowerment in IGB is strongly promoted as autonomy and agency, in other words: It gets better because you can make it better. An important component in the message of IGB is that it is premised on the idea that society has already gotten better (and all youth have to do is get out of high school). In this way, it echoes the idea posited by YGA that the closet is almost a thing of the past and the world now provides more opportunities for young gay people to live 'normal' lives. As Savage states: "... things *have* gotten better, things *keep* getting better — for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. I knew that to be true because things had certainly gotten better for me" (2011, April 13, pp. 17-18). Indeed, this idea strongly structures the general format of user-created videos that have followed Savage and Miller's lead; people talking about the difficulties they experienced as youth and how it is not just their lives that have since gotten better but the opportunities available to them. Other people in user-created videos follow Savage's lead in pointing to positive shifts such as the legalization of marriage and professional opportunities. There is a particular narrative that Savage tells in framing IGB which he repeats in his video with Miller (2010) as well as the introduction to the book (Savage, 2011), and an article, which is a truncated version of book's introduction, titled "How it Happened: The Genesis of a Youtube Movement" published in *The Stranger,* a Seattle newspaper (Savage, 2011 April 13th). In this account, Savage contrasts his experience in coming out to his mother in 1982. For him, this did not simply mean telling her that he was gay but that "coming out in 1982 meant "telling her that I would never get married, that I would never be a parent, that my

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professional life would be forever limited by my sexuality" (2012, p.3). He follows this with his own transformation, describing how he has managed to make a successful professional life, adopt a son "with the love of my life – the man I would marry – and, with him at my side, present my parents with a new grandchild, my siblings with a nephew." (p. 3). He goes on to say that things did not just get better for him but "all of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adults [he] knew were leading rich and rewarding lives" (p.3).

Thus, Savage describes that it has gotten better for him in highly normative ways that are seemingly now available to him and other LGBTQ people he knows: the possibility of marriage and children, family acceptance, a successful job. As he also adds in his article a "capstone – living proof – that things were indeed getting better, 'don't ask don't tell' was finally repealed" (Savage, 2011 April 13, p. 18). In this way, the message of empowerment that Savage has shaped is similar to YGA in that it moves away from explicit questions of sexuality (and shame) and focuses on positioning youth as able to take advantage of a new, 'normal' and normative life that reflects generic American ideals. Of course, IGB, and Savage and Miller's video particularly, have been critiqued precisely for being narrowly normative in a way that risks further marginalizing certain youth, as well as reviving the problematic American mythology of "pulling yourself up by the bootstraps" (see especially, Puar, 2010 Nov., and Ngyong'o, 2010).

The phrasing of "It Gets Better" is important. The passive voice in the phrase lacks a subject who takes action. In fact, action is not required from anyone in order for things to get better; it is simply a message that it will get better. Overall, the aim of the campaign is to simply *prevent one action*: suicide. It does not address the question as to

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how things will get better for that specific young person. The logic presented, as discussed in the previous paragraph, is that society has already progressed, and will assumedly continue to progress, in ways that allow for life to get better for LGBTQ young people once they are free of the limitations of being a teenager (e.g. high school and legal dependence). However, Savage has also included the statement "You can make it better," thus ascribing both agency and responsibility to young people. As Savage states in the MTV special, "You have the power to make it better" (2012). In an interview in *Mother Jones*, Savage also makes a similar comment, sharing a story about an IGB video:

> Gabrielle Rivera, a Latina, lesbian poet in the Bronx, did a wonderful video. She watched the first videos and she got angrier and angrier about straight parents who were doing the bullying. She made this video where she said, "It doesn't get better. What happens is you get stronger." And I loved that idea. I love the way she put it. It's the Latina, lesbian Bronx way of saying it gets better. She put it on their own shoulders (quoted in Chen, 2012 Feb. 20).

While one might agree with telling young people they can and will get stronger and more capable of handling life's challenges, the other message coupled with this is that it's "on their own shoulders" — in other words, young people are individually responsible for making their lives better without recognizing: 1) A wider responsibility shared by institutions such as the government, schools, parents, etc.; 2) Young people might understand homophobia as a systematic issue that might be addressed collectively; and 3) Young people's concern might go beyond their own individual lives. The narrowly individualistic view of both social problems and the means to address them promoted through IGB is also consistently represented in YGA and XY.

YGA is also very consistent in its representation of what the new young gay person is today: *normal.* In the same editorial, YGA (2004-2005 Dec-Jan) writes: "Normal for the first time. ... The average non-straight young person in North America today understands he or she is a force to be reckoned with and has just as much right to sexuality as everybody else" (p. 31). What is defined as normal is often aligned *with* American, and with a rotating range of labels that often include "non-straight," "whatever," and *against* an "older" gay community, which is figured as older in age but also "old" - as in no progressing, backward, and crippled with internalized homophobia.

Normal is also figured through another contradictory move as empowered (e.g. "a force to be reckoned with") and yet in need of self-improvement, which is not that surprising given that YGA chose the entertainment genre. In fact, YGA magazine's format mostly follows the traditional entertainment/self-improvement model familiar to teen and women's magazines. Each issue contained feature articles, letters to the editors, "role model" interviews, personal essays, photo essays, beauty and fashion, reader surveys, advice columns, book and music reviews, games and quizzes, etc. Incidentally, the mode through which YGA sought to "save lives" and give hope to gay teens was that of self improvement centered around topics, such as: what kinds of books to read, music to listen to, fashion to wear, and how to negotiate personal issues.

Another contradictory message in YGA is that, while the media's mission is to empower LGBTQ youth, they invoke the imagined reader as actually *already* empowered and just needs to "be yourself." More clearly, there is no need for them to take action to change their lives (or the larger social issues coming to bear on them), because by just being their 'natural' selves, they are part of a movement for change. Promoting inaction is not only contradictory to the message that the reader is in need of

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empowerment, but also veers away from the 'self-help' nature of the magazine.

Additionally, the logic seems to follow in YGA that since LGBTQ young people today

have a new and healthy relation to their sexuality (free of the pains of the closet), in

order to be empowered they just need to be themselves. To 'just be yourself' is rather

overstated throughout YGA and constantly positioned as how to manifest their new

"normal" selves. Yet, here we see again a way in which this contradictory promotion of

empowerment and self-acceptance are undone in certain ways. An example that

illustrates this contradiction is in an article called "New, Popular, Improved" by Emily

Williams who writes that, despite never feeling accepted by the popular kids at school

because she was a good student, overweight, and gay, she has found out: "... I was

popular, just by being me" after her friend explains: "Emily, that haircut really made you

stand out. It was like you said to everyone that you didn't care what they thought, that

you were going to be yourself no matter what!" (2005, p. 27). Ironically, Emily's

unhappiness over not being popular is not relieved by a genuine disinterest in it, but

rather by getting external affirmation that she has it. Importantly, Emily gained

acceptance by not striving for it; she writes: "I had always thought that I had to be

someone else (and my being very lazy rather inhibited [that])" (p. 27). The power of not

following the crowd is reinforced through experts in feature articles and celebrities. For

example, in an interview with comedian Margaret Cho, Cho advises: "Follow your

instincts about what you want to do with your life. Never do something to appease other

people" (2005, p. 8).

Despite Emily's advice that "being yourself" is possible (even for those of us who

may be "lazy"!), it becomes apparent throughout YGA that empowerment can also

require a bit of assertiveness and action. The "Luscious Beast Guide" to "capture your

crush" advises: "the one thing that you have total control over is your good feelings." The reader is instructed to 'find' that good feeling in order to interact with others in a sexy and socially efficacious manner such as: "smile", "show interest", and "be a kind and friendly pal." They also advise youth to "be sexy": "... be strong, confident, and excited, no matter how inexperienced you are..." and "make them like you so much they are dying to take your clothes off to be next to you" (2004/05, p. 44). YGA figures sexiness as a central form of empowerment. As they explain: "Everyone wants to be part of an incredibly good feeling. Loving yourself means you're that much more desirable to others. You'll be surprised to find the results, when you're really in control of your spirit. You'll even be able to control how people respond to you! Now that's sexy!" (2005, p. 47). Sexiness is often discussed in the context of what is "natural" and "normal." "Natural" and "normal" are often interchanged and/or used together throughout the magazine and website, but as you can see, these terms also get bound up with several contradictory notions of empowerment and belonging.

Both XY and YGA share a focus on promoting a healthy, confident self-acceptance of one's sexual desire even when it is undercut in certain ways. Echoing other teen and women's magazines, YGA focused on self-improvement to be a sexier, more desirable person to potential partners. Sex and power are the most common themes in YGA, and they are consistently connected; being sexy and confidant are often presented as avenues to exercise greater agency. Though erotic power and same sex desire are celebrated as natural and 'normal' throughout the magazine, YGA contains a narrow representation of what normal sexuality may be. Attempting to separate what is presented in YGA as normal "sex," "desire," "sexual identity," and "relationships" is

rather difficult, since all of these concepts are commonly conflated and treated as interchangeable.

In YGA, power is almost always figured as "erotic power," or as arising out of "erotic power. " Erotic power is not developed, or achieved through striving for it, but in recognizing and allowing it to come out of one's authentic or "natural" self. As YGA states: "Desire is a natural function of our human essence. It not only invigorates us, but it also gives us spirit and extra energy that helps us make bold decisions, think creatively, strengthen our relationships, and overcome difficult obstacles" (2005, p. 48). Since every individual is seen as an erotic being, every individual has the power to achieve these qualities, we just have to look in the right place: "within us, deep down, perhaps even deeper than you've ever decided to look" to find the "erotic spirit." (2005, p. 48). In accessing the erotic spirit, youth can achieve both greater agency and freedom: ""Erotic power gives us control over our own lives, rather than becoming at the whim of others. Erotic power is the root of freedom. Lust/erotic/desire... its all part of the same exciting thing" (2005, p. 48). Readers are also assured of the naturalness of erotic power through the citation of experts such as Professor Simon Blackburn of Cambridge University and quotations from Audre Lorde as a "famous lesbian thinker" (2005, p. 48).

The conflation of sex with relationships and sexual attraction with gay identity is common. Indeed, gay identity is expressed through one's desire for sex and sexual intimacy *as a part of a romantic couple.* Representations of sex in the magazine are most commonly made in the context of an ongoing romantic relationship. The value on couple is demonstrated through the amount of photographs that deviate from this model: In all six issues of YGA magazine, there are only two photos of a large group and

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five images that include more than three people. Being in an ongoing, committed relationship is given much greater value over being single through the overwhelming predominance of the images of romantic couples. Similar to XY, almost all of the photos either figure a central figure with a demand gaze involving the viewer, or images of a couple together. However, coupling in XY is very different than in YGA. In XY, two or more men share an erotic moment but are not typically presented either explicitly or implicitly as a couple. The focus is on desire more than the couple, as demonstrated by images in which desire is shared by three people, often the viewer. For example, in figure 3.3, there are several gazes enacted between the men on the bed, the man in shadows behind them, and the viewer. Whether the two men physically engaged together on the bed are in a romantic couple or not is irrelevant to the image.

Figure 3.3

XY and XY Foto are heavily saturated with references to sex and desire, as well as being visually composed of mostly erotic photographs. And, I have discussed, XY's work

in making such images visible and available to young gay man in a positive and even perhaps celebrated way is figured as a "social good," as combating shame, and perhaps even in saving a life. Therefore, sex and accepting one's sexual desire is figured as a central form of empowerment in XY. What does sexy look like in XY? Almost all models display normative bodies in that they are traditionally masculine, 'straight looking,' physically fit, and seemingly non-gender-transgressive. Although the majority of models appear to be Caucasian, there is a fair amount of young men of color in the images. A consistent pattern is men posed in the classic "beefcake" style with the model centered and the most salient aspect of the image. This traditional masculinity is supported through props such as an array of sporting equipment, fishing poles, cowboy hats, and dogs. A good many photos show models with little clothing and almost always shirtless, showing off their muscles, and fixing a sexualized or flirtatious 'demand gaze' on the viewer who, through framing, is positioned with just enough social distance to give the sense of being an intimate observer. By promoting such a narrow image of sexiness, especially while placing such a value on sex and desire, they may also establish a measure of attractiveness unattainable by most young men. XY also promotes hypermasculinity as the only image of desire, leaving readers with no positive and sexy representations of gender-queer, feminine, or androgynous bodies. Lastly, desire is figured as incited by "masculine" men. Many photographs contain two masculine men as a couple, or a single man looking together either in intimate poses or seemingly "fooling around" in fun but flirty ways (see figures 3.4 and 3.5 below).

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Figure 3.4

Figure 3.5

Theme Three: The Power of Belonging and Movements for Social Change
(Is this what the revolution looks like?)

A specific form of empowerment that threads through these media projects to

varying degrees is the sense of power in belonging to a larger community or even to a

larger social movement. In XY, the magazine appears to promote a sense of belonging

through a sense of shared desire (both with other readers and more actively with the

models themselves) that is presented as affirming and empowering. However, the theme

of belonging, and especially of building new social movements, is central in both YGA

and the IGB project, both of which the producers describe as representing and

empowering a "movement." For YGA, this is a "new movement" of the "new kind of

young person," whereas IGB seeks a wider audience of the general public, as they state

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on their website: "JOIN OUR MOVEMENT - TAKE THE PLEDGE" and "Join the

520,640 others who support IGB."

All three media organizations centrally include a promise of participation by

readers and viewers; for YGA and IGB, of course, the idea of viewer participation is

central aspect and evidence of their political ethos and activism. The YGA staff, for

example, present the magazine as a place for youth to express themselves in a public

forum and that such a forum is a necessary piece of empowerment. To that end, the

YGA defines their own role in the magazine as facilitators for young people's voices

rather than a medium for expressing their own opinions; they repeat the message "this

is your magazine... [it] is for you and about you" (2004/05, p. 4) in multiple ways. Both

XY and YGA seek reader involvement through traditional modes for a magazine or

website format, such as publishing letters from readers, taking surveys, or offering space

to post comments as well as less traditional modes, through soliciting or publishing

photos or written content directly from readers as guest writers. Although many of

these strategies are typical marketing tactics aimed at building a customer base and

brand loyalty, participation in this media is framed as a form of personal and political

action. Like the other forms of empowerment presented, the modes of participation and

belonging are similarly contradictory and limited.

While a central part of the IGB ethos is to establish itself as a political movement

for LGBT youth, Savage also frames IGB as a form of collective empowerment for adults.

Specifically, he posits IGB as a means of empowerment for adults as well, and

encourages them to actively intervene and speak directly to LGBTQ young people. IGB,

he argues, has broken the "old order" where LGBTQ young people were inaccessible to

adults given the social and legal control that parents and state institutions had over

them, which was especially restricted for LGBTQ adults. Savage writes: "That was the

old order; and it fell apart when the IGB went viral. Suddenly, gay, lesbian, bisexual and

transgendered adults all over the country — all over the world — were speaking to LGBT

youth. We weren't waiting for anyone's permission anymore. We found our voices"

(Savage, 2011 April 13th, p. 20). However, the 'voices' do not become a collective voice

but rather, through the videos, an aggregation of individual messages for youth that

follow a narrow format and also fairly narrowly repeat a de-politicized message: That it

gets better (somehow) and/or you can make it better (on your own). The IGB's

website's "Get Involved" page links to their "Action Center: Do Better for LGBT Youth."

The actions that they list are:

- Donate
- Record a video or write your story to share on the website
- Take their pledge to support gay youth
- Wear an It Gets Better T-shirt
- Buy the book
- Order the book for your local library or school
- Connect with them on TWITTER, FACEBOOK and YOUTUBE

All of which focus the viewer's actions on the IGB campaign, not on connecting with

each other, other campaigns, or issues. The forms of action require focus on donating

money and engaging with the IGB social media, requiring relatively little time and

actual connection to young people. No doubt, participants and viewers derive positive

effects from participating in the campaign, but alas they are restricted to the modes of a

performing lifestyle (e.g. following on Facebook or Twitter, wearing a t-shirt, and

making a video).

Participating in YGA and IGB is most often couched as having a "voice" in the

political sense of overcoming silence and thus being "heard" and included in public life.

As mentioned, both YGA and IGB frame their purpose as a mere platform or medium

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through which others can have a voice. One concept that is helpful in better understanding how voice is framed and enacted in these texts is Bakhtin's concept of dialogicity. In this concept, all texts are considered dialogical in that they establish (and work through) relationships between different voices. Dialogicity is a measure of the extent to which such relationships are established, especially between the voice of the author and other voices; that is, the "extent to which these voices are represented, responded to, or conversely excluded or suppressed" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 214). Dialogicity works very differently in YGA and IGB.

One way in which YGA *does* include multiple voices of LGBTQ young people is they include some of their readers' content in their magazine, website, and photo exhibit "Exuberance" - material collected from meeting with groups of LGBTQ young people on their road trips around the U.S. and Canada before starting the magazine. As mentioned, YGA consistently published notices inviting readers to contribute photos or other content to the magazine. Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess with any sort of accuracy how much of the photos and content published were reader submitted since they did not mark articles as such, The magazine also promotes a certain form of self-improvement as life-stylization of gay identity, YGA also serves as the voice of authority in giving advice on everything from what to buy to how to manage anxiety. It is not an uncommon for YGA to write such advice in authoritative, declarative sentences, such as: "Go out of your way to be friendly with everybody, even people you're not that fond of. You never know who they could know, or who you'll be introduced to" (2005, p. 49). Throughout the magazine, they also commonly quote experts, including, as I have noted, Rich Savin-Williams.

