

**“It Gets Better”:  
Towards a Deeper Analysis of Pan-Queer Identity**

by  
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## Abstract

In this thesis I interrogate the “It Gets Better”(IGB) video project by Dan Savage, using an intersectional analysis to reveal the ways in which it reinforces politics of respectability<sup>i</sup>, neoliberalism, and lacks an intersectional approach to the process of coming out across lines of gender identity, race/ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, and ability. To help frame the research of this paper, I will address the following questions: 1) Who are the intended audiences of “It Gets Better”? 2) How and in what ways do hierarchies get created within a single group, rather than between two groups? 3) What are the consequences of delivering a message that it will "get better"? 4) How does “It Gets Better” apply to individuals living with multiple, marginalized identities? 5) In what ways do racialized LGBTQ bodies feel torn between their racial/ethnic community and the LGBTQ community?

I chose to research this topic because as a genderqueer and queer person there have been instances that my life has not gotten better since coming out. By the same token, I have several friends who have had particularly difficult experiences with coming out due to their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), contending with gender dysphoria<sup>ii</sup>, nationality, religion, and inaccessibility to resources (e.g.- healthcare, education, housing) within the capitalist structures of the United States (U.S.). My goal in this thesis is to interrupt neoliberal notions of “getting better” and instead turn our attention to the structures in society that do not always allow life to get better for all LGBTQ people after coming out. Secondly, I want to suggest a restructuring of the framework of “It Gets Better” to be more inclusive for individuals whose lives did not become better after coming out.

## **Section 1: Background & Previous Studies**

### **Introduction**

In September 2010, LGBTQ activist and columnist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller launched the YouTube project IGB, a series of videos with multiple people interviewed, sending messages to LGBTQ youth viewers that life will get better in the future. They developed the project to inspire hope for LGBTQ youth and in response to the increase of LGBTQ youth suicide rates and harassment they face in school<sup>iii</sup>. The introductory video of the project begins with Dan Savage and Terry Miller talking about their childhood experiences, family, and the difficulties they experienced with coming out. Savage describes the difficulties of his childhood by stating: “High school was bad. I was catholic, went to catholic high schools, a catholic boys school. My dad was a catholic dean, my mom was catholic lay minister and my family was very...catholic [laughs]. And there were no gay people in my family. And no openly gay people at my school and I was picked on ‘cause I liked musicals and I was obviously gay.” In the next scene, his partner Terry describes his childhood and school experiences as being violent and isolating, specifically explaining: “My school was pretty miserable. I lived in Spokane, Washington, which is a mid-size town with a small town mentality. And I was picked on mercilessly in school, people were really cruel to me, I was bullied a lot, beat up, thrown up against walls and lockers and windows. You know...stuffed into bathroom stalls, people shit on my car.”

What I found the most striking between these two stories were the contrast of childhood experiences between Savage and Miller. While Savage described the religious elements that made his childhood experiences difficult, Miller went into more explicit details about the physical violence that was inflicted upon his body because of his gay identity. However, they

later describe how life became better after high school and moving to the city where they met other gay people, and becoming more comfortable with their gay identities. Terry explicitly states: “Honestly things got better the day I left high school. I didn’t see the people who bullied me everyday, I didn’t see the people who harassed me everyday, I didn’t have to see the school administrators who would do nothing about it everyday.” In later parts of the video Savage and his partner are shown with their child vacationing in Paris, skiing in the mountains, and posing in pictures with their families while Savage explains that his parents have accepted his partner as “their daughter”.

In many ways, the framing of Savage and Miller’s experiences illustrate upward class mobility, respectability politics, and whiteness as being centered in the narrative of coming out. They do not address their positions as white, cis-gender, upper-middle class, and able-bodied men. Furthermore, Miller being referred to as “the daughter” of Savage’s family arouses questions of how roles of gender in a same-sex relationships manifest. What does Savage referring to his partner as a “daughter” for his parents reveal about internalized notions of gender binaries? Or gender presentations of masculine or feminine? And how would this framework apply to transgender, genderqueer, two-spirit, and polyamorous relationships?

