The Critical Interrogation of a Category: An Interview with Jack Halberstam

Author(s): Jeffrey A. Bennett

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Jeffrey A. Bennett

One of the perverse side effects of the anti-bullying discourses circulating through the American cultural imaginary has been the appropriation of bullying rhetorics by conservative pundits and politicians. As I completed work on this interview, a state senator from Tennessee argued that the "gay rights community are the biggest bullies in the world" because of their criticism of his legislation prohibiting any mention of LGBTQ people in public schools. A quick search on Google would suggest, ironically, that LGBTQ people are actively bullying Chick-fil-A, the Boy Scouts of America, Rick Santorum, and even the Roman Catholic Church. Accusations of bullying are not exclusive to proponents of gay rights, but extend to pro-gay liberals more generally. The rhetoric of bullying has become a staple of national politics, with conservatives such as Eric Cantor, Jim DeMint, Nikki Halley, Mitch McConnell, and Newt Gingrich all decrying President Obama as a "bully." Governor Scott Walker asserted that he would not be bullied by unions just before he attempted to dismantle collective bargaining rights. Conservatives rushed to the defense of Sarah Palin, who was supposedly being "bullied" by Tina Fey and Julianne Moore at the Golden Globes because they had won awards portraying her. A new book by conservative Ben Shapiro, *Bullies*, argues the Left is not against bullying at all, but seeks to divide Americans with cultural issues such as gay rights.

I raise these examples to highlight the need for an on-going interrogation of the category of "bullying" and its manifestations in public culture. The consis-

tent embrace of "bullying" by rabidly anti-gay politicians illustrates both the success of anti-bullying campaigns and the need to more carefully investigate the ease with which they are espoused. Even as this conservative appropriation oddly positions the GOP as queers themselves, projecting a defenselessness against a political juggernaut of people whose rights they consistently keep at bay, the repeated rhetorical attempts at situating themselves as victims raises questions about the ways bullying is constituted and occasionally contorted. Whereas conservative narratives are relatively transparent in their political opportunism, other bullying discourses run the risk of being naturalized without scrutiny, overlooking the nuances of bullying and the complicated variables that contribute to its various materializations. Of course, to argue that we should more forcefully analyze such narrations is not to say that bullying is not a problem that requires immediate attention. It most certainly is. Nonetheless, the apparatus of "bullying" has come to occupy a prominent place in our institutional and everyday discourses precisely because it is ubiquitous, effective, and frequently left without critical rumination. But, as the above instances highlight, bullying can take on a variety of meanings depending on the audiences, contexts, and acts defining its boundaries.

It is in this spirit of critique and evaluation that *QED* approached Jack Halberstam, a professor at the University of Southern California and author of numerous books about gender and queer theory to chat with us about the on-going problematic of bullying and its relation to LGBTQ lives. Halberstam has been critical of the "It Gets Better" campaign, for example, arguing that it produces a feel-good message that does not communicate adequately the harsh realities confronted by LGBTQ people. Halberstam is also skeptical of narratives that pose a causal relationship between bullying and suicide, suggesting that a deeper and more nuanced understanding of heterosexism and masculinity in context must be explored to fully process the phenomenon of bullying.

Halberstam is correct to suggest that scholars and activists must continue to scrutinize understandings of bullying and the ways they come into being. To be critical of these forms is assuredly not an easy task. When confronted with stories of young people who have taken their lives, it can be arduous to reassess explanatory narratives that are retorting violent forces that harm queer youth. While putting the finishing touches on this interview, the national news media again focused on the death of two young teens who committed suicide after reporting confrontations with bullies in the weeks prior to their deaths. The first was a 15-year-old Oregon teen named Jadin Bell, who hanged himself on an elementary school playground and was taken off life-support ten days later. The second boy was a 16-year-old student from the U.K. named Anthony Stubbs,

who also hanged himself to death. The news media frequently hinted at a causal argument, with headlines that read, "bullied gay teen commits suicide." To be sure, bullying may have acted as a catalyst that ultimately led these two kids to take their own lives. However, in order to understand the struggles these two students endured, we must offer greater context to the lives they lived and the many problems they may have confronted on their journeys. Bullying becomes intelligible through a multitude of discourses including, among others, heterosexism, homophobia, masculinity, and gender conformity. We do a greater service to these lost voices by attending to these complexities, not simplifying them. As Halberstam notes, few people blame heterosexuality for suicides. A broader examination of the cultural and social patterns that permit harassment and acts of violence against LGBTQ people is imperative across a range of institutional and vernacular contexts.

