The Sexuality of Death: 
A Response to The *It Gets Better* Campaign

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**Abstract**

In this essay, Amy Saunders explores ideas of the association of homosexuality and the death of the nation. Using concepts from Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages* and Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*, Saunders critically investigates the homonormative propaganda of the "It Gets Better" campaign and the oppressive nature of modern day necropolitics.

The *It Gets Better Project*, a project organized in response to an outburst of queer\(^1\) youth suicides in the Western world, highlights the association that queerness and homosexuality have with death. Through this association, as well as the *It Gets Better Project* itself, queerness becomes intertwined with death and the death of the nation. Opposing death and the image of the homosexual subject, is the prospect of life, which is lead only by the heteronormative discourse. The *It Gets Better Project* naturalizes the ideology that queerness and ‘otherness’ is equated with death, whereas heteronormativity and the normative subject, including the white, privileged normative subject, is equated with life. Through the media attention that the *It Gets Better Project* has received, these stories of queer youth suicide have become a tool for the regulation of lives, both queer and normative. This regulation creates a straightening device that is in line with the biopolitical aims to serve the hegemonic discourse of the nation state: the heteronormative necessity within a nation for that nation to thrive through gay-bashing, homophobic violence and the death of the homosexual subject.

In the early fall of 2010, the United States of America was overwhelmed by a wave of homosexual youth suicides, struck by the number of suicides, as well as the suicides themselves. The nation was shocked by the events; the wake of this outburst of suicides had countries, activists, LGBT communities and LGBT allies questioning what fuelled the ‘sudden’ outburst of queer youth suicides in a climate that seemed to be changing in its acceptance of the LGBT community, and specifically of LGBT youth. In response to the desperate situation, Seattle’s Dan Savage, writer of the column *Savage Love*, jumped at the chance to showcase a way to a happier life for queer youth, producing

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\(^1\) In this essay, I use the word ‘queer’ and ‘queering’ as both an identity and a means for relating to/understanding/being critical of the world and of specific societal actions and understandings. ‘To queer’ or ‘queering of’ is used to create a mode of thinking that differentiates from the normative mode of thinking and understanding- in this sense ‘queer’ is used as a verb rather than a noun.
the *It Gets Better Project*. The *It Gets Better Project* showcases Dan Savage and his partner, both white, gay, male subjects who associate with the homonormative discourse, reaching out to queer youth in order to explain that their lives could get better, if only they chose to live them.

Dan Savage and his partner exemplify the existence of homonormativity, defined as the heteronormative lifestyle lived out by subjects who identify as homosexual. This lifestyle includes marriage, proper work, consumption, adopting children, becoming an upstanding citizen that can uphold the standards set upon heteronormative subjects. The allowance of gay subjects into this heteronormative discourse of life implies that the current climate in which we live is a climate of supposed sexual acceptance, of sexual exceptionalism. In the *It Gets Better* campaign, Dan Savage and his partner create propaganda for a homonationalist way of life, a homosexual way of life that follows the heteronormative discourse, which benefits the nation state. This is a time and space of queer temporality, as "homonationalism is [...] a temporal and spatial illusion, a facile construction that is easily revoked, dooming the exceptional queers." This is to say that the temporal existence of a queer nationalism, of a homonormative and homonationalist discourse, is always on the brink of its own demise. Within its own existence, sexual exceptionalism, which allows propaganda like that of *It Gets Better* to exist, is always a moment away from its own death. Queerness is always in tandem with death, whether through the queer body, the queer youth of the nation or the ideology of queerness itself.

Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* focuses the first two chapters of the book on the death of Brandon Teena, a white female to male transgender subject living in small-town Nebraska in the United States who was brutally murdered once being ‘discovered’ to be living as a transgendered man. Halberstam argues that Teena was living “literally and figuratively out of time and place”, and argument through which Halberstam is claiming that there exists a time and place that is not ‘out’ but rather ‘in’ for queer subjects. The notion of US sexual exceptionalism paints the Western World, specifically the United States, as a place that welcomes queer subjects and queer bodies.

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3 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 78.


5 A concept borrowed from Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, which can be described as the notion of the States being a place that accepts all different types of people (including homosexuals) and the idea that because of this ‘acceptance’ the United States is on the forefront of modernity, progress and sexual liberation.
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‘in’. Contradictorily, the story of Teena is not of his life, but rather his death in the face of homophobia and transphobia. The boys who live in the small-town who beat Teena, his girlfriend and his differently-abled friend of colour to death, represent the normative attitude that is concurrent with the ideology of perpetuation of life, murdering the subjects who are associated with death, only furthering the identification of queerness with death. Since Teena was, as Halberstam claims, out of a time that allowed for the freedom of his ‘queering’ the way in which he lived his life, subjects who represent the perpetuation of life (heterosexuals) and the association with normative life narratives, took it upon themselves to kill Teena and thus render his life incapable of situating itself in a narrative that can associate with life; through death, the queer subject and queer life has been diminished in the face of the normative life, the heterosexual life.