Another method in which YGA appeared to represent multiple voices was in articles, such as "Debate: Would you get gay married?" In this one-page debate, they include three photos of young people from different cities with their opinions written in opposing colors (red and teal) and visually simulating a 'back and forth' conversation. The two opposing positions are given on the top of the page in, following Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006, p. 186) model of information value, as presented as an "ideal" rather than a real or realistic position (See figure 3.6). The opinion enthusiastically in support of marriage is given two boxes, one positioned in response to the opinion against marriage.

Figure 3.5

However, even the opinion against gay marriage is framed as unambiguously for the legalization of gay marriage; the 'opposing' argument is that some people may have personal preference to not get married, as long as they had the choice. The final voice, placed in a large box at the bottom of the page with greater length and salience and in the "real" position, suggesting what may already be true and thus a "realistic viewpoint," arguing for marriage but that LGBTQ people can "take the privilege of marriage from

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the elitists and give it to everyone, so that we can all make what we want of it" followed by three pro-marriage "Great Marriage Spots on the Web," including a link for readers to "sign the HRC's petition to get a million signatures in support of gay marriage!!" Below this, YGA asks, "What do you think? Send us your thoughts..." (2004/05, p. 49). So, even though YGA titles this as a "debate" with multiple voices, through both content and visual layout and framing, YGA presents all voices (including theirs, through suggesting three pro-marriage websites) as pro the legalization of marriage; such a debate feels flat and contrived when the different positions are simply whether one would choose to get married, and/or how one might change the institution from within. Importantly, two of the opinions promote gay marriage as a way to enact change and "make this country in a lot better shape." Marriage is seen as an "elite" institution to be broadened by LGBTQ people for "everyone" although it's not clear who else would be.

IGB also promotes a sense of collective movement and diversity through the presence of multiple voices. Yet, as I have already discussed, while there are many unique voices, with personalized stories, the message and the format of the kinds of stories told (as mostly remaining in the realm of personal stories) is largely uniform across the thousands of videos. The campaign message has clearly struck a powerful chord with an appeal wide enough to attract an array of people, including a large number of politicians and celebrities. One of the reasons for IGB's success phenomenal and "viral" success is the timing of the response to the tragic number of suicides in September of 2010. Other reasons may include Savage's idea to use a relatively accessible medium like Youtube to speak to queer youth, as well as his own media savvy which was presumably helpful in quickly responding to the public response in setting up a website, book, merchandize, as well as promoting the message.

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I argue that a large part of the project's success is in the simplicity and political

neutrality of the message. Although it is impressive that high-ranking politicians such as

President Barack Obama quickly contributed videos of their own, it can also be seen to

demonstrate just how politically "safe" the message was to make (particularly noting

that the President's opposition to the legalization of gay marriage at the time has been

considered conservative by gay marriage advocates). The message is, if you will, a

convenient message about an inconvenient truth[14]. IGB provides a relatively easy way to

"take action" toward a complex social problem whilst requiring little action beyond

sharing a rather apolitical message. More so, the narrowness of the message sidesteps

the actual problem: widespread homophobic ideologies, attitudes, and social and

institutional practices. Another way in which this message is rendered as 'safe' or less

politically 'charged' is through framing the message through individual and affective

terms; that is, as one individual telling their own personal story to another and thus

situating it as occurring supposedly outside of formal, public, or political spheres.

An exception to the uniformity of format and message in the IGB videos is a short

video made by comedian Sarah Silverman. A mere 28 seconds long, Silverman clearly

departs from the message in *not* addressing a young person in crisis, but the country.

Silverman states:

> Dear America, when you tell gay Americans that they can't serve their country
> openly or marry the person they love, you're telling that to kids too. So don't be
> fucking shocked and wonder where all these bullies are coming from that are
> torturing young kids and driving them to kill themselves because they are
> different. They learned it from you.[15]

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[14] Thanks to Crispin Thurlow for applying this expression to the message in IGB.
[15] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WM6xbW1DZyM&feature=related

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Of course, Silverman departs not only from the imagined viewer but departs radically from the political neutrality of the message. Here, she makes an argument that the *causes* of youth suicide, beyond simply attributing them to individuals who bully or parents who are not accepting, is more accurately the result of widespread social and institutional exclusion. Her unique message speaks to what is missing in IGB, which is also reflected in XY and YGA in important ways: the recognition of homophobia as a wide-scale social issue that is still often socially and legally sanctioned. It also points to what is missing in this media in regards to representations of collective responsibility and action (in fact, actual movement building!) to address homophobia and other social issues that contribute to youth suicide. Yet, instead of giving a passing consideration of collective social change, the visual imagery throughout all of the media projects focus on individuals or couples (almost always with a maximum of three people); there are a scant few photos of large groups of people (in YGA, there are only 2 images of a large group in all six issues).

Empowerment is framed for youth as a mode of individualism (individual choices, desire, erotic power, etc.) that are often figured as requiring little to no action on the part of the "new kind of young person" because homophobia is supposedly a quickly eroding phenomena. At the same time, YGA presents an imaginary and mythically normal gay youth who is either unaffected by and/or unaware (and, importantly, not invested) of other social issues such as racism, sexism, transphobia, ablism, poverty, etc. Even the religious oppression of LGBTQ people is less of a concern, according to YGA: "The end of religious-supported homophobia is fast approaching" (2004/05, p. 34). Homophobia, where it is represented, is consistently portrayed as stemming from individuals rather than a systematic and institutionalized social issue.

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Nowhere do we see where homophobia may circumscribe a young person's ability to express his or her whole sexual self, be happy and confident, and/or gain a sense of social belonging or approval.

In support of this message, YGA provides models such as Dustin, a "proud gay boy" in Helena, Montana, who received "the brunt of the hatred" from a group of neo-Nazi kids in his town, was disciplined and censored by school administrators for using the word queer; Dustin had to sleep in an underpass after being kicked out of three homes. Yet, Dustin took responsibility for his situation by "understanding what a lot of today's queer people seem to understand", and sympathized with his tormentors. With a positive and non-judgmental attitude, Dustin took the initiative to sit down to have a discussion with one of his tormentors along with the young man's grandmother. In doing so, Dustin's tormentor admitted to harassing him because he was attracted to him (2004/05, p. 34). There are many similar stories in YGA that present young people managing and overcoming such difficulties on their own. Stories like this work through a form of extreme individualism, but also neoliberal values of the privatization of social issues and individual's personal responsibility for managing their own disadvantages.

If social issues are presented as individual issues, then how do these media present the larger LGBTQ community? The purpose of IGB, of course, from Savage and Miller's perspective was to speak to young people *as older gay men* who had experienced bullying and share their story to give young people a sense of a future. This is one aspect of the campaign that connects young LGBTQ people with a large community of adults – both LGBTQ and heterosexual – in a caring way, even if this is mediated technologically and in terms of the standard message format. In addition to caring about queer youth suicide, this 'community' of speakers has come together – no

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matter their age or sexual orientation - to offer the viewer, presumably LGBTQ youth, their own story of overcoming challenges. In this sense, the community is represented as those who have overcome their challenges.

We get a very different image of a larger LGBTQ community in XY and YGA. Both magazines lack substantial discussions or representations of political movements, including LGBTQ political movements. Interestingly, YGA does include one profile of a "pioneer," Barbara Gittings, who started as a homophile activist in the 1960s (2004/2005 Dec – Jan, p. 48). No other "pioneers" or collective movements, such as the AIDS activism, are mentioned. However, the image of a larger LGBTQ community in YGA is consistently a negative one. We have already discussed the distinction YGA makes between past generation of gay people and the 'newly normal young person' of today, and the depiction of older generations of gay people is never improved or complicated. YGA often refers to "gay culture" in quotes, indicating that it is not perhaps a culture, nor qualifies as a real group or community worthy of recognition as such. "In YGA, "gay culture" and the people who inhabit it, are figured as unhappy, unable to be true to themselves, and generally fraught with problems such as drug use, shallow relationships, and a negative attitude. Importantly, while YGA consistently urges its readers to engage and revolutionize institutions such as gay marriage and religion, it does not prompt a similar action for changing what are perceived as problems in the gay community. Instead, YGA directs their readers *away from* the gay community. Typical advice in YGA is to: "hang out with the kind of people you like" even if they are not gay or appear to be gay, because "even football player and lipstick cheerleaders" may help you find that special someone (2005, p. 49).

In a strange twist, "gay culture" is figured as rendering 'authentic' LGBTQ people invisible. In "Why for the Straight Guy?," Michael Amico condemns mainstream representations of queer lifestyles for presenting stereotypes rather than images of "real" gay people. He is most critical of the television show "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" as representing "synthetic" and "fake version of homosexuality" that feeds homophobia in mainstream culture and renders "more true-to-life gay people" culturally invisible. Such a stereotype, he writes, "will effectively erase your true personality while you applaud its prime network timeslot and model yourself after someone else's vision of who you are" (2005, pp. 32-33). However, in criticizing "gay culture" YGA does provide an alternative: "just by living happy, normal lives, a new challenge arises for an existing 'Gay Community' that faces the prospect of its own irrelevance" (2004/05, p. 34).

One effect of this contradictory move is a simultaneous deployment and denial of a LGBTQ identity as well as an LGBTQ politics of visibility. Though at times attributing the social change that has occurred "in no small part" to older "gay pioneers," the "critical mass" supposedly now achieved that has brought about the end of the closet for the new generation of young people through the visibility of older generations, has allowed, and in fact, necessitates the seamless integration into the norms of mainstream (which is to say, heteronormative) culture. And, in this way, the homogenous and negative portrayal of "out" gay communities is required in order to give any specificity to (and conventions of talking about and addressing) LGBTQ youth. However, it is also denied, in order to posit a "new" and normative generation. Gay communities are described as having a dangerous homogeneity that is enforced through pressure to conform to narrow stereotypical standards. The adjectives describing this world

throughout the magazine are powerful: older, pioneers, irrelevant, synthetic, conforming, obligatory, seedy, unhealthy; the terms "culture" and "community" are placed in quotes *only* when coupled with the term "gay." Gay culture is also positioned in a binary relationship to mainstream culture — never as overlapping or sharing commonalities. YGA's founder and publisher Benjie Nycum is quoted in "Brave New World": "'Many young, gay people have more in common with their straight peers than with anything resembling a Gay Culture' says 'It calls into question whether the Gay Culture is even necessary anymore'" (2004/05, p. 34). His statement references a rhetorical reversal made throughout the magazine that figures gay culture as a "closet" in that it demands that youth deny their true selves and isolates them from the promise of "normal" open, accepted, and socially connected lives in "mainstream" culture.

One collective identity that is never disparaged, and, in fact, often promoted, is belonging as an American. As discussed, YGA and, to a lesser degree, XY actively use the term "American" as a description and mode of identification and belonging for their readers. But all three media organizations frame empowerment through the familiar hallmarks of American individualism, some of which I have already discussed. If it is not evident already by the previous discussion, queer youth identity and community are consistently and often overwhelmingly defined through an American ethos of individualism and progress through assimilation. Certainly XY and YGA offer rather romantic and idealistic notions of America and what it means to be American (as you can see in the epigraphs to this section). The two words that appear most often in conjunction with representations of identity in YGA media are "normal" and "American" and were figuratively and, at times, literally used interchangeably. Empowerment and agency for LGBTQ young people is presented in terms that reverberate within the

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narrow ideology of American individualism that is premised on an unfailing belief that greater freedom and progress are always already unfolding, particularly for those individuals who work for it. The IGB campaign is more ambiguous in its message (e.g. it will somehow get better, or you will make it better) but nevertheless works through the same ideology of (often normative) individualism and progress that is seen as available to all equally. At the same time, this mythos becomes indistinguishable from *neoliberal* ideologies that enforce a division between public and private, treating social issues as individual problems as well as an individual responsibility to overcome them.

YGA's advice to Daniel – a young out gay man with concerns about his safety in the locker room – is illustrative: Worried about the threat of violence in the locker room of his high school physical education class where "even [his] friends will be uncomfortable with [his] presence there", Daniel seeks advice. YGA instructs Daniel in "a valuable lesson in diplomacy": to write a letter to his PE teacher while sending copies to the principal, school board, another supportive teacher and his parents. Ironically, the presumption is that Daniel has a teacher and/or parents who are supportive, though if they are, Daniel is not advised to ask *them* for help or support). YGA advises Daniel: "I would not bring the issue of being gay into the picture at all. That is secondary"; furthermore, that Daniel be clear that he's not asking for "special rights" (2004/05, p. 59). Like Dustin, the young man in Montana, Daniel is told to take responsibility for his situation but also, importantly, to keep his sexuality and the homophobic response to it (which is the actual issue) 'out of the issue' by not mentioning this in the letter. Sexuality – and homophobic responses to it in an educational setting – are thus framed as personal issues, distinct from the request for his "right to safety" from the school board.

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Of course, notions of the "new" and "better" kind of young person rely on narratives of progress - both in the progress that LGBTQ communities and allies have helped to bring about, but also of the expected individual progress for the young readers and viewers. Such a vision of progress, as I have pointed out, is overwhelmingly figured as an expectation than an individual be strong enough to independently *overcome* obstacles in their way, obstacles that are consistently not otherwise directly addressed, most especially structural social inequalities such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Young people are presumed to be able to choose freely, act autonomously, and 'be themselves' as if such material inequalities did not exist. Although there is a clear (but not central, by any means) presence of LGBTQ young people of color in YGA and XY, there is very little substantial engagement with what such social differences might mean for young people, much less recognizing and addressing racism. Too often, there is simply an inclusion of images of people of different races while still treating and defining LGBTQ youth as not experiencing racism.

There are also more overt examples of how race becomes sublimated or overly abstracted in these representations, including this example from XY's Foto issue (2004 Autumn). In the introduction to the issue, Cummings writes: "When you look at Steven Underhill's pictures, you're reminded of a former time — a sort of ideal America from the 1950's [?] … When you wax poetic about Pleasantville-type eras, you think of milkshakes, great music, clean and hot boys, and people you could trust. Such was the promise of America." (n.p.). Cummings then acknowledges that part of the attraction in these photos is that "there was never a gay Pleasantville" and that Underhill's photos help young gay men in working through that loss through fantasy by capturing that lost sense of American-ness, even including a "variety of ethnicities" (n.p.). Visually, most

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images are black and white and exposed or printed with little contrast in skin tone, thus de-emphasizing racial difference, and/or rendering race somewhat ambiguous for some of the models. Introducing the photographer, Indigo Escobar writes: "the black and white photography adds more of a timeless quality to Underhill's work. Black and white makes the boys more beautiful precisely because they are devoid of time, place, and even ethnicity. When you can't tell the ethnicity, you're freed from your preconceptions and able to appreciate the actual person" (n.p.). This sublimation of race and racial characteristics, especially of those of men of color, to American-ness is a unique way of rendering racial difference as not invisible, but utterly devoid of, and perhaps obfuscate, a recognition of the material issues of racial inequality and/or the history of movements against it.

3.5 General Discussion: The Stakes of Making it Better for Queer Youth

In this final section, I discuss all of the themes threading across these media projects with a specific focus on the dissonance between what is presented as empowerment in IGB, YGA, and XY and the kind of empowerment they actually offer. As I argue here, aspects of this media often *look like* empowerment by invoking a familiar but overly narrow version of American liberal individualism; at the same time, this image of empowerment is indistinct from, or aligns with neoliberal ideologies that may very well effectively *disempower* large numbers of queer young people.

In some ways, YGA and IGB are correct in their claims that LGBT young people's experience today differs in important ways than that of older generations of LGBTQ people. However, there are other ways in which a rather narrow focus on individual empowerment, as well as often painting a vague or misleading picture of what young

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people may need empowerment to overcome, fails to account for the new social and material conditions in which youth find themselves today. Two of the dominant influences in shaping the larger social, ideological, and material changes since the mid-1990s when XY began, has been the continued rise of both a mainstream liberal gay rights movement and of neoliberal politics that have shaped both economic and social practices

Drawing from Lisa Duggan's (2003) analysis of neoliberalism discussed in the introduction, particularly her analysis of the 'ruse of liberalism' and its manifestation in lesbian and gay activism since the early 1990s, provides a useful critical frame to contextualize and question these media. At least four of the negative effects of neoliberalism that Duggan describes are strongly manifested in YGA, IGB, and XY. First, neoliberal politics has promoted a shrinking public sphere in which civic participation is not based on constituency mobilization or grassroots movements accountable to democratic forms of participation (as well as able to promote them). The ways in which participation and belonging are presented in these media projects are on many levels aimed at building greater *publicity* rather than *publics*. Participation is consistently limited, not only through a narrow and exclusionary image of normative bodies (mostly in XY but also in YGA), but also through a homonormative vision of American individualistic identity, community and empowerment running across all three media projects. This is closely related to a second effect of neoliberalism noted by Duggan: a culture in which acceptance becomes contingent upon normative behaviors aligned with limited forms of recognition by the state (for example, through marriage).