Even in popular films, such as the documentary *Bully*, audiences are left with a set of complex issues that are not always laid bare for judgment. The film opens with the suicide of Tyler Long, a high school student who hanged himself to death with a belt in a bedroom closet. Tyler's death is tragic and the suffering experienced by his family is unfathomable for those of us who have not suffered the horror of such loss. However, according to numerous reports, the director purposefully left out a number of issues about Tyler's mental health and past hints of suicidal thoughts. Again, it is impossible to know fully how to account for the life of another person, a person whose life was undoubtedly filled with happiness as well as sadness and whose story can never be fully encapsulated by narrative forms. Yet, as Ann Haas, an official at the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention told *Salon*, "To leave Tyler's mental health problems out of the film is an egregious omission. . . . The filmmakers had the opportunity to present bullying as a trigger, as one factor that played a role in a young person's suicide. But to draw a direct line without referencing anything else—I'm appalled, honestly. That is hugely, hugely unfortunate." Of course, in this instance, the classification of "mental health" must also be critically interrogated to avoid equally problematic assumptions concerning causality. The ambiguous parameters of what constitutes "mental health," as well as the varying conditions and effects experienced by individual people, illustrates the necessity of investigating loss rigorously in order to avoid suspect conclusions. Whether it is bullying, mental health, sexual orientation, or some combination thereof, few easy answers await us when approaching the topic of suicide.

In addition to scrutinizing overly deterministic narratives, we must continue to move past discourses that situate these suicides as "caused" by one's identification as LGBTQ. Larger cultural problems steeped in heterosexism continue to

motivate subtle and overt forms of discrimination and violence against people who occupy the terrain of sexual and gender difference. One of my academic mentors once wrote of the "pornography of grief" that is imparted by American news outlets. These words still ring true for those of us who witness discourses of bullying and the tragedies confronted by queer teens in public outlets, but often with little reflection about the forces that allow bullying to come into being in the first place. Judith Butler has argued that grief should change us, that it "exposes the constitutive sociality of the self, a basis for thinking a political community of a complex order." In reflecting on the lives of these young people, we should continue to view heterosexism and heteronormativity as discourses that demand the erasure of queer lives. Although LGBTQ youth continue to battle alcoholism, drug abuse, and homelessness in numbers disproportionate to their heterosexual peers, these problems are caused in part by a disciplinary culture of conformity that refuses to recognize queer teens as truly human.

Finally, it is imperative that we stop pathologizing LGBTQ kids and foster more celebratory atmospheres for nonnormativities across gender and sexual spectrums. Although it is important to eradicate forms of bullying and continue to making life more livable for LGBTQ people, we must also promote discourses about how fabulous it can be to be young and queer (and, for that matter, being queer across the lifespan). Even some queer organizations—such as those that offer important scholarships to LGBTQ kids—have been accused of encouraging application narratives that stress hardship and oppression. Although struggle and domination are certainly parts of many of our everyday lives, enabling more liveliness and celebratory discourse can generate ways of being not yet imagined. Despite some attempts in popular culture to galvanize the amazement of being young and queer, we don't often revel in such rhetorics to the extent we should. LGBTQ lives deserve celebration. Despite our fetishizing of Foucault, perhaps the most unrealized of his propositions is that discourses come together in ways that are frequently unimagined by those crafting them.[12] How, then, might we fabricate rhetorics that promote pleasure, happiness, and nonnormative ways of being that enable, in whatever yet to be imagined capacity, young people to embrace and delight in their queerness?

As we inaugurate *QED*, I hope we proceed in a fashion that celebrates and reimagines scholarship and activism to more fully embrace the diverse nonnormativities of our global and local polities. Halberstam offers us some starting points for addressing these complicated problems without foreclosing debates, discussions, and yet-to-be rendered possibilities. These conversations are assuredly necessary, but they also require a shared commitment to spirits that make them engaging, complex, and above all, queer.

NOTES

1. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 19.

2. See especially, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. One* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 (1978)); Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," in *Michel Foucault, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 321–28; Michel Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," in G. Burchell, *The Foucault Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 53–72.

))) Interview

JEFFREY BENNETT [JB]: One of the projects you work on is titled "Bully Bloggers" and I'm wondering if you could tell me a bit more about what the Bully Bloggers are? Is "bully" a reference to the bully pulpit or is there some kind of play happening with the name?