### **Counter Narratives**

Counter narratives to the IGB project are prevalent for the lives of LGBTQ individuals existing with multiple identities that push them further to the margins of society. While Dan Savage and Terry Miller certainly have faced marginalization because of their gay identities, they are white, cis-gender, able-bodied men and have better access to class mobility due to white and male privilege built into the fabric of our society. Indeed, scholar and trans activist Dean Spade in his book *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, & The Limits of*

*Law*, reveals the ways in which life has become increasingly difficult for the most marginalized in the United States (U.S.) (Spade, 2015). Spade reveals throughout his book that for transgender, low-income, people of color, and undocumented individuals, life has become increasingly difficult due to neoliberalism, police brutality, and the expansion of the prison industrial complex<sup>iv</sup>. While working as a lawyer in New York City, he had a client named Bianca, a transgender woman who was not allowed to enter her high school when she dressed in clothing reflecting her gender identity. The school offered no referrals to other schools, no documentation of official suspension or expulsion, and did not return calls to Bianca's parents. When Spade attempted to pick up the case three years after Bianca's incident with her school, he was unable to pursue a lawsuit against the school due to the statute of limitations expiring. Bianca was homeless, unemployed, and attempting to escape an abusive relationship. Additionally, she was afraid to seek refuge with the police out of fear of retaliation from her boyfriend and fearing that the police would harass and humiliate her because of her trans identity. Her identification (ID) documents disclosed a male name and gender, outing her as a transgender woman. Bianca also faced several issues of seeking access to homeless shelters that would misgender her and place her in an all male facility, making her vulnerable to trans-misogynistic<sup>v</sup> violence.

In the case of Bianca, it's apparent that life did not get better for her after high school. In fact, it got worse due to structural inequalities and institutionalized discrimination. Scholar Jasbir Puar touches upon the politics of IGB by unveiling that death and suicide are attached to certain bodies, while for other bodies it is unfathomable due to their positions of class and racial privilege (Puar, 2012). In her article, "CODA: The Cost of Getting Better. Suicide, Switchpoints", Puar uses the example of a white male student, Tyler Clementi, who committed

suicide after videos of him having sex with another were released by his roommate and another student. Puar exclaims: “The apparently sudden spate of queer suicides is also obviously at odds with the claims of purported progress by the gay and lesbian rights movement. As noted by Tavia Nyong’o, Dan Savage’s sanctimonious statement ‘it gets better’ is a mandate to fold oneself into urban, neoliberal gay enclaves: a call to upward mobility that discordantly echoes the now-discredited ‘pull yourself up by the bootstraps’ immigrant motto.” Similarly, Hiram Pérez uses the term “gay cosmopolitan” to describe the idealized subject of white, gay male, urban, middle to upper class and whose desire is “cast materially onto the globe at the close of the nineteenth century.” He further argues that tracing the origins of gay modernity and cosmopolitan goes beyond the link to sexology’s “invert” and homosexual”, and rather that it is an addition to colonial and neocolonial expansion (Pérez, 2015).

Put another way, certain bodies have been marked as livable, beneficial to the state, and having an imagined future. While other bodies are marked as expendable to the state, nonproductive, and without a future (Berlant, 2007). Michel Foucault classified this under the term of biopolitics, stating, “One had the right to kill those who represents a biological danger to others.” (Foucault, 1990). Through the Foucauldian lens, Bianca’s body is at the will of the state and she is not sovereign or self-autonomous of her body. Her body is positioned as a moral threat to the fabrics of a hetero-patriarchal and capitalist society because she will not be able to reproduce new bodies for the state, transgresses the gender binary, defies the nuclear family, and she is not employed. Bianca’s existence challenges the framework of IGB by demonstrating the pitfalls of neoliberalism and reification of individuals being responsible for their mobility. Tyler Clementi on the other hand, represents a body that has an imagined future mapped on it and isn’t a “biological danger to others.”