Duggan also notes a third effect of neoliberal politics as the obfuscation and/or outright denial of systematic inequalities. As I have endeavored to demonstrate through

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my analysis, the avoidance or dismissal of inequalities such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ablism, ageism, etc. that young LGBTQ people experience is found in this media in a range of complicated ways but nevertheless evident. For example, although images of racially diverse young people are included, they are not presented as being any different from an assumed norm in which racism is not a substantial concern. What is interesting here is that IGB and YGA particularly are wholly premised on the idea of queer youth, as a group, are treated unequally and experienced greater harassment, and have fewer social supports *because* of their sexuality. So while the recognition of systematic mistreatment, if not oppression of young people, is required for their rhetoric of empowerment to make sense, it is rarely recognized and/or carefully avoided. This is something I will address further in the next subsection.

Lastly, Duggan notes that neoliberalism has operated through the dismissal or erasure of radical visions for equality and a narrowing of agendas for social change overall, including a fair distribution of wealth and resources for all and a social safety net for those who are most vulnerable and/or most disadvantaged. The driving force of social change in YGA, IGB, and XY is predominantly affective in nature – they each aim to provide hope and a positive and affirming sense of self to individuals and thus indirectly effect collective change. There is zero advocacy for material changes in legal or social practices such as providing greater resources to help LGBTQ youth who are bullied or abused by their parents (and/or used proactively to educate and intervene in the behaviors of bullies or abusive parents), much less for material changes addressing the disproportionate treatment of those most vulnerable to being bullied including youth of color, gender non-conforming, transgender, and poor youth (Ryan, 2004).

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At the same time, by erasing radical visions for social change, this media effectively distorts a rich history of LGBTQ activism that could inspire and inform young people today. It is noteworthy that YGA provides one activist profile: An interview with Barbara Gittings about her involvement in the homophile movements of the 1950s. While Gittings is a wonderful activist to profile, there is no mention of any other political movements – from the Gay Power and the Gay Liberation Front beginning in 1969 to the AIDS activism of the 1980s and 90s. This narrow vision effectively prohibits the recognition of intersecting issues and the opportunities to think differently and form coalitions. For example, in her discussion of an earlier use of homonormativity, Susan Stryker (2008) writes that transgender activists in the early 1990s used the term to express the double sense of marginalization and displacement they experienced within both dominant culture as well as queer communities that mostly aligned with the dominant constructions of gender (pp. 145-146). These activists raised questions about the structure of power along axes *other than* the homo/hetero and male/female binaries, and "identified productive points of attachment for linking sexual orientation and gender identity activism to other social justice struggles" (pp. 148-49).

Commodification and consumption are closely tied to modes of normative embodiment and lifestyle often promoted in these media as empowerment. Certainly this is more explicit and consistent in YGA and XY whose focus was on selling magazines through attractive and aspirational images of LGBTQ young people. This is also present in IGB in both the narrative repeated throughout many of the videos in which adults aim to provide an aspirational image to show that it has gotten better for them as sometimes indexed through material resources (e.g. the type of job, travel experiences, success, general lifestyle). Perhaps this is most clearly seen in IGB through

the means offered to website viewers who want to "take action" for queer youth that is closely tied in with what Stuart Ewen (1988) has called the 'commodity self' in which viewers actions are restricted to donating through buying items (books and T-shirts) or following the project on Facebook or Twitter. Of course, the increasing commodification of gay lifestyle since the 1970s has been vitally critiqued by several scholars as less indicative of positive social acceptance than of capitalism's appropriation of LGBTQ culture for mainstream audiences *and* offering acceptance and visibility as consumer subjects rather than as social subjects (Clark, 1993; Walters, 2001; Hennessy, 2001).

Problematically, visibility mediated through consumption (and the promise of social acceptance and inclusion that it brings also works through making other people and social practices invisible, not simply through exclusionary, normative representations. The narrow aim of greater consumption and state-sanctioned inclusion ultimately creates a powerful distortion, rendering invisible the larger context for LGBTQ identities and politics. By ignoring the effects of capitalism, and especially neoliberal modes of capitalism that have consistently superseded the state, the marriage between liberal notions of individualism and capitalism creates several key contradictions. Empowerment through capitalist practices of consumption depends on hierarchical social relations where certain groups accumulate resources and other groups provide resources, such as mobile and inexpensive labor, differing types and levels of consumption, and ideological support for a system of inequality. While recognizing the potentially positive effect of greater visibility of LGBTQ young people in popular culture, we must also recognize some of the complex issues that have emerged as modes of visibility have increasingly shifted to modes of mainstream consumption. As Hennessy (2000) warns: "for those of us caught in the circuits of late capitalist

consumption, the visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification, a process that invariably depends on the lives and labor of invisible others" (p. 111). Additionally, Hennessy argues that the increasing circulation of gay and lesbian images in consumer culture has the effect of consolidating an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both gay and straight audiences. This process is not limited to the spheres of knowledge promoted by popular culture and retail advertising, but also infiltrates "the production of subjectivities in academic and activist work" (p. 112). The lack of recognition and indirect denial of class through the promotion of a normative life - where money or resources are never questioned and are seemingly perceived as equally and easily attainable by all - can only appear to function by rendering certain "others" as well as their labor and their challenges invisible.

A profoundly negative effect of the discourses of empowerment found in IGB, YGA, and XY is that they render large numbers of LGBTQ young (and their issues) as *invisible.* It is assumed the typical imagined reader or viewer does not have to deal with racism, including how racism may shape the kind of homophobic bullying directed at them. The possibility that sexism or class inequality, including poverty, may bear any influence on the reader or viewer's ability to "make it better" is simply ignored. Although there are some user-created videos in which transgender or transsexual people do recognize the challenges they faced in negotiating normative gender roles, such recognition is not included in XY or YGA. Unfortunately, through depicting issues of other social inequalities such as racism either invisible or marginal, these discourses fail to empower those LGBTQ young people who may need it the most. Not only are LGBTQ youth of color at higher risk for violence and harassment than White LGBTQ youth and heterosexual youth of color, but harassment in schools based on perceived non-

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conformity to gender and/or sexuality 'norms,' is more vicious and occurs with greater

frequency than other types of harassment (Davis, 1999; Hunter, 1994; Kerr & Cohn,

2001). According to the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (2004),

44.7% of the LGBTQ young people of color they surveyed reported that the harassment

they experience is targeted at both their sexual orientation and race/ethnicity. At the

same time, IGB, YGA, and XY are promoting an empowered lifestyle through accessing

or cultivating a homonormative lifestyle centered on privatized and individualized

modes of embodiment and consumption, regardless of racial and cultural diversity. This

particular way of thinking assumes that this type of homogenized life is attainable and

desirable for all LGBTQ young people, and consequently places many alternative social

practices and values out of the reach of many young people who wish to envision and

claim new and innovative ways of "making it better."

Chapter Four

Eye Contact: Visual Dialogues on Queer Identity and Community:
A Photovoice Exhibit

Whereas in chapter three, I analyzed a broad picture of visual representations of LGBTQ young people and the epistemological frameworks that are both enabled by and reproduce a national imaginary that supports neoliberal cultural and economic practices. Chapters four and five focus on how queer youth themselves use and theorize their own visual practices; with this aim, I used the visual research method of photovoice, a community-based participatory method, to work with a small but diverse group of queer-identified young people (ages 16-22) in Seattle, WA. My goal was to explore the role of visuality in their lives as well as how they *image and imagine* queer identity and community across the many communities in which they belong. My participants and I met biweekly between January to July in 2009 using Holga cameras (a low-tech film camera) to explore the uses of photography as a means to engage in critical thinking and dialogues with peers and strangers; our project culminated in a collaboratively produced public art exhibit and website entitled *Eye Contact: Visual Dialogues on Queer Identity and Community.* This chapter is a visual essay comprised of the eighteen images and accompanying textual comments the participants displayed in the exhibit. Some photographs include accompanying text or titles and some do not.

A photovoice exhibit blending art and words by queer youth in Seattle

EYE CONTACT:
VISUAL DIALOGUES ON QUEER IDENTITY & COMMUNITY

june 19 - july 17, 2009 | kaladi brothers coffee | 511 pike street

opening reception: june 19, 7:30 pm

American Friends Service Committee

SIMPSON CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES UW COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

The exhibit was displayed in Kaladi Brothers Coffee, a café within the Gay City Health Building in Seattle, WA from June 19th — July 30, 2009.

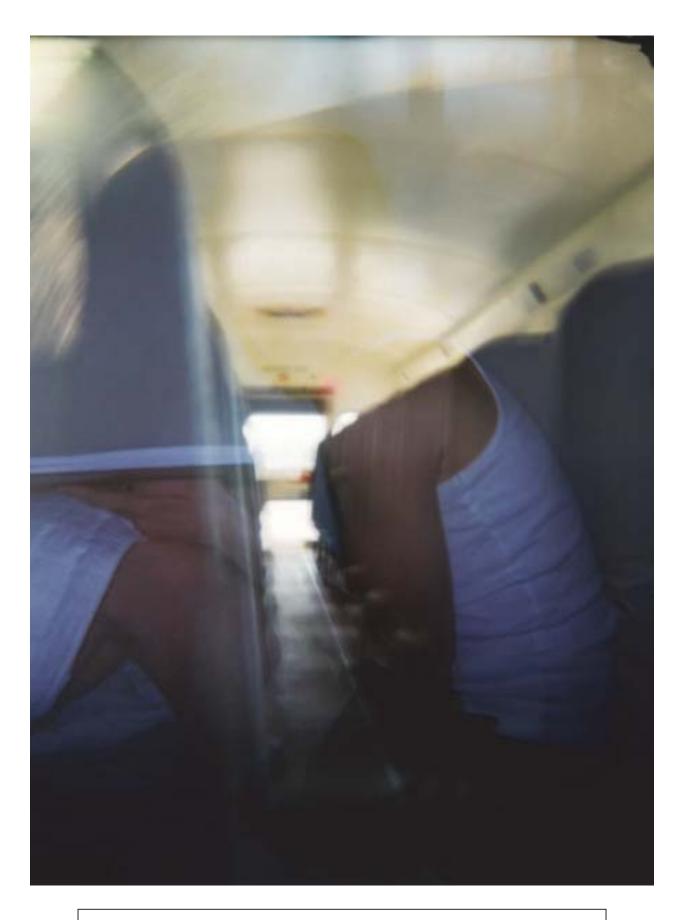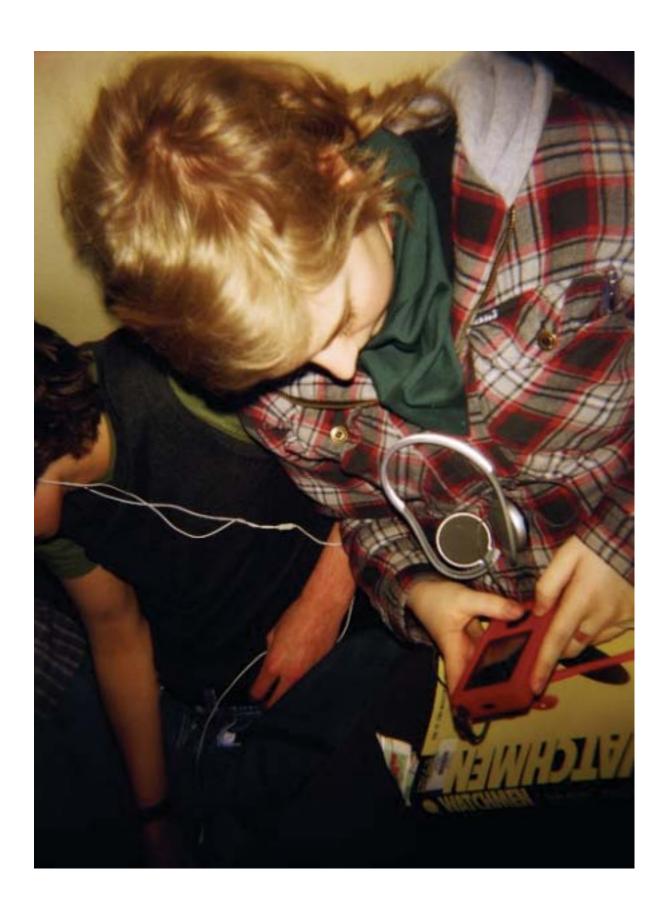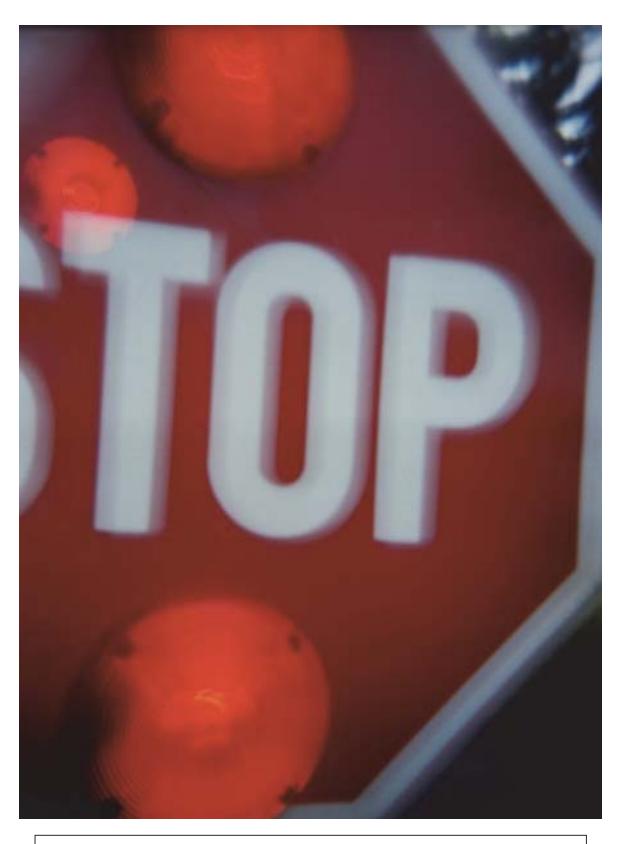# *What is queer to you?*

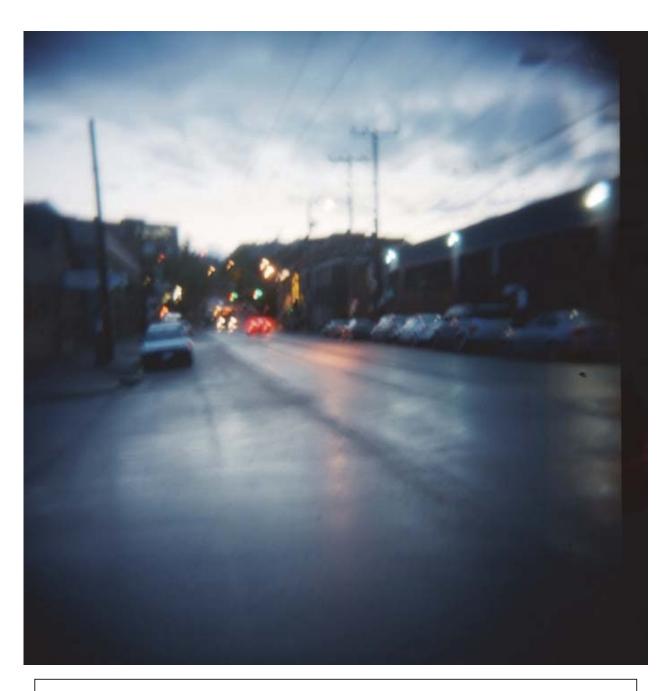R. R. Eye

Come with...

rider's past

Is there a queer way of looking?
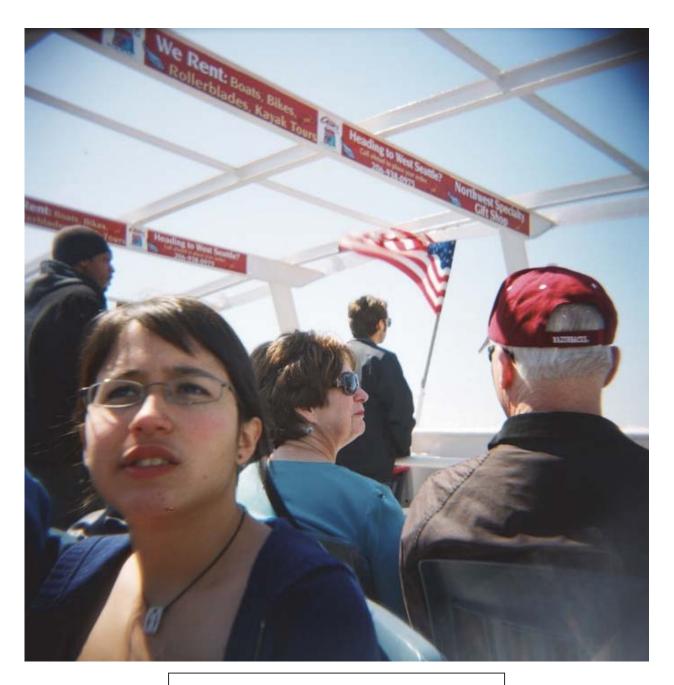
How do you know?

the top of the stop

Dumpster living

all day long wearing
a hat that isn't really
on my head

mysteries of the eyeball – for children!