JACK HALBERSTAM [JH]: As academics we found it attractive because academic publishing is so slow. By the time whatever you've written comes out, whatever issue you were writing about is well, gone, long gone. None of us had any sense that we could write a blog every week, but together maybe we could keep a blog alive. So, the idea was just to share the blog in order to not have that pressure to post every day—in order to have a conversation sometimes with each other. But the name itself—"Bully Blog"—was sort of a joking reference that Lisa Duggan and I had to our sense that when we have put on events together that we have bullied people into being organized basically.

We always said we should do something called "Bully Productions" because we were both pretty good at organizing and making things happen, but in a way that sometimes required a strong hand, shall we say. So it was a joke. But, at the same time, in the course of time that the blog has been up and running, bullying has become a completely different kind of issue. And it's just a general term for somebody who is aggressively asking people to do things.

JB: Okay, I was wondering if you were making a move to productively reclaim the label of "bully" for other uses?

JH: I don't believe any word is fixed. I mean, I think that you can use the term "bully" for your own purposes. Prior to this era, bullying has had a very

negative connotation, but it's also had a dynamic connotation where there's a sort of step up from cajoling. It's a crude way of trying to get people to do what you want to do and sometimes that can tip into something nasty and sometimes it can be charming. And I think that we are losing the nuance in the term precisely because it has become one of these key words on the school ground.

JB: That's interesting. I was reading an editorial that danah boyd published in the *New York Times* saying that she didn't think that the language of bullying was effective because teens don't identify with it. She said that when you use the word "bully" it takes away agency from those people who are being bullied, and the people who are doing the bullying, who are younger, don't often understand themselves as bullies. So they use words like "drama" instead.

JH: I think that's right. The terminology of the word has a life of its own, absolutely separate from words or phrases or articulations that teens might use themselves. That's how you know that this is almost a social service type of term that's being imposed from the outside to try to explain teen behavior— not to each other, but to adults. Also, the way in which the term "bully" is being deployed is very instrumentalist. It's just like "oh, we have a problem with bullying. Find the bullies, disarm them, shame them, and that will be the end of it." That's not the end of it.

Bullying is a problem because of very toxic constructions of masculinity, for example, as we saw in the [Sandy Hook elementary school] shootings. The real conversation that needs to go on in this country is around guns, manhood, and masculinity. And we have extracted this term "bully" out of that matrix of social phenomenon and then tried to resolve it separately from resolving all these other things. It's just not going to work. So that's why I had the negative reaction to the "It Gets Better" campaign that went from being not a very smart idea to being a national band-aid. I find it's such a simplistic and lazy way of thinking about social violence.

JB: There are a couple of things that you just said that I want to touch on. Maybe I can ask you about the problem of masculinity first and come back to "It Gets Better?" I've read other interviews where you've said that bullying should be treated as a masculine problem. Could you expand on that just a little? Especially considering how much research suggests that girls of all types, for example, also bully and experience bullying.

JH: I do think that bullying is gendered. I think that the classic way in which we think about bullying is a masculinist mode of physical aggression that is exerted by bigger kids on smaller kids, things like that. In its classic definition we're talking about something masculine, but there are all kinds of ways in which girls bully. They just tend to be different from the ways boys bully. Sometimes it's physical confrontation or bashing, that does happen, but we also see that girls bully often by getting into groups and then excluding other girls.

It can be more of the "mean girl syndrome." It's not the "let's jump this kid on the way home from school and beat her to a pulp." It's more, "let's subtly let this girl know that she's not one of us, that she's not wanted, that she's not considered as good as we are." It's a bullying by exclusion. I'm saying the terminology is very crude, that we are using the same language and the same words for all kinds of behaviors that kids and adults participate in, but it's ratified by gender, by social situations, and by institutional settings. Maybe the most obvious way to make the first distinction would be to say there are masculine forms of bullying and feminine forms and let's actually try to take those apart before we come up with some blanket strategy that's going to save the little sissy boy from harassment.

JB: Right, for sure. So, I'm wondering, within what you're thinking about, with the various types of masculinities and femininities that we know emerge in particular moments, can you think of how we offer strategies for combating bullying, especially for younger people who don't have the language of masculinity and femininity that we as academics who study gender do?