## **Dark Matter: “It Gets Bougie”**

There have been LGBTQ groups that have been critical of the mainstream LGBTQ movement assimilating into whiteness and capitalism. One group in recent years (2013-2016) has been Dark Matter, a duo composed of two South Asian, transgender non-binary artists Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian. In their performances they recite poems that reflect the systematic oppression they face as being persons of color and transgender non-binary in a society that is deeply in-grained with the binaries of race and gender. For example, Alok often talks about walking through the subways and streets of New York City and receiving glares from people as well as derogatory remarks about their appearance. Alok was assigned male at birth, is tall, has a hairy body, wears makeup, and dresses in a very feminine style (most often in dresses). The clash of U.S. societal standards of male/masculine appearance (hairy, tall, and deep voice) and feminine attire (dress, make-up, platform shoes) blurs the lines of gender and forces us to see a body that transcends the binary of male and female. Additionally, because Alok has brown skin and is South Asian, their body is already queer and marked as “other” outside the norms of whiteness (El-Tayeb, 2011).

Indeed Alok and Janani have made several bold statements through their poems about the problems they see arise in mainstream LGBTQ movements being centered in whiteness and capitalism. They had a performance in response to Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” campaign and titled theirs “It Gets Bougie”. In their performance “It Gets Bougie”, Alok and Janani confront many of the issues still facing queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) such as, racism, deportation of undocumented people, increased incarceration rates of QTPOC, police brutality against black and brown bodies, increased gentrification of former urban ghettos, and body

shaming/policing that QTPOC face both within and outside of the LGBTQ community. They also are critical of same-marriage being an issue that was the forefront of the mainstream LGBTQ movement, while there are still large numbers of homeless LGBTQ youth due to being kicked out of their homes and communities (Reck, 2009).



Photo above of performance

artists Alok Vaid-Menon (left) and

Janani Balasubramanian (right) from their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/darkmatterpoetry/?fref=ts>

Another point of critique that is made in their “It Gets Bougie” performance was the focus and efforts put towards the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and inclusion of gays in the military industrial complex. Dark Matter and others, such as scholar Jasbir Puar, argue that inclusion of gays in the military has become part of a homonational agenda that seeks to expand imperial rule overseas. Jasbir Puar coined the term homonationalism defining it as, “the emergence of national homosexuality, what I term ‘homonationalism’—that corresponds with

the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire.” (Puar, 2). She also argues that LGBTQ populations have become acceptable to the nation-state through normative and restrictive boundaries of queerness, race, nationality, and sexuality. (Puar, 2007). In Puar’s critically acclaimed 2007 book, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, she reveals the ways in which the state has folded LGBTQ individuals into the nation-state to defend Western democracy and fight against the “backwards” and homophobic Middle East. Put another way, she argues that inclusions of gays in the military has been deployed to continue the expansion of U.S. imperial rule overseas and wars in the Middle East.

According to Puar, in the U.S. and globally since September 11, 2001, queerness has become acceptable when fighting the racialized and Islamic other for nationalist purposes. At the same time, emblemizing the queer, Muslim, and brown body as dangerous and a threat to Western democracy. There is a binary of either the good citizen queer fighting for the country or the Islamic enemy of the state, but never both. Moreover, Puar reveals that Muslim queer individuals are often targets of prejudice and simultaneously hated for being gay and Muslim.

*Sticks and Stones* by Alok Vaid-Menon

*“sticks & stones may break my bones*

*but words will never hurt me.”*

*to the man who stopped in his tracks,  
turned around and walked up to me said,  
“you are disgusting!”*

*i ran down the stairs to the train to get away from you but i met another man with a different  
word but the same stare so i kept on running back to my childhood  
where i learned that if you*

*repeat a lie over and over again  
at some point the familiarity  
makes you begin to think it's true*

*“sticks & stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.”*

*thank you, stranger on the street  
for teaching me the difference between familiar and true*

*how foolish i was to think it was true,*

*your word versus my body  
your world versus my [ ]  
who wins?*

*sticks & stones may break  
my bones but words will disappear them  
will make you believe it never happened  
will write a story about an incident on 14 street  
that everyone saw and no one saw at the same time*