Halberstam offers the reasoning that Teena operated outside of normative time because he opted “to live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labour and production. By doing so, they [he] also often live[d] outside the logic of capital accumulation: here we could consider [...] HIV-positive barebackers, rents boys, sex workers”. Outside of the normative construction of time are subjects associated with death; from the diseased subject (HIV-positive barebackers) to the subject who will soon be ridden with disease (sex workers). In the *It Gets Better Project*, Dan Savage and his partner are two homonationalist subjects that clearly do not live in queer time. In fact, there is not much about their lifestyles that is queer, aside from the fact that they happen to be in a same-sex relationship. Due to the fact that the lives of Dan Savage, his partner, and their adopted son do not cross the homonationalist/heteronormative boundaries of time and space, they are subjects who are temporally accepted into the normative discourse. Their association with death is in line with the heteronormative association with death: which is an association that occurs only after a long life of happiness and normativity, as “we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life, and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity”.

Because the subject of Brandon Teena did not align himself with normative modes of living, he became automatically associated with death. The subjects that the *It Gets Better Project* was created for were also not in line with normative discourses of life: they were homosexual subjects whose homosexuality did not contribute to the nation like Dan Savage’s homosexuality does. The queering of time and space of the victims of homophobic bullying, Tyler Clementi, for example, who did in fact take their lives in the face of an ever-changing climate of sexuality in the US were not homonationalist subjects, due to their age. Clementi himself was only eighteen years of age, an age at

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6 Halberstam, *Queer Time & Place*, 10.
7 Halberstam, *Queer Time & Place*, 4.
which one is not yet able to involve themselves thoroughly with the life of the nation through acts of marriage and reproduction. In this sense, Clementi and the other subjects of the *It Gets Better Project* queered time and space more so than Dan Savage and his partner currently do. The critical differences of these two lives is as follows: Dan Savage has aligned himself with the life of the nation through homonationalism and following the heteronormative discourse, perhaps in order to survive. Tyler Clementi aligned himself with death through his inability to follow a heteronormative discourse, not only by way of homonationalism but also by way of his queerness, which queered the space he was in to a point of uncomfortability, leading to his suicide. In short, Clementi is a queer subject, whereas Dan Savage is a homonationalist, albeit homonormative subject.

Halberstam introduces the idea of “geographies of resistance” in relation to the queer body. The queer body and the queer subject as a site of resistance becomes problematic for heteronormative discourses that homonormative subjects tend to follow in order to be associated with the life of the nation, rather than death. Queer bodies and queer subjects as tools for resistance become associated with “improper, nonnational queerness”8. Puar states, “we have a split between proper, national (white) homosexuality [...] and improper (colored) nonnational queerness [...] therefore proliferating the sexualities of which Foucault speaks (the good patriot, the bad terrorist, the suicide bomber, the married gay boy, the monster-terrorist-fag, the effeminate turbaned man…).” This split is reflected in the *It Gets Better Project*; Dan Savage and his partner are the proper, white, nationalist homosexual subjects, whereas Tyler Clementi and the other queer youth who committed suicide are representative of improper nonnational queerness. This is due to the fact that Dan Savage and his partner have chosen to associate themselves with life, through living, as well as through the *It Gets Better campaign*, while Tyler Clementi has become associated with death through his suicide and through the campaign's exploitation of his suicide. Dan Savage is representative of life, whereas Tyler Clementi is only representative of death because it is all he is known for.

Non-normativity is associated with people of colour; people of any race other than white. In this sense, the *It Gets Better* campaign is not only a straightening device for proper homosexuality, but also a *whitening* device, as queer youth of colour are completely absent from the campaign. Nor is the subject of race or class at all touched upon. Instead, what *It Gets Better* enlists is a reproduction of whiteness in life; to deviate from whiteness is to assume otherness, such as blackness, which is to associate with death; just as to deviate from heterosexuality is to assume homosexuality, which is to associate with

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8 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 78.
death. Dan Savage’s lifestyle itself reflects upon this ideology of improper nonnational queerness in terms of sexuality, race and class in the narrative of his life. Dan Savage discusses details about his white family taking a trip to Paris, France in which he spent time with his son “strolling the streets of Paris and chatting”. This specific part of Dan Savage’s narrative highlights the project’s inability to discuss the differences of queerness in relation to class and race. Dan Savage is a white, homonormative, middle to upper class subject who has access to the mainstream through his whiteness, maleness and class, all of which put Dan Savage in a position of privilege. The lifestyle that Dan Savage has that allows him to associate himself with life and the life of the nation, rather than death, are things that are not available to everybody. Homophobia and racism reflect one another in their consistent ability to continually be ‘othered’ subjects. Dan Savage and the other members of the project fail to discuss the possible acceptance into the association with life for queers of colour, differently-abled queers, and queers of lower and different class. The *It Gets Better Project* once again is a propaganda that pushes the white, normative discourse forward and therefore relates any improper, nonnational queernesses, that will by its own nature fail to become associated with life, with death.