What experiences make a queer perspective?

Distorted Path

alone.

waves

Chapter Five

Making Eye Contact: Visual Dialogues, Public Art, and Queer Youth

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the photovoice case study that produced the exhibit *Eye Contact: Visual Dialogues on Queer Identity and Community* included in chapter four; in other words, I discuss the "making" of the study, the exhibit, and my findings. As mentioned briefly at the beginning of chapter four, this study was designed using photovoice, a community-based participatory research method that uses photography as a means to engage in critical thinking and dialogue with peers and the public through a public photography exhibit. In my application of this method, I worked with a small group of LGBTQ young people (ages 16–22) in Seattle, Washington, to facilitate and document a visual epistemology of self and community. The framing questions for my project included: How would this group of young people define and represent themselves and their communities visually? How would they understand visual representations of each other? How would they develop knowledge about and use visual representational and observational practices? And, how is their sense of belonging to different communities influenced by how they are "read" in terms of sexuality, gender, race, and national identity? That is: How do participants understand themselves and their community?; how do they read and perceive themselves being read and socially defined by others?

The participants answered my inquiry by complicating the questions. As shown in the photovoice exhibit in chapter four, the participants framed the exhibit with three sets of questions that were enlarged and mounted above the photographs. The questions they posed to the viewers were: (above the first wall) "Is there a queer way of looking?

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How do you know?"; (above the middle wall) "What experiences make a queer perspective?"; and (above the last wall) "What is queer to you?" In asking such questions, the participants not only acknowledged that viewers bring their own epistemological frameworks to bear on a queer image—frameworks that are often assumed but invisible—but also asked the viewers to fundamentally question their own epistemological and even ontological understandings of queer identity and community. Posing these overarching questions also directly interpellated the viewers in a "dialogue" with the images and, by extension, the participant photographers. Where most photovoice projects are intended to privilege the "voice" of the participants, this exhibit questioned conventional notions of voice along with attendant notions of epistemic authority. Rather than constructing a framework of knowledge that might define queer identity (or what queer identity looks like) in concrete ways, the participants constructed a space that defined queer identity and community not simply through a dialectic process, but *as a* dialectical process centrally focused on reflexively questioning that very process. The participants' framing of the exhibit with these questions was consistent with other findings of this study on the complex ways in which the participants negotiated discursive practices around queer identity and community.

Although the study is small, it makes significant contributions. First, like many qualitative studies, it provides rich and ethnographically informed data about complex social practices that are often difficult to access. Second, this study is novel in its focus on qualitative research done in collaboration with queer youth, especially on their relationship to visuality (social practices of looking and being seen), including their own visual representations of themselves and their communities. Moreover, the study outcomes diverge from typical photovoice studies in focusing on: 1) an emphasis on

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individualized outcomes for participants, and 2) the analysis of the photographic archive based on ethnographic data. To my knowledge, in only one other photovoice study, by Nowell et al. (2006), does the researcher provide analysis of photographs.

5.2. The Importance of Visually Based Research for Queer Youth

In striving to access a visual epistemology of self and community, I found photography to be the best tool available. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag (1971) writes, "In teaching us a visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing" (p. 3). What most interested me in designing my own study was the potential for participants to use cameras to explore their own "grammar" and ethics of seeing, especially in regard to their sense of self and how they visually relate to others and diverse social spaces.

Why use a visual arts–based qualitative research method? As I discussed in the introductory chapter, while sexual minorities may have a complex relationship to discursive and visual representations, given the social taboos against same-sex sexuality and romantic relationships, significant research inquiring into this relationship has not yet been undertaken, especially through qualitative research. If we understand language and communication to be the dominant identificational and relational resource available to young people (Thurlow, 2001), and that LGBTQ young people have a very complex relationship to language (O'Flynn, 2005; Thurlow, 2001), then centering questions about their relationship to language and visual representation may lead researchers to more fully understand the experiences and needs of LGBTQ youth. As discussed in the introductory chapter, understanding young people's relationship to

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language and visual discourse is even more important given the predominance of the demand that LGBTQ people, including young people speak, "speak up" and "come out" using recognizable narratives. For example, being "out" in order to access to social, educational, and medical services designed for LGBTQ youth (Rasmussen et al., 2004). How do they negotiate such demands? What other communication resources do they utilize to come out beyond and in conjunction with identity labels? What is the role of not just *visibility* in their lives, but *visuality*, which encompasses social practices of seeing and being seen—in other words, a "grammar" of seeing)?

The power of visual media is such that it may exceed the limitations of language-based communication, and this is especially relevant when working with sexual minority young people for whom identity labels can be quite complex. My interest in designing this study centering on visual media was to provide one possible means for the participants to use, expand, and/or speak back to common linguistic identity labels. At the same time, of course, issues of visibility and visuality have fundamentally shaped LGBTQ life in the United States over the past 140 years. As discussed in the introductory chapter, the importance of the visual register in queer life in the U.S. cannot be underestimated (Walters, 2001; Gross, 2001; McGarry and Wasserman, 1998). At the same time, there are many factors that mediate and limit queer young people's access to discourse in general, including visual discourse (Driver, 2007; Gray, 2009). For queer young people, accessing positive visual representations of themselves, including representations of how they belong to larger communities, can be difficult due to the paucity of such representations and also risky due to a lack of autonomy from homophobic families or communities (see discussion of Savage (2012) in chapter three).

The same obstacles that can prohibit young people from engaging in queer discourse, life, and politics can also make them a difficult population for study. A practical limitation of research on LGBTQ youth is that most research is based on young folk who are already "out" with some degree of comfort and/or security (however tenuous it may be for some). These limitations impact which young people tend to be included in research as well as the type of research methods that are used; as discussed in the introductory chapter, the overwhelming amount of research on queer youth has focused on Caucasian and cisgendered[16] males (Ryan, 2004; in regard to racial exclusions only see also Kumashiro, 2001; McCready, 2003). At the same time, a great deal of the research on queer youth thus far has been conducted through surveys, interviews, or focus groups that can be anonymous, brief, and with questions pre-scripted by the researcher. Thus, there is a need for grounded research that includes young people as co-creators of the process and that emphasizes reciprocity between the researcher and participants. Through their role in our group discussion and the photographs they shared, participants had an important hand in shaping the direction of this study. They determined what and who to include in their lives and which topics to further explore, and also designed the public art exhibit. Photography is, arguably, one of the more accessible art forms, and, by emphasizing visual expression rather than identification with labels, the intent of the study was to create a more comfortable space for racial and gender minority young people. Although I do not know how fully that goal was attained, I was able to recruit a small but racially and gender-diverse group of

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[16] Schilt & Westbrook (2009) define cisgendered as: "*Cis* is the Latin prefix for 'on the same side.' It compliments *trans*, the prefix for 'across' or 'over.' 'Cisgender' replaces the terms 'nontransgender' or 'bio man/bio woman' to refer to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity" (pp. 461).

participants. What was clear in my study was that the arts-based model helped to facilitate greater investment in and collaboration between the participants in the research activities, as I discuss in the next sections.

Perhaps the most important reason for using a visual arts—based study with queer youth was that it allowed the project to strive for a fuller and more complex picture , if you will, of participants' visual social practices, by undertaking meaning-making as an on-going *process*, rather than as a stable and delimited phenomenon. In this regard, using a visually arts-based research method produced a confluence between the subject matter, research questions, and the method. In addition to asking participants about the images they produced, I also asked them to describe their experience of taking photographs—of what they aimed to produce, including how their readings of photographs changed over time. Leavy (2009) argues that arts-based research in general tends to explore experiences and epistemologies *as a process* (p. 10) and that arts-based research can provide a means to explore complex social research questions in a holistic and engaged way, being "particularly adept at accessing subjugated perspectives, challenging stereotypes and dominant ideology, raising critical consciousness, fostering empathetic understandings, and building coalitions" (p. ix). Arts-based research might provide access to otherwise hard-to-access practices in social life through visual media's unique power to both express and evoke strongly affective and intellectual responses at all stages of the art-making process. And, of course, photographs don't have to be "artistic" in order to convey dense information and provide a unique type of what Geertz (1973) has famously called "thick descriptions" of social life, including capturing the messy processes of meaning making across diverse and even contradictory viewpoints.

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Lastly, this research study was also designed as a public humanities project. As such, creating a public art exhibit not only focused and gave meaning to the participants' photographs (as well as raising the stakes for them!) but also offered another means to visually engage with their communities. The participants also produced a visual archive of their experiences as queer youth in Seattle that may serve other interests beyond their own growth as photographers and this research project. Cvetkovich (2003) has written about the importance of building queer archives and the "profoundly affective power of a useful archive, especially an archive of sexuality and gay and lesbian life, which must preserve and produce not just knowledge but feeling. Lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism, all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive" (p. 6). Building such archives requires participation from a whole spectrum of people, including the everyday experiences of young people whose perspective is often marginalized or excluded. As Cvetkovich (2003) asserts: "That gay and lesbian history even exists has been a contested fact, and the struggle to record and preserve it is exacerbated by the invisibility that often surrounds intimate life, especially sexuality" (p. 111). Even in as small project as this, young people may contribute to such a history by documenting and reflecting on their intimate life, even if these images are understood as fleeting and dynamic movements in meaning making.

In using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) method in this case study, I aimed to create a different perspective on LGBTQ young people and their relation to representation. As Leavy (2009) and Rose (2007) have argued, an essential component of methodological rigor in any qualitative research study involves careful attention to and transparency of process, and this may be especially true for arts-based

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research. Thus, to properly contextualize my findings, I first discuss the photovoice method. I revisit the question of method at the end of this chapter in a more detailed reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of photovoice.

5.3 Photovoice: A Community-based Participatory Research Method

5.3 a Photovoice: A General Overview

Photovoice was first developed for the social sciences by Wang and Burris (1997) whose stated aim was to create a participatory action method aimed at empowering individuals and communities with the tools, skills, and platform to engage in discourses from which they have been excluded. To do so, Wang and Burris drew on scholarship and practices in feminist theory, education for critical consciousness, and documentary photography. It has since become a method used widely across the social sciences with the intent of engaging members of communities with otherwise limited access to public and academic discourse. Photovoice has also been used outside of the academy by community-based organizations (CBO) and NGO's as a form of community engagement and expression, as well as data collection (e.g., needs-assessment mapping). For example, the Nature Conservancy[17] has used photovoice in rural villages in China to document and assess environmental resources and cultural practices that are important for villagers in debates and policies regarding conservation.

Although my study did not follow all of them, the three goals that are generally used in the photovoice method are: 1) to create a means for community participants to

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[17]http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/asiaandthepacific/china/howwework/china-photovoice-exhibit.xml

record and reflect on their community's strengths and problems, 2) to promote dialogue about these strengths and problems through group discussions, photographs, and exhibits both within communities and across communities, and 3) to engage potential policy makers, social program administrators, teachers, researchers, and others who may influence social policies that affect this particular community. The processes involved in photovoice, in brief, include: recruiting participants; facilitating group discussions about shared community topics or issues; using photography as a tool for participants to explore these issues and share their photos with the group; and organizing a public exhibit of selected photographs (the "photo" component) to be accompanied by brief written comments by the participants (the "voice" component) intended to convey the context and/or the photographer's intended meaning of each photograph. Because the method aims to allow the researcher to collaborate with participants in order to meet local needs, the method provides great flexibility in regards to how researchers may choose to implement it.

While they do not use the term "voice," in their discussion, Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) discuss the risks and limitations of the photovoice method, noting that, thus far, the method has been primarily used to connect disenfranchised populations specifically with policy makers and community leaders but that doing so does not necessarily effectively question (or change) power inequalities. Furthermore, they note that by situating research participants as disadvantaged and community leaders as advantaged, the method risks narrowly representing the groups involved as well as notions of power and agency (e.g., that only one group has it and the other does not). Other scholars also raise questions about how effective photovoice may be in creating social change. Carlson et al. (2006) write that despite the number of photovoice

projects, there has been no in-depth analysis of how and to what degree such projects might have effected material social change (p. 838). Joanou (2009) shares a painful lesson from her photovoice study with street children in Lima, Peru: In recruiting children for her project, she found out that one of her participants had already engaged in a photovoice project years prior, leading her to ask: "What kind of intervention has been done? He's an expert on the street but how does this serve him? What happens when he turns 18?" (p. 221). Joanou's story may be the most poignant argument in tempering the sometimes uncritical discourse around the photovoice method and a reminder of the profound limitations of both "voice" and representation in the face of ideological and material inequalities.

5.3 b Seeing What Queer Youth Know: A Seattle Photovoice Project

For my photovoice study, I worked as a research assistant to a trained photographer and with an undergraduate student intern who served as a second research assistant. I also partnered with the leading provider of LGBTQ youth programs in Seattle at the time, Outspoken, a program of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) for LGBTQ Youth.[18] Outspoken was the continuation of programming for LGBTQ young people that AFSC began in Seattle in the early 1970s. As one of the oldest and best-connected community-based programs in the region, AFSC provided access to diverse communities of youth, consultation, and additional funds for the study. All

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[18] The name of this program changed during the study from the American Friends Committee Peace & Social Justice Program for Queer Youth (2009). In 2009, after almost 30 years of youth programming for LGBTQ youth, AFSC ended their program and moved one component, the speaker's bureau, to another collaboration of CBOs, the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington. In 2011, the Outspoken speakers bureau was taken over by the NW Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse youth programming.

participants were recruited through AFSC's programs. My prior experience in working

with LGBTQ young people in social service organizations in Seattle, including working

as a facilitator for AFSC's queer youth speakers bureau for three years prior to the study,

informed my choice of the photovoice method as well as my research questions.

Our recruitment goal was twelve participants with the hope that eight to ten

would complete the project. We enrolled ten participants but only seven actively

participated from the first meetings. Two participants who enrolled together chose not

to proceed with the project due to a personal conflict with another participant that

preceded the study. One participant completed three months of the project before

quitting due to scheduling conflicts with school and work. Six participants completed all

six months of the project. Although a small group, they were diverse in terms of racial,

sexual, and gender identifications. The group was racially diverse, with participants

coming from several different racial and ethnic minority backgrounds (four or five out of

six who completed the study). The participants identified their racial identities as

"Latino; African-American/Guatemalan; White/Dutch American; White;

Vietnamese/Chinese; Irish/Chinese; and Other." Participants were also asked (in an

open-ended question) to identify their sexual identity[19]; answers included gay, lesbian,

and bisexual but also included "queer male" and "gay, queer." When asked to identify

their gender, two identified as male, one as genderqueer, one as "male/bucket," one

identified as "woman," and another identified as "female." Given the personal and

political complexities of queer sexual and gender identifications and labels, I assume

[19] These answers were in response to open-ended questions phrased as such: "How do you identify your sexual identity?"; "How do you identify your gender?"; and "How do you identify your race and/or ethnicity?" each followed by a blank line. See the Appendix for the complete form used with participants.

these labels to have distinct and yet, to a degree, inscrutable meanings. For example, I assume the person who wrote "male/bucket" did so to distinguish himself from simply identifying as "male" and yet there is no way for me to know what this distinction is. Similarly, the participants who wrote "female" and "woman" may have meant "either/or" but there is also the possibility that these terms mean something specific or personal for them. Although I did not ask participants to identify their socio-economic class status or background, it was apparent from information that they shared with me and with others in the study that these differed greatly; for example, some participants had been homeless while others lived in wealthier suburbs. Participants could choose to engage with the study using a pseudonym for any part of the study. Four of the six decided to create pseudonyms for the exhibit only.

The small group of participants, the two research assistants, and I met for two hours twice monthly between January–June 2009. After an initial training session on some of the safety and ethical issues involved in taking photographs as well as how to use the cameras, in each meeting we provided further training in technical aspects of the cameras (e.g., using color filters, double exposures) as well as various topics on basic photography (e.g., lighting, composition, types of film). The substance of each meeting, however, centered on the participants sharing and discussing the photographs they had taken since the prior meeting. Often we decided on a theme or issue raised in discussion to explore photographically in the next meeting; sometimes participants followed this theme or topic, and sometimes they chose not to follow it.

The choice of cameras and the visual effects possible had an obvious and profound effect on the images produced. For this project, each participant received a Holga 120 CFN camera (a small plastic camera using 120 medium-format film) and film.

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Used by professional photographers and students, Holga cameras are fairly simple to use but require the photographer to understand basic lighting and depth-of-field as these are not done automatically by the camera. Holga cameras were ideal for these reasons, as well as for the unique and more artful aesthetic choices that they gave to the participants. Most photovoice projects use inexpensive disposable or simple digital cameras that emphasize mere documentation. Given the group of young people in the study and our focus on questioning and pushing boundaries of language and representation, the range of aesthetic options in the Holga cameras afforded participants more creative options for using visual effects than the cameras more commonly used in photovoice studies. For example, a signature visual effect of Holga cameras is a black vignette framing as well as a slight blur around the edges (see figure 5.1 as an example); however, the participants could choose whether to employ this framing. Other visual effects with these cameras can be manipulated or happen accidently, such as rewinding the film for multiple exposures or streaks of red or white light (sometimes burnt film) from light leaking through the camera body. (Many times, participants were unhappy with a manipulated effect and happy with an accidental one, or vice versa).