JH: Let me get to that in a minute. One thing that might be helpful in this discussion that we're having about masculinity is that "bully" is a masculine term. It comes from a Dutch or Germanic word for "brother." It is usually used to describe a masculine subject who is a ruffian or, in some instances, was the word for "pimp." So, I think that that origin is important in thinking of bullying as masculine. I'm not just pulling that out of the air and that's important, but you are absolutely right that girls bully.

But again, there's a different kind of language that we might want to use. So in relationship to helping young people without condescending to them, which I think the "It Gets Better" campaign does, I think that one wants to have complex conversations with young people about the kinds of dynamics that go on, particularly in high school, that begins to build from their own discourse rather than impose a discourse upon them.

So, it's very important that people are finally talking about bullying given that the schoolyard has been a kind of Lord of the Flies arena where the strong rule the weak and vicious forms of homophobia and sexism and racism basically circulate unchecked. That's an important reality about the schoolyard. It's also important to remember that kids at younger ages do not participate in this kind of baiting and, in fact, tend to be, when they are between the ages of 4 and 11, way more flexible than adults are about gender variance, sexual variance, and different ways of being in the world because they haven't been socialized to have those judgments. So the question really should be what happens between the ages of 4 to 11 to the teenage years where kids go from total acceptance to total rejection and begin to inhabit really toxic modes of normativity. That's what we should be studying; that transition from openness to prejudice. I don't really see people making distinctions between these different age groups.

JB: What would you like to see done? Because I agree 100 percent and I think a lot of people who read the journal would also agree that there's clearly this emergence into adolescence and plenty of problematic norms that come with adulthood.

JH: I think that there are a couple of things. What goes by the name of education in this country is increasingly impoverished and pitiful. We really need to think about education in a much broader way that includes things like sex education, that includes a critique of religion. It seems to me that religion in this country is out of control and I truly believe that there are connections between certain hyped-up forms of Christianity in particular and certain forms of prejudice.

There's a lot of intolerance in Christianity, a lot of intolerance. And so kids are able then, because of a religious structure, to understand what is actually very toxic violent behavior, as being something righteous because they have a religious frame. When you're given a religious frame that says homosexuality is wrong, then it becomes righteous to go out and bully homosexuals, bully fags on the playground, and so on.

JB: When the states are enacting bullying laws, they often have exceptions for religious speech that excludes those organizations. This happened in Michigan not long ago actually.

JH: Well, there you have it. The assumption is that anything that goes on under the heading of religion is somehow protected and is not to be messed

with. I don't think Americans are really ready to have this conversation, but it may be that a lot of the violence in this country is being snuck in the back door of religion. So, instead of it just coming up front as a form of, say, racial prejudice or homophobic hate speech, it's coming in this more subtle supposedly benevolent form of religious doctrine and religious speech. I think that if we really divorced the church and state, education from religion, and had a much broader sense of what kids should be exposed to, I think that kids themselves would do some of the adjusting that we're trying to impose upon them in relationship to bullying behavior.

JB: I know many queers express a lot of frustration because bullying is suddenly all the rage and we know that bullying and suicide have been with us for a long time. Eve Sedgwick wrote about it in *Tendencies* 20 years ago. I'm just curious, why do you think this discourse has emerged right now in such full force?

JH: Well, I would want to separate the bullying from the suicide, first of all. One of the frustrating things about the discourse and the conversations on suicide is that suicide is a poorly understood act in the sense that when somebody commits suicide, the people who are left in the wake of that suicide want a reason for it. And that might be the most futile way to respond to a suicide: by looking for the reason. There are many people who would be in dire circumstances, could experience bullying every day, and never get to the place where they would consider killing themselves. On the other hand, there are a minority of people for whom suicidal thoughts are a part of their reality. I think that suicide is being approached in this very instrumentalist way. What happened to make this person kill her/himself? How can we remove that element from the environment so that more people don't kill themselves? I just don't think it works that way and I've said this in other venues, but—

JB: So you think that sexuality is too deterministic as the reason for suicide?

JH: It's too deterministic because if a young woman kills herself and she's not anorexic and she's not being bullied and the home life is okay, we would never say she killed herself because heterosexuality was putting pressure upon her. But heterosexuality is as likely a cause as anything for a young woman to kill herself. Heterosexuality is as likely a cause as any and it would be very interesting to do studies that looked at the suicide rates for, let's say, girls who come out as lesbians in high school versus heterosexual girls. My guess is you would find much higher numbers

among heterosexual girls. Heterosexuality will never be given as a cause because heterosexuality isn't seen as a problem.