In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar discusses the events of sexual torture that occur in Abu Ghraib, Iraq. In Abu Ghraib, Iraqi prisoners of war were tortured by means of homosexual actions by white, American officers. Images of these events circulated on the internet, upholding the ideology of deviance associated with homosexuality by paralleling homosexuality and torture. In these instances of sexual torture, heterosexuality dictates the tortured body by using homosexuality as a repressive, normalizing tool. Heterosexuality becomes a basis for the practice of necropolitics in warfare in Abu Ghraib, where the discursive power of heterosexuality standardizes the function of necropolitics through the anti-hegemonic position of homosexuality. This practice of necropolitics for regulation of sexuality parallels queerness with barbarism, animalistic characteristics and deviance. The use of S/M practices on Iraqi prisoners idealizes ‘regular’ sexuality by utilizing sexual practices seen as deviant and perverse by the American public on the racialized body of the prisoner. The notion of US sexual exceptionalism in light of the necropolitical practices of sexual torture of Iraqi prisoners creates a void between the two ends of the sexual spectrum, through the racial differences of the Iraqi prisoners' sexuality.

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9 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 79.
10 A concept taken from Achille Mbembe’s "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15,1 (2003):11-40. The concept is that there is a discursive power with the ability and the right to decide who gets to live and who gets to die. In relation to this essay, necropolitics is utilized in the life and death of queer subjects, wherein the discursive power, being a heterosexual and heteronormative power, has the power to dictate the death of a queer subject.
interplaying with S/M, versus the American, white heteronormative or homonormative subject’s sexuality. This creates the ideology that the racialized other must have a regularized and therefore acceptable sexual personality in order to escape death. Based on the regularization of sexuality in Dan Savage’s propaganda The It Gets Better Project, the prisoners of the Iraqi prison, as racialized subjects, deserved to be subjected to having the decision of the continuance of their lives or their eminent deaths rest in the hands of the white American soldiers, at whose hands they suffered. These prisoners were used as a tool of regulation of the othered body, outside and inside sexualities.

The torture at Abu Ghraib regulates the racial other and the queer subject simultaneously,ousting both as relative to the death of one nation (Iraq) to perpetuate the life of another nation (America). As this war has meant the death of many Iraqi civilians and Iraqi and American soldiers. The placement of not just a sexual torture, but rather a homosexual torture reinstates the interplay of shame of homosexuality and its dependence upon the presence of death in order to exist. Just as in the case of Tyler Clementi’s suicide, the homosexual tortures in Abu Ghraib only exist in a space that has a dependence on the death of something - if even just the death of the possibility of acceptance of queerness (not just a queerness that follows heteronormative scripts and becomes homonormative) as a societal norm. The fact that heterosexuality was not used as a torture device on the bodies of Abu Ghraib prisoners shows that there is nothing deviant or shame-worthy in heterosexual sex practices.

What the It Gets Better Project aims to do is justify and honour the deaths of a number of white, male, American homosexual subjects in order to produce a proper homosexuality that is in line with the aims of the nation state. This project fails to access an audience of any ‘true’ queerness, whose subjects deviate from the norm of homonormativity and whiteness. What Dan Savage’s campaign in fact does is highlight the existence of death within the life of the homosexual as well as the regulatory power of heteronormativity and its relationship with a ‘proper’ homosexuality. Through this process of ‘othering’, Dan Savage’s campaign does not only virtually murder the possibility of life for nonnormative sexual subjects, but also nonnormative subjects whose ‘queerness’ and ‘otherness’ rests in their race, class and/or ability- even the life of a heterosexual subject who queers societal norms, such as a queer subject or homosexual that does not fight for marriage rights or aim to mimic nuclear, heterosexual family ideals, is left out of the equation of this image of life, only to find themselves aligned with death. Through Dan Savage’s campaign there is a clear idolization of successful homosexuality as well as a red herring for failed homosexuality. Through this propaganda for the biopolitical functions of a ‘proper’ sexuality, there is an evident and oppressive presence of the death of the homosexual and queer subject, always present in a life that lives within a society that adheres to dominant heterosexual discursive power.
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Works Cited