Figure 5.1

Because the film was developed at a lab by hand, the developers often made the choice as to where one frame started and one ended, as they sometimes had few cues as to whether the overlapping frames were intended or accidental. However, all participants had the final say on their photos and chose which slides to reprint with the proper framing. For example, the photo in figure 5.2 is an image in which the participant did not intend to produce this kind of overlap in framing, but liked the end product more than what he had intended when taking the photograph.

Figure 5.2

As the culmination of six months of discussions and taking photographs, we co-produced a photovoice exhibit called *Eye Contact: Visual Dialogues on Community and Identity*, on display in June and July 2009 to correspond with the annual Gay Pride festivities in Seattle. The exhibit included three photographs by each participant with accompanying comments. As a group we decided on a unique exhibit space at a business called Kaladi Brothers Coffee (511 Pike Street, Seattle) housed within the LGBTQ Health Center where two programs, Gay City and Verbena[20], provide health services for LGBTQ communities. Both Kaladi Brothers Coffee and the Health Center also offered free meeting space for community groups and organizations. Thus the main audiences for the exhibit were patrons who entered the space for the above-mentioned services; however, we also advertised the exhibit through email and posted fliers in

[20] Verbena has since closed but Gay City Health is still providing services.

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public places at locations across Seattle such as coffee houses, street billboards, and LGBTQ programs and businesses.

To prepare for the exhibit, we framed all the photographs and the participants determined the order and placement of the prints. Each of the eighteen photos was printed at either 12″ x 12″ or 12″ x 14″ and framed; most, but not all, had accompanying text. The photos were exhibited on three walls of an open room. The group decided to post three sets of questions, one per wall above the photos (printed and mounted on black foam core board as shown above), that read: "Is there a queer way of looking? How do you know?"; "What experiences make a queer perspective?"; and "What is queer to you?" Participants also hung self-portraits with the exhibit. In order to reach broader audiences as well as to archive the photographs, we published the exhibit photographs and textual comments on a website at http://eyecontactqueervisualdialogues.blogspot.com/. As another mode of public engagement, the website included space for moderated public comment and discussion on the exhibit, though very few comments have been posted.

Using Photovoice to Explore Practices of Looking

It is important to note that my application of the photovoice method and my framework for analysis differ from other photovoice studies. The idea of "voice" is, of course, an important component of photovoice. I was more interested in using the method to frame this six-month study to explore participants' relations to discourse, especially visual discourse—or, as it is referred to in Visual Cultural Studies, their (social) practices of looking (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009). While the idea of "voice" is practiced methodologically in photovoice through the images and written comments as well as in connecting the participants to policy makers (or other community members

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with similar positions), this method functions through theoretical and political ideas of "voice" as well. Wang and Burris (1997) drew from Paulo Friere's (1970, 1973) theories of education for critical consciousness as well as feminist critiques of masculinist research practices (significantly, Maguire, 1987 and Rowbothom, 1973) in which "voice" is generally theorized as a means of exercising agency in the face of the marginalization and silencing of oppression. While I have found little critical discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of "voice" in photovoice literature, an essentialist idea of "voice," including the idea that researchers might (patronizingly) "give" voice to participants, has been widely interrogated in feminist scholarship (Archibald and Crnkovich, 1995; Greaves & Wylie et al., 1995; Smith, 1999). This critique has shaped my own approach to "voice" in this study. As I have discussed in more depth in the introductory chapter, my own approach to voice and representation follows Foucault's (1978,1979, 1983) notion of discourse in which he theorizes individuals as produced through discourse, not as existing prior to it; or, as Scott (1999) describes in her essay "The Evidence of Experience," "it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (p. 83). Scott discusses the complexities of theorizing experience in feminist research, especially for conceiving of experience as an unmediated "reality" that exists prior to and outside of social discourse. Conceiving experience in such a way typically treats experience as evidence solely mediated and authorized by the individual, and thus fails to account for the discursive systems that shape experience, its expression, and the modes of authority practiced through it. Moreover, she argues that the "project of making experience visible precludes an analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead, it reproduces its terms" (p. 83); in other words, notions of "voice" expressing experience as evidence

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render the social power dynamics that shape and organize "voice" invisible and thus beyond critique. My theoretical understanding of "voice" and representation has shaped this study in its focus on the participants' *relationship to discourse*, especially insofar as this relationship is already so complicated for LGBTQ young people.

Although the photovoice method was designed to empower communities by building an opportunity for public expression through photography, my intention was to design a study and public humanities project that focused on specific and more individual benefits for participants. Such aims can be difficult to measure and are in no way quantifiable. Leavy (2009) argues in *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* that this kind of qualitative research requires a different framework for assessment than traditional frameworks for social sciences projects that generate quantifiable results. She argues that arts-based research "comprises new theoretical and epistemological groundings that are expanding the qualitative paradigm" and that even "*disrupts* traditional research paradigms" (p. ix). Instead, she writes that qualitative arts-based research can be assessed by qualities such as: collaboration with participants; meaning-making, including multiple meanings; dimensionality, or understanding complex, interrelated experiences; and resonance—all of which were central to the outcomes of my study.

This study was implemented with a profound degree of *collaboration* between participants and the research team. I defined (and strove to enact) my role as a facilitator and collaborator rather than as a manager. For example, although I set up a structure for meetings, everything about our meetings was open to revision based on participant input, and we changed meeting locations and times to accommodate participants' schedules and comfort levels. As I have explained, participants decided

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where to hold the exhibit as well as which photographs to hang, whether to include a self-portrait or textual comments with the photographs, and the order of images and accompanying questions. The degree of collaboration might have been more difficult to achieve with a larger group.

As a feminist researcher, I also view (and value) *reciprocity* between the researcher and the participants as an important factor in creating a positive and balanced collaborative relationship. Some of the benefits that I hoped participants might gain from their experience were guidance and practice in basic photography skills using film cameras as well as exposure to how photography may be a means to engage in critical thinking and dialogues with peers and strangers. The Holga cameras allowed participants an opportunity to learn, experiment with, or flex photographic skills that that could not be gained in using simpler one-time use cameras that are commonly used in photovoice studies because of their ease of use and affordability. Although we could not offer the equivalent of a six-month course in photography, participants were introduced to different aspects of framing and composition, film types, lighting, depth of field, and photography genres.

In addition to photographic skills, participants also received a very small stipend for participation (approximately $10.00 for each meeting) from our partner agency AFSC; participants also kept their cameras, extra film, digital and print copies of all of their photographs and frames, and the option to copyright any of their images. I also chose to meet biweekly for six months rather than a shorter period of time to sow the seeds for another type of intended benefit: to build a sense of belonging. Based on my prior experience, the one thing that young people I have worked with valued the most was a sense of belonging to a group. Although such a feeling is difficult to measure,

participants demonstrated a strong sense of connection and collaboration. Even though some of the participants were friends before they joined the project, they consistently ensured that no one was left out, and always provided positive feedback and encouragement to each other. They also asked to continue to meet as a group even after our project ended, which we managed do to a few times at a local café.

As a researcher, implementing a project in which I shared so much of the decision making was at times chaotic, time consuming, and risky; for example, participants had room to make a decision but change their minds later, which altered our direction almost constantly. However, I also understood the many changes that we underwent as an indicator of both a group and artistic process of exploring the complexities of *meaning making*. As discussed in more detail below, participants' interpretations of photographs changed over time, through the influence of group discussions in which others commented and added interpretations of their own, and through the "visual dialogue" with others' photographs. Factors that determined participants' responses to many of the photographs included how much the images resonated with and were true to their interests and experiences. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this study was the aim to capture to some degree the complexity and dimensionality involved in the social practices of looking, to which I now turn.

5.4 Analysis of the Photographic Archive

As I have discussed, what most interested me in undertaking a photovoice study was the potential for participants to use cameras to explore what Sontag (1971) described as a "grammar" and "ethics of seeing," that is, the way in which photography can express a "visual code" and "alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking

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at and what we have a right to observe" (p. 3). Specifically, I wanted to engage and document the participants' sense of self and how they visually relate to others and diverse social spaces. In addition to six months of formal biweekly meetings, I also had contact with the participants for a month of recruitment and informal follow-up on a handful of occasions for a year and a half following the study.

The analysis of the images that I provide here is grounded in the participants' discussions of the images. I have tried to stay true to the meanings and intentions articulated by the participants in our discussions and mark clearly those moments where I apply my own interpretation to a photograph. The questions we asked about the images went well beyond the content, touching on the motives and meanings behind the content as well as the artistic choices made. For example, rather than simply asking, "What is this a photograph of? Who is in this photograph? What significance does it have for you?", we also asked, ""Why did you choose to frame the building in this way?" "Why did you use a yellow color filter?" Asking about both levels of information—essentially the "what" and the "why"—was important given the technological challenges of wielding a camera to capture one's vision, especially for amateur photographers. These types of questions opened opportunities for the participants to share and reflect on both the aim and result of the expressive and communicative choices made with the photographs.

In discussions about what photographs to include in the exhibit, it occurred to me that participants might identify some common themes across the photographic archive and our discussions themselves. However, when asked, participants did not clearly express agreement on any particular overarching themes in the photographs other than a title for the exhibit. They did agree to brainstorm a list of words they loosely

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associated with our project as part of the process of coming up with a title. These were: "community, Seattle, generational differences, identity, drag, place (inc. nation, American), race, youth, Holga, Capitol Hill, pride, looking, gaydar, media, gender pronouns, open-minded community." Many of these meanings are reflected in the photographs. Their indifference and reluctance to identify larger themes from the photographs was quite interesting to me; it echoed many prior discussions in which the participants consistently resisted specific or narrow ideas and labels for LGBTQ identities, especially those that might be associated with them personally. Rather, their insistence on meanings and intentions behind the photographs as being open, malleable, and multiple indicated that they viewed the visual representations in the project through the same framework in which they discussed the term "queer" in relation to identity—as multiple and changeable. Their approach extended to all images taken, even if the image did not explicitly or did not intend to speak to the idea of "queer" in any way (e.g., photos taken for practice, such as those of a mailbox or of the photographer's feet). This same insistence on multiplicity of meaning also manifested visually throughout their photographs, including the ones chosen for the exhibit.

While they respected each others' photographs and perspectives, all participants seemed to operate from the first meeting on the unstated premise that any photograph could have multiple potential meanings and that the photographer alone, or even the photographer's intention, did not wield final authority over the meaning attributed to them. There was little conflict over what photographs might mean; in fact, the more meanings people heaped onto a photograph the more this was taken as evidence that it was an interesting photo. Perhaps this lack of conflict was because the photographers

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typically explained their intentions behind taking specific shots as multiple, open, and changing. Participants also stated that they took photographs without a specific intention at all. Our discussions focused on ways of seeing and making meaning of visual representations as much as they did on the literal content of the photographs themselves.

I asked participants to bring all of their photos to our last meetings to sort and review, so that we might collaboratively identify key themes or messages to use in the exhibit. Again, participants conveyed a resistance to narrow, easy, or literal meanings, but we were, however, able to decide on one overarching theme (and subsequent title): *Eye Contact: Visual Dialogues on Queer Identity and Community*. One sticking point was whether to include the term "queer" in the title. Noting that the list of brainstormed words associated with the project (given above) didn't include a label for sexual identity, I suggested that then perhaps we shouldn't include one, which was met with some perplexed looks. Several of the participants clearly stated that the exhibit would not be coherent if we did, that "queer" had framed the project. Ultimately, all the participants voted in agreement to include the word "queer" in the title. However, when I next asked them to tell me what the word "queer" meant, their brainstormed list quickly threw into question a singular or common sense of the term. They listed: "water fountain; weird/o; fun; colorful; circle with lumps [When asked for further clarification: "like a stew with dumplings"]; awesome/big; mirrors with yourself" [When asked for clarification, the participant responded, "that a common thing in gay communities is sitting in front of a mirror talking with yourself—trying to convince yourself to change or not..."]." Based on my own observations, such a rhetorical move of articulating and yet ambiguating meaning around sexual identity was a very common

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practice by the participants. Although this was not always the case in every instance of such ambiguity, it was a move that each of the participants engaged in at least part of the time. And, evident in my discussion of the title and what the word "queer" might mean in it for the participants discussed here, rhetorical moves to complicate the concepts and terms for sexual identity were also common in large group decisions about topics such as the title, which photos to include in the exhibit, and how to organize and hang the exhibit.

The exhibit itself was an important means of expression about queer identity and community, beyond the individual images serving as a larger framework or context for how each print might be read. My understanding of the title for the exhibit—*Eye Contact: Visual Dialogues on Queer Identity and Community*—is that it is quite significant and has layers of meanings that would not be evident to someone who had not heard our group discussions about the photographs and the choices behind formatting the exhibit. In order to convey some of these meanings, I have defined what I perceive to be four strongly overlapping and inter-articulated subthemes, each of which I find to provide a fuller and more detailed explanation of the overarching theme of *Eye Contact: Visual Dialogues on Queer Identity and Community.* These subthemes are: *Contact and belonging; ambiguity and multiplicity; absence and presence; and non-narration.* I have identified these subthemes based on two sets of data: 1) my observations and understanding of participants' identified meanings throughout the process, including their explanations for choosing specific photographs for the exhibit as recorded in field notes; and 2) a separate examination of the photographic archive as a whole, using a basic content analysis method to map the photographs (reading them as literally as I could) that allowed me to check for possible alternative themes that

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might have visually emerged. At the same time, I acknowledge that my interpretations have also been influenced by the relationships that I developed with participants over the six months of discussions. These relationships provided me with a more nuanced understanding of the context and back stories of many of the photographs, thus lending a more complex understanding of the representations of identities and social issues present in them—something that I hope to convey here.

Key Subthemes

1. Contact and Belonging

All visual and knowledge practices involve both self and others. Central to any discussion of representation of an individual identity are questions of belonging. As I have outlined above, the prevailing discourse about LGBTQ young people has focused on acceptance—either the lack of it from others or the process of accepting oneself, both of which can center the "coming out" process. The premise (and, indeed, the heart) of these discourses is a sense of belonging: the message that these discourses most often produce for young people is that "you can belong" or "you have the right to belong," in which belonging is most often figured as and measured by "coming out." For the young people in my study, visual practices and representations played a central role in how they seemed to negotiate belonging and a sense of not belonging. Specifically, visual practices and representations were central tools through which to negotiate belonging in different communities and social spaces — communities and social spaces that entailed differing expectations and visual codes around sexual, gendered, and racial identity.

The first sense of belonging is expressed in the title of the exhibit; participants chose the terms, which included, importantly, "eye contact" and "visual dialogues." For

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the participants, the concept of "contact" was highly nuanced and complex; it encompassed multiple kinds of contact. First and foremost, it signaled that sometimes electric moment of recognition with a complete stranger—that moment of eye contact, even briefly, that shares a sense of "knowing" that the other person is also queer, gay, or in the community/life/family. It also spoke to shared visual codes that communicated this recognition even without physical eye contact, say, by seeing someone in a crowd or across the street. Such a shared code is colloquially and often humorously referred to as "gaydar," a play on the word "radar," implying that one can "tune in" and identify other LGBTQ folks by sight. However, many of the participants agreed that one could have this same moment of recognition and connection through representations—and specifically how they had experienced a boost or a sense of belonging and connection when seeing representations of other queer people and recognizing themselves in them. Although there was little agreement on the goals of the exhibit, some of the participants wanted their photographs to have the kind of power experienced in the codes—to mediate a connection that was, they insisted, a "physical" one. Another participant hoped that the exhibit would bolster "self-esteem" for queer viewers. The concept of contact, then, was also about creating a dialogue between strangers across time and space. I also understood the term "dialogue" to convey the value participants placed on a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that included, perhaps even encouraged, a space for disagreement.

Another aspect of contact was a sense of physical connection. In one discussion, the participants discussed a "moment of recognition" that a photograph could elicit, insisting that it was a physical response. In insisting on the physical aspect of this response, the participants also argued that images could create a type of physical

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connection. I understood part of their argument to attest to the kind of power that those moments may hold, but I also understood it to mean that such a connection may feel physical because it is centrally about a shared sense of embodiment—such as sharing the experience of not fitting into or resisting normative modes of embodiment of gender specifically but also of race. On another level, that moment of connection may be about sharing a social space which, in a dominantly heteronormative culture, almost requires carving out a social space to have one's queerly sexed and gendered body be seen and understood in ways that align with one's own sense of self and/or resist heteronormative and homophobic readings. It is, perhaps, the kind of social mirror (or, "awesome/big mirrors with yourself") described by the participant in defining the term "queer." As the participants described it, this "moment" of mutual recognition and connection can also happen powerfully through an image; in this exhibit, the participants used their photographs as "mediators" to stand in for themselves but also to offer connection and reflection to the viewers.