JB: It will always retain its privileged position.

JH: Yeah, and so the discourse of the problem reproduces the terms of the problem in its attempt to resolve it. That's a really complicated cycle. So that's why I would want to separate out suicide from bullying.

JB: How about the bullying? Can I ask why you think it's common to give it so much attention now, with the film *Bully* and the "It Gets Better" project?

JH: Well, I think it's because of social networking and the Internet and because people are able to come out at a younger age. And partly because of progress. Because there are gay-straight alliances in high schools; because bisexuality is considered a reasonable term for yourself, and now questioning your sexuality in your teen years is almost considered okay. That means there are many more gender and sexual variant kids visible in the schools than there were even five years ago.

And because those kids are out and about and they are identifying themselves to each other and to their peers, and because they have a sense of their own rights, I think the bullying that was going on surreptitiously and was being attributed to different kinds of causes is just now out in the open. It's out in the open; we actually have to deal with it. I don't think anything has changed. I think bullying has been way worse in the past potentially than it is now. But I think that our tolerance for bullying is at an end.

But now the fact that we're just basically administering to potential victims of bullies and telling them that things get better and presuming they are gay from a very young age and telling them that once they come out, the world is their oyster—that's just a pathetic lie. For very few people can you guarantee that life will get better. For very few people can you say life is going to be something that just gets better. And the minute you come out you're going to be invited to all the fabulous parties. I mean, no! We're living on the downside of a terrible economic crisis. We are living with very high levels of violence against poor people and racism. It's obscene to tell people that life gets better given the conditions under which we are living. Given the ecological crisis we live in to tell young people that things get better is in fact unethical.

JB: You've brought up the "It Gets Better" project a couple times. Is your frustration more with the impulse that Dan Savage has in the initial video or is

it with the project overall? Thousands of videos have been uploaded and they say different things and are interpreted in different ways. Is there a way to disarticulate some of the videos that weren't made by Dan Savage? Perhaps those made by people of color or people living in rural areas?

JH: Sure, it's a multivalent archive at this point. You can search through it and find things that are genuinely heartfelt and are really reaching out and speaking to young people in ways that are probably very comforting. I don't doubt that. I'm mistrusting of the vehicle, the sentiment that brings all of this outreach. If the sentiment was not "It Gets Better," but was something like "Violence Begins at Home," do you think people would say, "oh yeah that's so true, violence begins at home. That's right, these kids weren't born homophobic. They were made homophobic. Oh right, violence begins at home." People who have guns in their home are more likely to be involved in a violent crime. It is true that violence begins at home, but that doesn't have the appeal, the clichéd appeal, of the feel-good message that Dan Savage wrung out of a very charged situation.

That's the problem with living in this very massive country made up of many different kinds of people who for the most part have very few ways of getting information that are not FOX News. It means that clichés do a massive amount of discursive work in this country. A cliché like "It Gets Better" in the end has more traction than a hard truth like "violence begins at home." That's our misfortune. That's a misfortune that we live with. We see it in the movies every day that a positive upbeat sentiment is preferred over the hard truth, which is we're in dire circumstances. They probably will get worse before they get better and people really need to think about how to transform the societies they live in. That's not a feel-good message and it will never garner millions of video responses. So I'm mistrusting the cliché and I'm mistrusting the positivity of this spin on a situation that doesn't have a lot of positive in it.

JB: I definitely think the initial video is problematic. But a colleague was showing me some of the other videos and I was amazed by the number that say things like "I'm not saying it gets easier, but life continues," or something like that. It's interesting to me how many videos don't necessarily have the cliché in them even as the national media has definitely picked up on the cliché. I sometimes fear that's what people pay more attention to than the actual content of what people might be saying if you're lucky enough to come across those videos.

JH: Yeah, fair enough. I never doubt the ability of people to transcend a cliché anymore than I doubt the ability of the cliché to take hold in the first place. The original video is truly offensive—to have two guys who are upper-middle class, have adopted a son, have gotten married, sitting there reminiscing about their days spent in Paris. How lucky they are. The taste of a croissant next to the Seine. It's obscene really.