One of the most moving discussions for me touched on the difficulties of belonging. One participant powerfully described how "some of yourself" can find community and "fit in certain ways," but being part of a queer community and taking part in a queer space requires "leaving other parts [of yourself] out." All of the other participants agreed, and, in fact, seemed quite resigned to the idea that "fitting in" was a contradictory process involving both connection, alienation, and even isolation. As the same participant further explained: "belonging has the word 'longing' in it. It's something that everyone wants but, basically no one can really have completely because part of yourself probably won't fit in." When I asked "What do you do with those parts of yourself that don't fit in?", s/he answered, with uniform agreement from all: "you

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conform." Everyone in the group understood that "fitting in" or belonging in queer spaces might require acting in ways that required choosing which 'part' of themselves to leave out (or sublimate). When asked what aspects of themselves they frequently found did not "fit," their responses pointed out that it depended on the kind of social cliques but that race played a significant role. For the participants of color in the discussion (four or five out of six), all nodded in agreement that "fitting in" in most queer spaces meant having to figure out how to fit in a predominantly White space.

Comments about the impact of race on negotiating belonging to queer communities were fairly rare. When discussions of race and nationality arose, participants noted the ways in which they seemed to separate racial and cultural norms, experiences, and visual codes. Some participants relayed stories of interacting with family or visiting relatives outside the U.S., describing spaces in which cultural expectations rendered talking about sexuality, especially same-sex sexuality, taboo. In contrast, two (unrelated) participants also shared that, when visiting family in their family's home country, older gay family members had either pointed out gay bars to them or taken them to a gay bar. However, despite having family members who were gay, these participants did not describe their families as supportive or as embracing their own sexual identity. As I have already mentioned, I recruited participants for this study from young people already "out" enough to be involved with a community-based non-profit organization serving LGBTQ youth and, for those under the age of 18, I required parental consent to engage in a project talking about LGBTQ topics. Thus, for those under age, participation in the project itself demonstrated at least some acceptance from one or more of their parents.

Arguably, all individuals at any age must negotiate "fitting in" (or just "getting by") in a variety of social spaces that are often exclusionary of non-normative bodies and behaviors. As discussed in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, there are ways in which many queer young people are similar to and different from both LGBTQ adults and the general population of youth. Perhaps the most relevant difference here is that queer youth are strongly negotiating these spaces with sometimes limited autonomy (materially, but also possibly psychologically and emotionally) from their families of origin and from the many other social and legal institutions that both contain and support young adults, adding certain challenges for them in doing so.

One of the photographs that received the most praise from participants in our group discussions was an image of the photographer looking toward a group of people carrying a boat outside. The photographer's textual comment for this photo was "come with." (See figure 5.3: "come with") As an observer, I found the enthusiasm over this photograph surprising as it differed from the other photos that grabbed the group's attention. Most of the photographs deemed interesting by the group were either examples of strong conventional aesthetics (for example, the black and white image of a hayfield discussed below) or contained a sense of visual estrangement (also discussed below). From my understanding, participants liked the contrasts between light and dark, and inside and outside, but also the implied story (which, I think, was that this person was about to join the team as they walked outside). However, there were a number of photos of team sports, including many intimate photos of sleepy rides home from games on buses, sharing locker rooms, photos of close friends goofing off or sitting in circles doing homework. My guess is that although these other images captured a strong sense of belonging, the photo of the group carrying the boat captured a more

complex sense of belonging: the photographer belongs but is physically distant—is not involved in the shared activity but looks at it through a doorway. Yet, this sense of distance is not necessarily a lonely one; as the invitational text "come with" suggests, the photo offers possibilities and a desire for connection. Perhaps the interest lies in this tension.
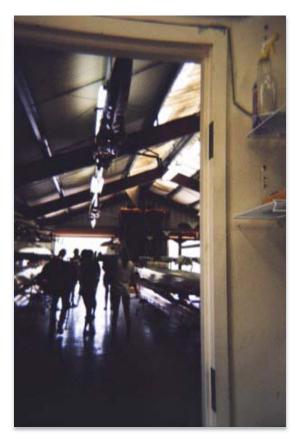

Figure 5.3

2. Absence and Presence

A closely related subtheme that emerged more saliently in the photographic archive was a sense of absence and presence. As might already be obvious, our discussions of making "contact" with the exhibit viewers were premised on a relationship that required both the presence of the viewer but the absence of the

photographer whose "presence" is felt through the photograph. The subtheme of

absence and presence was also recurrent in the photographic archive, such as in the

photograph in figure 5.4 (below) and shown in the exhibit with the caption "alone." The

caption was set in lower-case letters with the period included, which is both visually and

linguistically evocative of aloneness and finality. The image in "alone." is of a view

within a small but popular city park in Capitol Hill, a historically gay neighborhood in

Seattle. The photographer seems to have been walking through the park in an unusually

empty time and, with the lack of people and the darkness of dusk setting as the park

lampposts have been lit, captured the feeling of being alone. Part of the meaning of the

photograph might simply be a lonely feeling at the end of the day. The location may also

be important, as the photo hints at being in the center of the gay neighborhood—a place

that is usually full of people and activity—and yet feeling and finding oneself alone. In

this way, by taking a photograph—literally acting on and engaging the feeling—and

displaying it, the photographer has (and invites viewers to likewise) become fully

present with a sense of absence.

Figure 5.4

Another photograph in which a sense of absence and presence is important to how the visual image was created as well as to the meaning of the photograph is "rider's past," shown in figure 5.5 (below). The photographer created this image through the technique of double exposure, which allows two images taken at two different locations at different times to be "present" at once in the frame. Typically one of the images is rendered less clearly than the other. In this image, however, both exposures are at once detailed and yet blurry, rendering both clear enough to discern the original image yet not blurry, with a ghostly effect. One exposure is of a person in bed with a book looking directly into the camera; it is an intimate setting in which the subject seems to be wearing a tank top and shorts that might be slept in. The second image is from the back of a school bus that the photographer could access through his/her work, making the

Figure 5.5

bus an institutional space that is associated with schools but also a job site. The

photographer noted that one of the things s/he liked about the image was that the

subject—someone from a former relationship—is rendered ghostly, with his/her face not

clearly identified in the image. In one way, the ghostly image of the person in the

photograph speaks to their position in the photographer's life as someone once cared for

but now only present through memory and photographs. The title that the photographer

gave the image—"rider's past"—also emphasizes that the image speaks to or holds

something of the past for an imagined rider and that the visually and emotionally

interesting aspect of the photograph for the photographer was the layering of the past

with the present. That the second image exposed is a professional space indicates to me

that the personal relationship shared with that person is felt as present in other times and spaces in the photographer's life, such as while going about his/her job.

3. Ambiguity and Multiplicity

Another subtheme threading through both the photographic archive and the participant discussions was a sense of ambiguity and a related sense of multiplicity. For example, in the untitled photograph in figure 5.6 (below) the participants found the woman's blurred face to be interesting (they described it as "cool") in part because of its contrast with the rest of the image that had greater focus, but also because the blurring of her face rendered it hard to read her expression.

Figure 5.6

At the same time, as mentioned earlier, I found it interesting that the participants very quickly adopted the implicit agreement that there are multiple ways of seeing and that photographs contain multiple potential meanings. Moreover, rather than understanding the photographer as retaining complete authority over a photograph's meaning, the participants agreed that both ways of seeing and a photograph's potential meanings change over time and across social contexts. Resistance to singular meanings and/or an insistence that a photograph had to have any particular meaning was commonly expressed, even for the photographs in which participants claimed that they took the photograph with a specific artful intention. Participants also took photographs in which they had no intention at all. In fact, several of the participants insisted on their right to not have any intention in a photograph, asserting that they could take a photo of something for no reason and that images could have no real meanings in them. Most of the participants, at some point or another, expressed a similar oscillation about their relationship to the audience for the exhibit: Sometimes they aimed to "move" the audience at the same time that they insisted that the audience was not their concern at all when taking or selecting the photographs.

Technically speaking, the participants tended to create ambiguity with the cameras by intentionally blurring the focus, overlapping multiple images on one slide of film, letting light leaks into the camera for random "burn" marks on the film, or playing with framing. As described above, one common strategy was to roll the film out of sync with each frame, resulting in overlaps and indeterminate borders; many overlapped or double-exposed images occurred unintentionally but were nevertheless received as much more interesting. The film was developed by hand and thus the staff at the photo lab had to make their best guess at where one frame ended and the next one began.

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Once participants viewed the printed images, they had the option to send images back for reprinting to correct developers' framing errors, although participants only chose to do so with one or two images.

The participants used this strategy not just to literally push the boundaries of the frame, but also to push the viewer's perceptions of the meanings in the images. By reflexively reminding the viewer of the frame (or lack of it) by techniques of exposing the frame overlap or making burns in the film, the photograph makes the viewer aware of the medium, with the particular reminder that the photograph is not a disembodied production. The imagery resulting from these techniques can also indicate to the viewer that the image and meaning is not contained or containable within the frame, and thus instill doubt that the viewer is seeing and understanding the whole story.

I should also point out an irony at play in my own practice of trying to identify themes and making meaning when a consistent refrain from some of the participants was a resistance to finding meaning in the photographs. One of the research assistants, a trained photographer whose role was to provide feedback and guidance on the aesthetic and technical aspects of photography, could easily draw out multiple interpretations and meanings from the photographs. However, despite her intention of providing support, several of the participants often countered her interpretations with an insistence that photographs could have no meaning at all thus should not be "over-read." Certainly, I recognize the irony of my own interpretation, if you will, of subthemes in the photographic archive identified here -- even if such themes are meant to highlight and further articulate the forms that resistance to meaning took in our discussions.

4. Non-Narrative Moments:

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The predominant type of photograph across the archive appears to aim at either capturing a person or pet in a place and time, or convey an impression or feeling through the use of visual effects, framing, and light. Very few photographs appear to aim to narrate a story. Based on my understanding, none of the photos were meant to be displayed as a set or in a consecutive order, despite our active discussions and viewing examples of how photography could be used to convey a sense of time, timing, or narrative. There may be several reasons behind this, for example, the fact that photography is popularly viewed as capturing a "snapshot" of a moment in time, in other words, it is commonly viewed as "capturing" or "freezing" an image, emphasizing the synchronic rather than diachronic nature of photography. It is also possible that the photographer intended the photographs to convey narratives that are not explicit to me as a reader. However, the one instance where I prompted participants to experiment with narrative as a type of homework assignment yielded minimal results.

This disinterest (or perhaps resistance) to narrative was coupled with an emphasis on multiplicity when displaying the exhibit. The participants decided that the order of the photographs should provide a sense of aesthetic diversity, as they put it, "within an overall balance" in terms of size, color, and other aesthetic choices. The show was comprised of 24 framed images (three images by each photographer plus one self-portrait). Rather than group each photographer's images together or with their self-portrait, the consensus was to mix all the pieces together to emphasize the diversity across the board (some photographers had a distinguishable style and/or topic) and to place the self-portraits as a group at the end. This had the effect of providing a coherent message to the viewer: that the differences were showcased as a point of visual interest and, in fact, helped to enable the visual dialogues in the first place. Another effect was

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that the photographers presented themselves as a collective while also granting

themselves a degree of anonymity. This sense of belonging may also have ameliorated

their fears about sharing their work with the public, as a consistent concern some

participants expressed was that the photographs weren't "good," in other words, that the

image was not achieve the right lighting or composition of conventionally successful

photographs; this concern was expressed only occasionally and often countered by

claims that a photograph did not need to be "good" in the same sense. This

contradictory oscillation makes it challenging for me to accurately interpret what exactly

some participants meant by "good" and their reasons for wanting or rejecting it as a

standard. However, the fact that some participants consistently oscillated between these

two points is interesting in itself.

It is relevant to note here that, as already mentioned, participants could choose to

engage with the study using a pseudonym for any part of the study. While four of the six

decided to create pseudonyms for the exhibit, the other two hadn't communicated their

preference when we hung the show (and arrived late) and thus the other four made a

decision to make up pseudonyms for them as well. Of the six participants who

completed the study, two of the self-portraits showed a recognizable face; one chose an

image in which his/her face was obscured though a reflection in a window of the café

where the show was exhibited; one was of a personal object (a teddy bear on a bed); one

was of his/her pet (a dog); and one participant chose not to include a self-portrait at all.

The small majority of participants who chose to mediate their presence or exposure in

the exhibit with some anonymity nevertheless provided very intimate and personal

images through their other photographs. As for the participant who chose to obscure

his/her self-portrait through the café window, this image seems to be playing with a

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sense of *having been* at the café. Interestingly, it is difficult to tell if the person is taking the photograph from the inside looking out and thus having shared the same space with the viewer, or the outside looking in, implying that s/he is looking in on the viewer looking at the image.

An important way in which the participants seemed to resist or play with narration (and thus render some meanings ambiguous) was through the textual comments displayed next to the photographs. The comments tended to obscure the meaning of the photograph. Some struck me as provocatively vague or so personal that a viewer would not understand the meaning. For example, the comment, "all day long wearing /a hat that isn't really/on my head," for a photograph of someone without a hat; when I asked about the meaning of this comment, the response was that it was a personal joke between the photographer and the person in the photograph, and thus not intended for the audience to understand. In another example, the comment for a black and white photograph of a dark reflection in a mirror (see figure 5.7) was "Mysteries of the eyeball — for children!!" When I asked what it meant, the response was that "it wasn't supposed to make sense." However, my suggestion that these textual comments make more immediate sense to an audience was met with strong resistance. In fact, several participants chose to not post any textual comments, a choice that others supported even if they chose to do so themselves.

Figure 5.7

Another group decision was to post larger textual comments above the photographs as "umbrella" questions for the whole exhibit. These three sets of questions were: 1) "Is there a queer way of looking? How do you know?"; 2) "What experiences make a queer perspective?"; and 3) "What is queer to you?" These questions are fundamentally epistemological and ontological, aimed at provoking not only a moment of reflection in the viewer about "what one knows" about queerness or how this knowledge base is visually mediated, but also an awareness of the limitations of one's knowledge and its visual basis. When participants described what they hoped their "average" imagined viewer would experience, an answer that came up several times was that viewers would "have to think." In other words, they wanted the photographs to

perform a visual dialogue about queerness (through the multiple and sometimes ambiguous images or text) that also unsettled a coherent understanding or framework for thinking about what queer identity and representations might be or mean.

5.5 Discussion of All Themes

The overall theme and title of the exhibit, *Eye Contact: Visual Dialogues on Queer Identity and Community*, speaks to two important concepts and meaningful visual practices for the participants and this study as a whole: 1) a specific kind of contact and recognition or connection that can occur between LGBT/Queer people (with another person or even with an image of a person) and 2) the practice of visual *dialogue*—a dialectical movement encompassing not just multiplicity but a range of contradictory meanings, perspectives, and practices such as absence and presence, recognition and estrangement, and claiming boundaries and definition while upending them. These two concepts speak to how individuals may negotiate a relationship with each other as well as with a community at large—the same notion that was conveyed in the participant's description, noted earlier, of "queer" as "sitting in front of a mirror talking with yourself—trying to convince yourself to change or not…".

The art of negotiation is manifested rather clearly through the textual choices that the participants chose for framing the images. While using the label "queer" in the exhibit title frames the exhibit in a specific way and, presumably, invites an audience with a shared identification with that word and with whom possible moments of "eye contact" may happen, the participants also chose to frame their images with three questions: "What is queer to you?", "Is there a queer way of looking?", and "How do you know?" Rather than making a statement, the participants chose to pose questions, thus

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interpellating viewers more directly and prompting them to question not just the images on display but also their own knowledge and sense of a queer self, and how they may or may not situate themselves as viewers in relation to the images. The idea of "visual dialogues" describes a dynamic and dialectical exchange aimed at both laying claim to a common sense of knowledge or self as "queer" while also interrogating it. It invites that moment of recognition and interpellation as a shared sense of belonging while simultaneously throwing queer identity, the very basis of connection, into question. Such a move sharply contrasts with a simplified promotion of belonging as "coming out," instead offering and working through a kind of *queer* epistemology—one that is centrally shaped by and through visual practices that both resist and insist on belonging in any simple terms.

Each of the subthemes can also be viewed as enacting both a queer epistemology of self and community as well as a means to negotiate the relationship between self and community. Ambiguity and multiplicity, absence and presence, and non-narration may also speak to (and seem to be shaped by) the affective dimensions of negotiating a sense of self, especially perhaps feelings of vulnerability. For example, there are various types of implied intimacy shared in the photographs that both reveal and conceal intimacy and vulnerability. In the self-portrait in figure 5.8 (below) the photographer conceals his or her face but offers a view of what seems like an intimate space and a meaningful object—a stuffed bear on a bed. Similarly, another photographer shares an image of what I know to be a dearly loved dog. While they do not show their own faces or give their names, they offer instead personal spaces and relationships in their lives. Even in the three portraits in which the participants' faces may be recognizable we see strategies of concealment, distancing, and reflexivity. One person used a blue filter, strong light

Figure 5.8

Figure 5.9

flares, and a double exposure so the frame is filled with two faces: one facing the viewer,

the other, more ghostly, looking at himself (Figure 5.9). Such tactics situate the

photographer on an equal footing with viewers, but nevertheless reflexively demonstrate

the photographer's conscious negotiation with the viewers, inviting them to look while

reminding them of the limits of their view. Conventionally, light flares are read as

unintended damage to the film; here, however, these effects are intended. The light

flares appear on the top and bottom of the image, adding a second frame around the

photographer's face, and thus creating a frame within the frame. At the same time, the

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light flares are spaces on the film on which the exposed image has been literally erased from the film itself (greatly overexposing and burning off the image), indicating "holes" in the image that can never become visible. Effects such as light flares can visibly remind the viewers that they are not "seeing the full picture," so to speak; they can also remind viewers that the images they are seeing are mediated by technical processes that have also shaped the image, and thus viewers' relationship to the image. There was only one conventional self-portrait; yet, even in this portrait, the photographer shows her face but is looking strongly to one side to a point beyond the view of the frame. In this way, the photographer is both present with the viewer, and absent through directing her gaze and attention obviously away from the viewer rather than at them.

Most prominently, these strategies can be seen as strongly negotiating a desire to connect, "fit in," and belong, while also negotiating the risks involved in being recognized, misread, or "over-read." Negotiating how much of the affective dimensions of one's life to share with others is a fundamentally human activity and, arguably, all people continue to negotiate these risks at all stages of their lives. However, I am interested here in the specific strategies that LGBTQ young people employ in negotiating their relation to knowledge through representations of identity. On the one hand, this information provides a more detailed picture of the kind of discursive or rhetorical contexts that they perceive and experience as queer youth; and on the other hand, through these pictures we can to listen to and learn from queer young people about how they conform, reconfigure, and even resist the interpellating call of dominant sex, gender, and racial norms.

In understanding what may be unique to queer young people's experiences and perceptions of the discursive contexts in which they must engage, it is important to

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point out that they, like all sexual and racial minorities, may typically have to work to build a sense of self and community in the face of harmful and sometimes violent opposition as well as uninhabitable narratives. This challenge is what a campaign like *It Gets Better* seeks to address. Negotiating both the risk of violence and the projection of negative stereotypes most often involves a simultaneous articulation and disarticulation of identity—measures taken to minimize the risk of violence through obfuscation or through negation of stereotypes. Several scholars have addressed the unique tensions involved for minority subjects in negotiating everyday discourse.[21] For example, while writing specifically about queer people of color, Muñoz (1999) describes the process he calls disidentification: "a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology" (p. 83). From a slightly different angle, Berlant and Warner (1995) speak to this issue, writing that the "labor of bringing sexual practices and desires to articulacy has tended to go along with a labor of ambiguating categories of identity (p. 345), within and against the rigid and narrow frame of heteronormative models of identity. As discussed in the introductory chapter, queer young people also share specific forms of social marginalization with other youth, such as having limited social and legal rights and agency, as well as being strongly subjected to institutional power within family, education, the legal system, and the state. These multiple marginalizations render queer youth particularly challenged in forming their own community and support system and engaging with others to form a strong sense of self.

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[21] See also, Talburt (2004), Thurlow (2001), and Spade (2003).

Both the notion of a moment of queer recognition through "eye contact" that the participants sought to enact with the exhibit, and the array of distancing strategies and complicating of meanings resonate with Povinelli's (2006) notion of "stranger sociability" in queer communities in the United States. Povinelli describes queer networks and relationships organized not through kinship or other traditional institutions, but through a stranger sociability. The phrase plays on the dual meanings of the word "stranger." Thus, one aspect of queerness that has been historically shared by queer folk has been in varying relationship to what are considered "strange" or non-normative practices, identifications, desires, etc. Povinelli also reminds us of the unavoidable fact of strangeness and disturbances in discourse, specifically, that all identities are vulnerable and "disturbed by the play of citationality" (p. 569) but not in the same way. *Eye Contact* was an example of both a manifestation and practice of stranger sociability in the local queer community.

For the participants in this study, the consistent move to question meaning through strategies such as multiplicity, playing with framing, and non-narration can be seen to work against heteronormative models of sex and gender but also against dominant models of LGBTQ identity. On the one hand, some participants included playful (but consistent and focused) definitions of queer—ranging from one person describing his gender as "male/bucket" to the definitions of the word queer produced in a group brainstorm (listed above). In another way, participants' insistence on images or comments mounted in the exhibit having obscure or nonsensical meanings could also be understood as a questioning and refusal to specify what queer is or looks like. While agreeing to the concept of queer identity and community as the organizing principle for the exhibit, participants also included a range of photos, none of which explicitly evoked

typical LGBTQ narratives or symbols. Some of the photographs seemed so far afield from recognizable discourses of 'queerness' or even general concepts of identity and community as to seem significant in their distance/difference, such as the untitled image in figure 5.10 (below). Of course, it is precisely because the intention of the photographer is obscure to me and, presumably, to other viewers, that I cannot assign such a meaning to it. But it is the clear departure from familiar, hackneyed images of queerness that should be noticed. Such strategies seem to speak to the complex rhetorical demands on LGBTQ young people and also raise questions about the narratives of "queer youth" they may perceive as available to them, as discussed in chapter three.

Figure 5.10

As discussed at length in chapter one, most research on LGBTQ young people promotes accepting oneself and "coming out of the closet" as the solution to a myriad of social issues for young people. At the same time, much of this literature has not critically inquired into young people's complex relation to discourse and the tools

available for young people to "come out." Savin-Williams (2001, 2005) has critiqued the push to "come out" as a therapeutic practice. Savin-Williams' response to this practice is based on his more fundamental argument that LGBTQ young people are not "at-risk" or at greater risk than any other population of youth. As I describe in chapter one, his work exemplifies the third epistemological framework of understanding LGBTQ young people as defined by unique needs yet still being *the same as everybody else.* In supporting this position, Savin-Williams consistently points to what he perceives as young people's ambivalence to or rejection of "coming out" under identity labels such as gay and lesbian. Savin-Williams reads young people's resistance to and ambivalence about using LGBTQ labels as signaling an ambivalence about or disinterest in any kind of definition of their identity; moreover, he presents such labels as requiring falsity through "molding oneself into a stereotype" and "sacrificing one's personal integrity" (2005, p. x).

While some young people may feel this way about identity labels, my experience from this study indicates that there are other possible explanations. I found an ambivalence and sometimes rejection of identity labels such as gay, lesbian, and queer that is not necessarily a *divestment* from defining one's sexuality (or even from the strategic use of such labels) but rather might be understood as a sign of how young people today perform complex negotiations of identificatory practices around their sexuality. While it is possible that young people really do not feel strongly (or may even feel apathetic) about defining their sexuality or gender, it's also clear from my work with young people that there are times when they clearly demonstrate an investment in identifying and defining their sexuality, although this investment is a highly negotiated one. What is important is not to dismiss their ambiguity or seeming ambivalence as an

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out-and-out rejection of such definitions, but to recognize the complexity of this process. Where their investment is completely overlooked in Savin-Williams' research, it is treated (and/or operates) as a main object of both anxiety and solution in mainstream discourses about LGBTQ youth that centers on "coming out." Both approaches fail to account for the complexity involved in young people's identificatory practices, which are often plural, contradictory, fluid, and shaped by and inflected with the multiple identities and social contexts in which young people live.

There are many complex ways that young people engage with and have a vested interest in labels, terminology, and other forms of identifying non-normative sexualities and genders. Even when participants of this study avoided labels, they simultaneously actively employed, creatively played with, and consistently demonstrated a nuanced understanding of identity labels in ways that still demonstrated identification with and belonging to GLBT/queer communities in multiple ways.

Chapter Six

Conclusion: Making it Better for Queer Youth?

6.1. Introduction

This research emerges out of several questions that, for me, have been circling in different orbits through and around my academic and activist work for a number of years. I have continued to witness the ever-changing terrain of queer politics in the U.S. and particularly the shifting formations of rhetorics of visibility, wondering as both an activist and an intellectual what the effects of such rhetorics might be. I have long been interested in questions of identity and belonging in queer communities, as well as the complex visual social practices that mediate both. At the same time, I have been genuinely moved by Foucault's theories of discourse and power/knowledge as well as feminist practice in critically engaging the politics of knowledge production. Thus, many of these interests and concerns have shaped and are manifested in this research on young LGBTQ people and how they have been figured as a newly emerging and newly visible identity group in academic and media discourses. At the same time, this research has directly arisen out of my own work with queer young people and a respect for the complex and creative ways that they engage modes of representation - visual and otherwise.

In my work with queer young people, some of the effects of dominant discourses about LGBTQ youth have been easily observed. A few years ago, while waiting to begin a panel presentation in which LGBTQ youth were to share their personal stories and educate their peers in a high school setting, one of the presenters chatted with me (as the adult facilitator) and shared her concern that her story might not "fit" with the other

presenters' stories. As she described it, her story might not fit what the audience may expect because she did not have enough difficulty in her life; her parents did not disown her or force her out of the house, she had not been depressed, rebelled, or engaged in drug use. It was not the first time that a youth panelist had mentioned a familiarity with a particular narrative about queer youth and a concern about "fitting" it. Her concern speaks directly to rhetorics of queer youth as "at-risk" and "resilient" and thus in need of empowerment — rhetorics that I have heard manifested not only from queer youth but the many adults who work with them in social service and educational settings. Such a moment attests to the stakes of this research for young LGBTQ people.

As a service provider on the speaker's bureau, I also witnessed young people "coming out" and telling their stories in ways that were seemingly quite affirming and empowering for themselves as well as their peers in the audience which was, of course, part of the aim of the program. Programs like the speaker's bureau draw heavily from the discourses of empowerment and visibility under discussion in my research — discourses that have been shaped through an LGBTQ politics of visibility in which "coming out" has been conceptualized as a form of self-acceptance (and pride, of course). This idea, as articulated since the homophile groups in the 1950s and gay liberation movements in the 1960s, also conceptualizes the individual's "coming out" as a means to collectively effect and benefit from greater visibility as a group and a means for broad scale social transformation. To be clear, my critique is not aimed at the history of LGBTQ politics of visibility, or every manifestation of it; for example, I am not addressing whether youth should be encouraged to "come out" as an affirming act. I am, however, interested in promoting a more critical view of visibility than what is offered in current discourses.

My research begins to answer Walters' (2001) question when she asks: "... if the problem was once invisibility, then how is the problem defined in an era of increased visibility?" (p. 9). While recognizing the unprecedented amount of visibility in the media and culture at large for LGBTQ people in the United States, it is a myth that LGBTQ liberation has followed (or that it will follow) a simple progression 'up from invisibility' where visibility in mainstream culture is the source and measure of greater acceptance and equality for all LGBTQ people. Even Gross (2001) from whose title I borrow the phrase "up from invisibility" recognizes the potential drawbacks and limits of the kinds of visibility produced in media today. While respecting Walters' question, I argue that the metaphor of invisibility is still quite relevant and that, in fact, new types of visibility that are now so often cited as proof of progress and equality should be more accurately viewed as a complicated set of new frames of visibility *and* invisibility that mediate new modes of identity and social belonging. In the section that follows, I highlight the frameworks of visibility and empowerment currently promoted to the next generation of young LGBTQ people across all three discourse domains discussed in the prior chapters, focusing on what is these discourses most often render as invisible issues and epistemological frameworks for understanding youth. By looking specifically at current frameworks of visibility and invisibility, I begin to point to the kinds of questions that should be asked and new ways of understanding how "the problem" to which Walters refers may be defined now.

6.2 Frameworks of Visibility and Invisibility: An Overview of Key Points

In this project, I examine new frames of visibility and invisibility in discourses of empowerment for LGBTQ youth through a set of critical discussions about the academic

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research literature on queer youth and the three largest national media projects on and for queer youth. I then set these critiques into conversation with a very different epistemology of queer identity and community put forth by the young LGBTQ participants in my photovoice case study. Based on all three discourse domains, but particularly media and the research literature, I argue overall that while mainstream discourses of queer youth center and promote the promise of saving and empowering queer young people, there are specific ways in which these rhetorics offer an overly narrow mode of empowerment that oftentimes also disempowers queer youth in ways that directly or indirectly promote neoliberal and homonormative politics of individualism - a mode of politics that operates through the bracketing of social and economic oppression wrought through racism, sexism, transphobia, and other material inequalities under capitalism.

The driving component of my argument counters the rhetoric consistently found most saliently in media for queer youth premised on a teleological narrative of progress and normative ideals for young people as seen, for example, in Dan Savage's (2011) explanation behind the It Gets Better (IGB) message, writing that: "Things get better — things *have* gotten better, things *keep* getting better — for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. I knew that to be true because things had certainly gotten better for me" (p. 2). Such claims are part of a central theme in these media projects of *envisioning the new and the better* that seeks to instill hope for the future by focusing on the future over the present, but also greatly situates young LGBTQ people as inhabiting a new world where issues of discrimination and violence are greatly diminishing or, as the case on YGA, have already been almost wholly addressed. Although YGA goes so far as to posit that the "brave new world" of the future is here

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already and: "As the millennium turned, so too, did the status of the young (13-27) non-straight American. Once a struggling minority...we've reached critical mass" (Glatze and YGA staff, 2004/05, p. 31). For YGA, the *new and better* world in which young "non-straight American[s]" find themselves is one in which they are (and/or can become) "normal for the first time."

The "new" and "normal" young person defined in both IGB and YGA focuses, though to very different degrees, on a normative lifestyle of marriage, children, and consumption. More importantly, media projects like IGB, YGA and XY overwhelmingly promote a message of empowerment that it "has gotten better" and/or "it will get better" that renders invisible the social issues that actually pose obstacles for young people striving to make their lives better such as poverty, racism, sexism, religious intolerance, and immigration status. In doing so, these media promote a narrow understanding but also narrow vision of LGBTQ youth as White, adequately-resourced, and normatively gendered, rendering other material inequalities invisible and obfuscating the complexities that young people face. Despite the seeming promotion of diversity through the inclusion of images of racial and ethnic minorities as well as transgendered youth, when they do occur, they do not alter the overarching image and message of queer youth as a relatively homogenously group purportedly unaffected by issues of racism and transphobia.

In these media, but particularly in YGA and IGB, the teleological narrative of visibility is often distorted into a bold declaration of progress that may only be supported through a narrow focus on individualism. Although one may question claims such as that made by YGA that the "end of religious-supported homophobia is fast approaching" (2004/05, p. 34), the stronger message consistently expressed in YGA as

well as other mainstream media projects is that homophobia, where it is represented, is consistently portrayed as stemming from individuals, not as a wide-spread, institutionalized social issue. The forms of empowerment, solidarity, and activism offered through each of these media projects, although different, all focus on the individual consumption of media in ways that actively ignore (and thus render invisible) practices that could foster greater individual or collective modes of social change. Power, in its many manifestations across these media projects, is almost wholly presented as something to be wielded by an individual for individual ends that follows the ideal American ideology of autonomous and private individualism.

Academic researchers have provided some correctives to this narrow understanding and vision of LGBTQ youth as well as the social issues that they face. Of the four overarching epistemologies that I identify in the research literature (i.e. youth as *at-risk*, *resilience*, *normal*, and *diverse*), scholars who focus on *diversity* assert that institutionalized racism as well as the normalization of Whiteness in LGBTQ youth studies must be properly recognized and addressed, especially within programs designed for queer youth (McCready, 2003; Talburt, 2004). As McCready (2003) illustrates, the administrators and educators in his study essentially normalized Whiteness through defining the problems of queer students of color as a "special issue" in relation to those of queer White students, thus presuming Whiteness to be the norm (p. 46). While sharing McCready's and Talburt's critiques of the necessity of accounting for the impacts of race and racism (on youth and research practices), I argue for an even broader intersectional approach that better reflects the challenges that young people face; some of these issues are being addressed in Youth Studies in general, but without a focus on sexuality, such as: political economy (cf. Males, 2002), the effect of

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neoliberalism on youth (cf. Giroux, 2010), immigration and transnational youth movements (cf. Sunaina, 2004), and homonormativity and the commodification of queer culture in the field of queer studies (cf. Puar, 2011; Hennessy, 2001; Warner 1999).

Broadening the epistemological frames to substantially engage in the social factors that shape young people's lives would also pose challenges to scholars who follow what I have termed the epistemologies of LGBTQ youth as *at-risk* and as *resilient* in perhaps seeking more inclusive research populations but also contribute to more complex understandings of the varying risks and rewards of "coming out" for youth across different racial and national social contexts. The one epistemological framework that an intersectional approach seems to counter is that of young LGBTQ people as "normal" which is promoted largely by Savin-Williams (2005). More than any other researcher, Savin-Williams' views on young LGBTQ people align with the message of youth as a "new" generation that is "normal for the first time" found in media projects like YGA and IGB. Savin-Williams' research effectively critiques what has been a dominant view of LGBTQ youth as victims of violence and "at risk" for suicide and, in doing so, expands epistemologies of queer youth greatly. Unfortunately, as a corrective to youth as "at risk," the view of queer youth as "normal" that Savin-Williams provides appears to swing too far in the other direction. The vast majority of young LGBTQ people, according to Savin-Williams, are thriving, well-adjusted, and have 'normal' teenage problems like worrying about grades or earning a spot on a sports team. While this may be true for many youth, this view of 'normal' ignores problems that many youth do deal with such as religious intolerance, transphobia, sexism, and racism. Moreover, scholars focusing on issues of political economy and neoliberalism such as Males

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(2002), Puar (2011) and Giroux (2010) argue cogently against the notion that young people of today are thriving. As Males (2002) reminds us, the most recent generations of young people are, for the first time in U.S. history, growing up much poorer than prior generations and that factors such as race, gender, and citizenship status greatly impact young people's already compromised abilities in earning a living wage. Taking these factors into consideration prompts the question of which youth, specifically, might Savin-Williams be seeing and which youth are out of his view? It also raises the question of his definition of violence when one takes into consideration the violence of poverty and racism.