For me, what I'm trying to understand, even as I listen to you and understand that there are videos in the archive that are very moving and transcend the genre, I'm trying to understand how that could take hold in a country where we're talking about 99 percent of the people not benefitting from the economic system, 1 percent getting all of the gain, and everyone else basically consenting to that. That's a situation where, gosh, why didn't [Dan Savage's] video inspire more class hostility. Why didn't that video in fact inspire certain forms of classed homophobia? It's a cliché on one hand and, on the other hand, it's a complete and utter stereotype about gay life: being moneyed White men who travel a lot, are married, and the only tiny thing keeping them out of their proper place in the U.S. public sphere is their gayness, which is about to be resolved anyway by a gay marriage discourse. So, the obscenity of it is galling. That doesn't mean that it couldn't easily be transformed into something that really does speak to people.

JB: You mentioned capitalism in particular—do you think that these discourses of bullying serve a capitalist interest? Are certain class interests served by these reports of bullying?

JH: Oh, yes. I think that there are and I think that if we had a more nuanced language around bullying we could talk about economic forms of bullying. Honestly, credit cards, mortgages, sales pitches, and certain forms of consumerism are all forms of bullying in a certain way. We have been bullied into forms of consumption that are bad for us. So what does it mean that mortgage brokers ten years ago came to people and said, "oh yeah, on your $50,000 a year salary, you can afford a $750,000 home."

Everyone knew that was not true, but there is a sort of bullying quality to the sales pitch from the broker who says: "no, no, you can afford it and I'm going to get it for you. You're going to borrow it and we're going to get this." People are bullied into terrible situations but, had they had more information at their disposal, had they had more education at their disposal, had they had better financial training, they would never have found themselves five years later in foreclosure.

So, you're right, that there are styles of aggressive salesmanship that we could call bullying and are part and parcel of the economic sphere. The other piece of that is also this kind of entrepreneurial sentiment or the business ethos that was so clearly a part of Mitt Romney's campaign. It's along the lines of, "Look, I made my money. If you can't make your money, you're an idiot." I mean, how did we get to that? How did we get from pretty careful critiques of how exactly it is that economies work, that wealth is distributed and redistributed, from having a clear Left wing that was able to articulate the processes of exploitation, to this free market discourse of, "if you're aggressive enough, if you step on enough people, if you bully your way in, you can make your money too. Go get 'em tiger."

JB: On that note, because you're making these wonderful connections, I think you have this great knack for counterintuitive insights. I was reading something the other day where you said that divorce can be wonderful because it creates more parents for children. I love that. I'm just wondering, are there productive moments like this that we can find within these bullying discourses that perhaps we're overlooking because we're focusing on something like sentimentality too much?

JH: Yeah. Though, the thing is it's not just sentimentality. It's also these investments in what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism," where we want to believe in something even though our belief in that thing is, in the end, going to be bad for us. We persist in it. I think that we lack the ability to think in counterintuitive ways at the moment.

So, the example that I do like to give is that of the nuclear home where two parents are always in the driver's seat all the time and it's only those two parents. There's only the relationship between the parents and the children and that can get lousy and claustrophobic quickly. And instead of seeing divorce as a kind of safety bar that lets the kids out of one nuclear environment and gives them relief in the form of another, we just keep hammering on this insane idea that a broken family is bad for the child—that every child needs one mother and one father. We just repeat these sentiments often without any social science research to back it up. I heard Stephanie Coontz, the woman who wrote *The Way We Never Were*, who has become the go-to person for the media on the changing nature of the family and marriage. I heard a lecture by her where she, despite of all of her research clearly giving her data to the contrary, she kept insisting upon this idea that no matter how the world changes around us, long-term relationships are better for personal

happiness and comfort and that the best environment for a child is a mother and father under one roof in a nondivorce situation. My guess is that if people really do the research on this, they will find that this is absolutely untrue. Kids who grow up in two households where divorced parents actually get along and where there are good relationships with the stepparents: that gets closer to an ideal of child-raising where more adults are involved rather than less in parenting. Kids have many more outlets for intimacies with adults. That just makes sense at this point in time. The idea that long-term relationships are always going to be better than short-term ones, I doubt has any basis in reality. Long-term relationships where people don't speak to each other anymore cannot be better than a short-term relationship where everybody gets what they want out of it and moves on.

Even in the realm of common sense what these folks are saying cannot be true. But, without any evidence to back it up because it sounds right, people accept it. So, we still have this ridiculous discourse of the broken home. There's no such thing as a home that isn't broken, no such thing.

JB: Thinking about these ideas related to what is positive and what is negative, do you think that we as a culture focus on the negative aspects of being young and LGBT too much? Do we not focus on the joys of being young and queer enough?