Although a small group, the views and experiences shared by the young people in my photovoice case study provide a richly textured third discourse domain for this research. Across the board, the views of my participants complicated the rhetoric of LGBTQ youth as "normal" and just like everyone else found in media like YGA and IGB, and in Savin-Williams' research. Indeed, this group seemed particularly resistant to mainstream rhetorics of queer identity as American. When I asked: "What do you think of when you think of the word 'American'?" their responses were: "Lazy"; "Bourgeois capitalist war mongering pigs"; "Wasteful"; "A family in blue and White going to the game [said with derision]; a stereotype." To the follow up question of "Is there an overlap between American and queer? And with queer youth?" only two participants offered a response, the first replied: "Well, we're all part of where we live" and the second stated: "I don't think you have to be a part of the system where you live." The remainder of the respondents seemed uninterested in talking about the question even as some of them nodded their heads in agreement. At least three participants identified

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their families as having immigrated to the U.S. and even had a basis for comparison of national contexts when visiting families in their countries of origin.

However, my sense was that I did not have access to their full opinions on this topic as none of the participants initiated a discussion of race for at least the first five meetings in which discussions of race were only raised if initiated by myself or one of the research assistants, herself a woman of color. After I shared this observation, the group discussion that followed was one of our most substantial discussions about belonging in queer communities. One participant described how "some of your self" might find community and "fit in certain ways," but being part of a queer community and taking part in a queer space requires "leaving other parts [of yourself] out." All of the other participants agreed, and, in fact, seemed quite resigned to the idea that "fitting in" was a contradictory process involving both connection, alienation, and even isolation. As the same participant further explained: "belonging has the word 'longing' in it. It's something that everyone wants but, basically no one can really have completely because part of yourself probably won't fit in." Everyone in the group understood that "fitting in" or belonging in queer spaces might require acting in ways that required choosing which 'part' of themselves to leave out (or sublimate). But all participants, including those of color (at least four or five out of six participants) nodded in agreement that "fitting in" in most queer spaces meant having to figure out how to fit in a predominantly White space[22]. While the fact I am White certainly played a large part in setting the tone for discussions about race, participants als0 expressed the attitude that queer spaces were about queerness and not racial difference, echoing the attitude

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[22] I write "at least" here because one participant chose not to disclose a self-identified racial identity.

described by McCready (2003) in which educational service providers treated race and sex as two distinct issues requiring distinct social spaces.

What was clear in our discussions was that all of the participants recognized race and racism, along with other social differences such as classism, capitalism, transphobia and sexism as important social issues directly relevant to their lives and to queer communities. A majority of the study participants were recruited from the CBO that I partnered with, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) LGBTQ Youth Program that actively promoted an anti-oppression message through its trainings and events; thus, many of these young people are quite aware of racism and transphobia[23]. Nevertheless, the central value that all participants seemed to place on anti-oppressive practice (even for those participants who had limited engagement with AFSC) unquestioningly countered the normalization of Whiteness and lack of substantial research on transphobia and classism within the research literature as well as the focus on notions of individualism and consumption abstracted from social differences such as race and class but also from political activism.

The most fundamental way in which the young LGBTQ people in my study complicated discourses on LGBTQ youth in the research literature and media was through their consistent negotiation in defining the meaning of "queer" identity. The idea of "queer" as a dialogue based on mutual recognition and negotiation was a consistent and compelling theme. The participants theorized the idea of "queer" as a visual dialogue that happens in social spaces where LGBTQ people may have a moment of mutual recognition as being LGBTQ. The participants set up the photovoice exhibit to

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[23] Two participants heard about the study from a friend already involved with the AFSC and joined their youth program in order to be in this study.

produce and perform such a visual dialogue – as was indicated by the title: "Eye Contact: Visual Dialogues on Queer Identity and Community." The dialogue, for them, seemed to be a dialectical movement that is both individual and collective, encompassing a range of multiple and contradictory meanings, perspectives, and practices which constantly troubled the very ways in which people might recognize and "know" if someone else is LGBTQ. While inviting viewers to look, they also engaged themes of absence and presence, recognition and estrangement, and claiming boundaries and definition while upending them. The participants also troubled viewer's recognition of what may be "queer" in the images by framing the images under the following questions: "What is queer to you?"; "Is there a queer way of looking?"; and "How do you know?" The notion of "queer" as a dialogue speaks to how individuals constantly negotiate and renegotiate relationships with each other, with social spaces, but also with the idea of "queer" itself. Such a fundamentally fluid concept (in fact, a concept that is perpetually in praxis) is likely impractical as a basis for defining a research population or creating media for the niche-market of queer youth, but it is nevertheless a compelling and provocative perspective to attempt to take account of in such practices or in rethinking epistemologies of queer youth identity.

The complex negotiations the study participants demonstrated with the idea of "queer" (or consonant identity labels) raise significant questions about how LGBTQ people in general might identify themselves in research (or media) that that necessarily functions through such labels. How do other youth demonstrate their negotiations with identity labels and why might they do so? If youth were given multiple opportunities or and/or flexibility in how they self-identified, would they identify differently? More discussions of how young people themselves relate to language and naming practices (as

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well as practices of visual representation) could produce a more nuanced and realistic understanding of how young people come to identify with the very categories through which research and social service programs rely on to access young people and complicates notions of visibility upon which narratives of progress and empowerment are based in so much of the discourses currently aimed at queer youth.

6.3 Making it Better: Reflecting on Interdisciplinary Research

In my introductory chapter, I framed my research as an effort to practice a key strength of interdisciplinary research: cross-pollinating and bridging intellectual conversations that might share an object of study but not (yet) a critical lens. Of course, interdisciplinarity is a term that has come to have different meanings in different disciplinary contexts. Salter and Hearn (1996) provide a definition of two distinct kinds of interdisciplinary work. The first type of interdisciplinary work they refer to as "instrumental" in which a range of existing frameworks from a multiple disciplines are synthesized to address a specific problem (p. 29-30). The current field of work on LGBTQ youth can be described as "instrumental" in Salter and Hearn's term in that the field is constituted in large part by a shared object of study — namely the 'problems' of LGBTQ youth. There is no specific disciplinary home for this field, nor may it be said to share common epistemologies or methodologies. According to Salter and Hearn, instrumental interdisciplinarity can certainly produce new knowledge that contributes to the problem but this synthesis of interdisciplinary work is a temporary coalition — structured based on what is otherwise a relatively temporarily shared problem under study.

Salter and Hearn (1996) also describe a second type of interdisciplinary work that I find more closely describes my own. They refer to this type of interdisciplinarity as "conceptual" in which researchers seek to engage and build a more commonly shared epistemological frameworks rather than a shared focus on a problem. Salter and Hearn understand conceptual interdisciplinary work as transformative in that it requires a deeper engagement with other kinds of knowledge production practices and holds the potential to create new and more permanent epistemological, methodological practices within the disciplines and even perhaps in creating new disciplines. Salter and Hearn's definition of conceptual interdisciplinarity is very closely aligned with the idea of transdisciplinary work that seeks to both draw from and transcend synoptical disciplinary practices in order to build a meta-level framework that integrates and synthesizes concepts and practices in novel ways (cf. Klein, 1990).

As part of my own interdisciplinary work, I have sought to engage in broad conversations that share a common 'problem' of study – that of how to define and address the challenges facing young LGBTQ people – in ways that contribute to conceptual and transdisciplinary scholarship. In addition, I have tried to leverage what might be thought of as an "outsider" status to critically reflect on discourses of empowerment and visibility to find the 'negative space' that shapes these conversations: the issues and forms of power that are often invisible in these discourses. In have tried to leverage the generative aspects of interdisciplinary work to open up possibilities for alternative perspectives, extend conversations in new ways, and potentially illuminate and widen the epistemological frameworks in which work on LGBTQ youth is done. For example, in the previous section I highlighted examples of potential areas of inquiry and modes of analysis such as questions of neoliberal political economy, the

commodification of queer politics and cultures, the place of youth in globalization studies, histories of the social construction of modern notions of adolescence, as well as social oppressions that intersect with homophobia such as racism and classism. I argue that addressing issues such as these will allow for a more holistic and realistic understanding of queer young people's lives —not with the expectation that any one inquiry may account for all such issues, but simply to outline the ways in which epistemological frameworks within the field may be broadened.

Interdisciplinary work also poses challenges. I have described part of my interdisciplinary practice as 'putting into conversation' work with diverse approaches. I am struck, however, by how the concept of "queer" as a practice of (visual) *dialogue* as it emerged in the photovoice study may serve as a more useful metaphor for inter- and transdisciplinary work. The dialogues in the photovoice study might be thought of as sharing the 'problem' of defining the term "queer" and did so through encompassing queer identities through encompassing multiple and even contradictory meanings (e.g. both recognition and estrangement, through claiming boundaries and definition while also upending them. Interdisciplinary work may also be conceptualized and practiced as practices of recognition and commonality as well as estrangement, practices of stability and fluidity (e.g. of claiming boundaries while also changing and/or exceeding them). The notion of "queer" as a dialogue that emerged in the photovoice study acknowledges that individuals constantly negotiate and renegotiate relationships with each other as well as with the conceptual frameworks that define those relationships. This is another way of conceptualizing the critical reflexivity that so often characterizes interdisciplinary work.

Engaging in interdisciplinary research involves moving not only between different intellectual conversations and the epistemological frameworks within them, but also through the different political agendas that they contain. One such example in my research is how it engages multiple epistemologies that contain sometimes-opposing views of the concept of "voice" as a politically empowering practice. As the name implies, "voice" is significant in the photovoice method. In employing this method, I did so while working in-between competing political understandings of the politics of "voice." In promoting a concept of "voice" as empowerment, photovoice draws on traditions in feminist theories, documentary photography, and education for critical consciousness (Wang and Burris, 1997; cf. also Friere 1970, 1973) in which voice is seen as creating opportunities for individuals otherwise marginalized in social discourse to engage and be heard. I designed my photovoice study to provide a platform for participants to "voice" their own ideas through photography. This aspect of the project received very positive comments by people in the community, applicants for research assistant positions, and parents. At the same time, the structure of this project has been perceived as advocating this view of "voice" in viewing the third discourse domain – my work with young LGBTQ people themselves in the photovoice project – as offering the voices of "real youth" as a "corrective" to the institutional discourse domains that precede it.

My intention in this structure was not to produce such a problem-solution narrative, although I do find that the study participants productively countered and complicated key aspects of the larger discourses on LGBTQ youth found in the broader discourse domains. While recognizing (and valuing) the benefit of the ways in which my research participants 'speak back' to some of the rhetorics of American individualism,

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my aim has not been to set up community-based projects as the more "authentic" site of voice (free of the disciplining power of discourse). I am not making an argument for privileging individual voices over and against the institutional voices of scholars or media producers for to do so would risk what Duggan calls the 'ruse of liberalism': privileging forms of individuality as if they are private and thus separate from public ideologies of identity. My aim has been to see how these three discourse domains operate and how they may speak back to each other, but not to reproduce the notion that they operate freely from the other two. However, in this research I consciously chose to negotiate and work across differing views on the politics of "voice" and epistemic privilege.

My interest in complicating the politics of "voice" emerges from the theoretical frameworks that I draw from in feminist and queer studies. As discussed in the introduction, my work engages Foucault's view of discourse as a site where both subjectivity (the premise of having a voice in the first place) and subjection occur; as a site of "permanent provocation" (Foucault, 1983, p. 222) that is potentially both freeing and constraining. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that, in presenting my work in other academic spaces where scholars share this view of power and discourse, my project was viewed with suspicion as potentially deploying an uncritical notion of voice. One person actually commented, "voice is so passé" which is true in certain academic conversations. Yet in other academic conversations (and popular culture), the politics of "voice" are alive and well and yield an immense power; I find this to be especially true in regard to discourses on children and youth. My research on LGBTQ youth is situated as dialoging with both of these conversations. I choose the photovoice method in order to critically explore the politics and practices of voice, recognizing that I depended on the very

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politics of visibility that I was interested in potentially critiquing. As such, I situate my work at a crossroads of feminist and queer studies in which a project like this one can value voice while critically deploying and interrogating it.

When designing the photovoice study, I was concerned with not "setting up" the participants in my study to provide stories that may be very similar to those in media projects that I was already critiquing in the other case study even while I used a 'grounded' approach in which I used as few prompts as possible to allow them to direct the conversation. But this potential conflict is one reason why I chose to do a six-month study rather than a very short study (or even interviews). My intent was to allow space for them to have multiple ways of telling their stories and to (if they so chose) tell stories beyond the kind of tailored narrative that "fits" what they may think is expected (as my previous work with youth had demonstrated was all too common). And, if their story fit the narrative of homonormative consumer lifestyle advocated in YGA, for example, then at least I would have enough time to explore what that meant to them. Of course, I was interested not only in the complexities of their stories, but in the processes and practices they used to tell them. In using the visual medium of photography, I intended for the participants to have the opportunity to communicate abstract concepts outside of the pre-conceived narratives and terminology typically used to describe queer youth (if they chose to do so).

6.4 Making it Better for Queer Youth

A common practice in Social Science disciplines is for researchers to frame their work through identifying a social problem and then proposing an intervention to

address it. I have framed my work here as an epistemological intervention in knowledge production practices that shape definitions of queer youth and the problems they may face. Where the aim of this project is in shifting the discourse about LGBTQ youth dominated by questions of utility (e.g. What is being done about queer youth suicide?) to questions of definition and power (e.g. How are queer youth being defined? What are the effects of these definitions?), I have also made an argument *about* power and the troubling ways in which is operating in current discourses of LGBTQ youth.

It is an unfortunate irony that discourses about young LGBTQ people are centrally organized around empowerment and yet seem to offer few practical options for individual and collective social change and empowerment. The tremendous public response to the It Gets Better (IGB) campaign is an inspiring expression of support for young LGBTQ people. As Dan Savage (2011) has noted, the IGB project cannot be the only solution, but simply a means of inspiring hope. For those of us who care about young people, it is important to believe that 'it can get better' for them, and for us; indeed, to engage in social critique requires that same hope and conviction. However, as I argue, the IGB campaign, similarly to other rhetorics of empowerment in media for young LGBTQ people, not only fails to ask, but obscures questions of power, such as: Why doesn't it get better for some people? This is the kind of question that may lead to identifying the concrete forms of empowerment that queer youth need in order to make their lives (and the world) better. Yet, as I argue throughout this project, the current rhetorics of empowerment directed at queer youth in dominant discourses often fail to address the question of why it does not get better for some people, particularly for those young people who are the most vulnerable and in need of support.

This research is based on the conviction that it should get better for all. A key component in my argument is that discourses of empowerment for LGBTQ youth currently function to promote normative modes of visibility that leave many young people's challenges relatively invisible. The fundamental questions that have animated LGBTQ youth studies since the field began remain relevant and pressing: How is the population of young LGBTQ people identified and defined? What might be their specific challenges and strengths? This project contributes to these questions by vastly widening the lens through which these questions are answered and, by doing so, broaden field of possible actions that may be taken toward inclusive social change for young LGBTQ people.

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APPENDIX

Participant Information form used when enrolling participants.

Seeing What Queer Youth Know: A Seattle Photovoice Project

Name: _____

This project will take place between January and June of 2009. Do you plan to be in the Seattle area for that time? ¨ Yes ¨ No

How old are you?: _____

Participation in this project requires written consent of a parent or legal guardian for those under age 18, would one of your parents or legal guardians be willing to sign a release form for this project? _____

How do you identify your sexual identity?: _____

How do you identify your gender? _____

How do you identify your race and/or ethnicity? _____

What's the best way to contact you?

☐ By phone (Home): _____ ☐ (Other): _____

☐ By email: _____

Is it okay to identify this as a LGBTQ study at these numbers and email address? (Circle those that are okay)

(Note: Although I will not share your email with anyone, I cannot assure complete

confidentiality in emails).

What interests you in participating in this study?

VITA

Calla Chancellor was born and raised in the Rocky Mountains of Salt Lake City and Heber, Utah. At the University of Utah, she earned Bachelors of Arts degrees in English Literature as well as Social and Behavioral Science through what was then named the Women Studies Program. She went on to earn a Masters of Arts degree in English Literature at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York. She currently lives in Seattle, WA with her partner, Tara Ellis where she has made a home for a number of years. In 2012, she earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Feminist Studies through the Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies program at the University of Washington in Seattle, WA.