JH: Yes, I really couldn't put it any better. We are obsessed with teaching this idea that the early experience of gayness is dreadful and then we use it to justify protecting gay youth. Just as the word bullying has become a key word in contemporary society, so has youth. The teenager, of course, was invented only in the 1950s as a category—it's a relatively new concept; but we have now naturalized the divide between adults and youth and now in queer communities, we suddenly are thinking in these very heteronormative ways about the relationship between older people and younger people.

We imagine youth for young queer people as being an obstacle course and a marathon that they have to get through in order to arrive through the aegis of "It Gets Better" into the glory of adulthood. Honestly, that's just bullshit. It's bullshit because youth like any other period of your life will be full of ups and full of downs. It will be better. It will be worse. It will be full of joy, excitement, and possibility, and it will be full of misery, violence, and pessimism. To render it in this static way doesn't do anyone any favors. It definitely doesn't do young people any favors. We've all been through youth, so we know that youth is not one thing. You know, if we are talking specifically about girls, we find that lesbians in adolescence are in many ways

protected or sheltered a little bit from the really dire dangers of heterosexuality. They're less at risk for pregnancy. They're less at risk for sexual abuse. They're less likely to do poorly in school when they start dating. Yes, they're subject to homophobia, but homophobia is only one thing that besets you at that moment of your life. For us to focus on homophobia as if that is the be all and end all of your gay experience in adolescence is short sighted and unimaginative. So, I think that's an important point that you're making.

JB: I think that can apply to so many different contexts. I was reading about a week ago that the GLSEN survey came out about rural communities and resources for queer teens. They found that queer teens in rural areas are harassed more and have fewer resources than their urban peers. I'm always torn because, on the one hand, I want everybody to be protected, but I also worry about how both rural areas and rural teens are being portrayed. Research shows that, for example, if these kids have GSAs, they are much more likely to attend. Why that's not given more prominence than some other elements of the discourse is always troubling.

JH: Yes, I absolutely agree. I think the best way to create a good environment for people to be queer in is to first try to drop some of the identity politics and recognize that adolescents as a group share all kinds of uncertain relationships to sexuality, to desire a relationship, intimacy, and so on. We don't need to single out gays and lesbians, on the one hand. And then, on the other hand, like you're saying, we also should be thinking much more about how to enhance the experience of being young for young people rather than always trying to come up with new forms of protection for them.

The best protection really is a) get rid of guns in this country, b) sideline religion, and c) have some of these hard conversations about how to create environments in which people really do have the best opportunity to make connections with others that are not suspicious, that are not limited by violence, that are not precarious. Because young people spend a lot of time with other young people. It's one of the periods of one's life where one is in relationship to a true collectivity. Instead of being so focused on the romance, instead of being so focused on the couple, we should be figuring out how to make the group experience of adolescence into something much better. That doesn't come from separating out gays and lesbians from everybody else.

JB: People like Kerry Kennedy have said that bullying should be treated more as an "a human rights issue." Does that move closer to what you want or does that completely reinvent the wheel for you?

JH: That just reinvents the wheel.

JB: I knew the answer before I asked the question. Sorry.

JH: I trust you to come up with the full-fledged critique of this so I will only repeat that the answer is not more protection. It's not about rights. It's about changing the way that people think of the Other. This is hopefully the best part of what people potentially can access in a college education in the humanities—that is, different ways of scripting human interaction, different ways of understanding relationships to people who are different, and different ways of being in the world. Period. Different ways of thinking about being in the world and being in relation don't come to us through legal protection. They don't come to us through better social science research. They come to us through the imagination and through certain forms of social aspiration that we're losing touch with. So I trust that people who are reading your journal are some of the people who are going to be engaged in doing the hard but pleasurable intellectual labor in the future that seeks to find new ways of organizing and enjoying the company of others.

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Jack Halberstam is Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity, Gender Studies, and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California. Halberstam has published numerous books, including *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Duke University Press, 1995), *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998), *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005), *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), and, most recently, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* (Beacon Press, 2012).

Jeffrey A. Bennett is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. He is the author of *Banning Queer Blood: Rhetorics of Citizenship, Contagion, and Resistance* (University of Alabama Press, 2010). His articles have also appeared in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, Critical Studies in Media Communication,* the *Quarterly Journal of Speech, Text and Performance Quarterly,* and the *Journal of Medical Humanities.*