*what happened to him/her/them/it?  
(too ambitious)*

*what was him/her/them/it?*

*why couldn't "he" have worn shorts instead?*

*why couldn't "he" have kept that at home?*

*why couldn't "he" have loved "himself" harder?*

*believed in "himself" more? held "his" head high?*

*envy the stick.  
envy the stone.  
envy the proof.*

*how can we win when they control the word?  
(too ambitious)*

*how can we live when they control the word?  
(too ambitious)*

*how can we exist when they control the word?*



Pictured above Alok Vaid-Menon in a coral colored dress obtained from:  
<https://www.alokvmenon.com/blog/2016/9/13/sticks-stones>

## **Section 2: Intersectionality**

November 2008 was a historical moment in U.S. history with Barack Obama being the first black president inaugurated into the White House. On the opposite side of the coin, Proposition 8 overturned the right for same-sex couples to legally marry in the state of California. In this historical moment, Dan Savage scapegoated the black community in local Seattle newspaper *The Stranger*, as being the cause of this setback, blaming their religious beliefs and reporting inaccurate statistics to media outlets that the majority of blacks voted in favor of Proposition 8 (Savage, 2008). On November 5, 2008 Savage wrote in his blog (*The Slog*) for *The Stranger*: “I do know this, though: I’m done pretending that the handful of racist

gay white men out there—and they’re out there, and I think they’re **scum**—are a bigger problem for African Americans, gay and straight, than the huge numbers of homophobic African Americans are for gay Americans, whatever their color.”

That same month LGBTQ magazine *The Advocate* published an article titled “Gay Is the New Black?” In the article, author Michael Joseph Gross unpacked rhetoric around comparisons of the Black Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the contemporary Gay Marriage Rights Movement (Gross, 2008). Gross conflates the black rights movements with contemporary gay rights movements and contentiously asserts how gay rights in 2008 were more vulnerable to hate crimes that were used against black groups in the past. In Gross’ words: “Gay is the new black in only one meaningful way. At present we are the most socially acceptable targets for the kind of casual hatred that American society once approved for habitual use against black people. Gay is the dark pit where our society lets people throw their fears about what’s wrong with the world.” He later does acknowledge that gay rights and the struggles of black people do not bear semblance to another because white supremacy is built into our society. However, what remains questionable about Gross’ article and Savage’s statements are what if a person is both black and gay? Throughout Goss’ entire article there is a race neutral tone around gay identity and assumed whiteness around LGBTQ identity. Meanwhile, Savage’s article is explicitly racist, yet still predicates whiteness as the norm of gayness. It also juxtaposes gayness with a threatening, homophobic, and racialized other. Binaries of gay or racial other are reified within the framework of both Savage’s and Goss’ articles on LGBTQ liberation movements, because there are no possibilities of space to be simultaneously racial other and gay.

Indeed LGBTQ individuals living with multiple, marginalized identities (especially for

non-white queer and transgender individuals) face unique experiences of stigmatization and oppression on multiple levels institutionally and societally (Ghabrial, 2016). LGBTQ people of color (POC) in particular experience mental distress and anxiety due to racial profiling and brutality from the police, unemployment, coming out, changing pronouns, and feeling erasure from their racial/ethnic community and the white LGBTQ community.

Another perspective to consider is the history of U.S. slave trade from Africa, the expansion of the prison industrial complex, imperialism of the U.S. Empire via military occupation, and settler colonialism<sup>vi</sup> of indigenous lands in North America. The impacts of colonialism have been detrimental to many LGBTQ (and non LGBTQ-identified) POC. In particular, colonialism has erased gender identity for individuals coming from cultures that recognize multiple genders. Many indigenous tribes historically have acknowledged two-spirit identities and treated them with great respect. However, colonialism and expansion of the U.S. Empire forced indigenous communities to assimilate to Eurocentric norms of gender (e.g.-binary of male or female), sexuality identity, and patriarchal family structures (Rifkin, 2011; Berkhofer, 1978). Enforcement of Eurocentric norms were further enforced through indigenous boarding schools set up across the U.S. and Canada, and were often the sites of abuse and sexual violence. One study conducted by Evans-Cambell et al. examined the effects of indigenous boarding schools on two-spirit Alaskan Natives. Their results indicated that indigenous people had higher incidences of depression (10%-30%) and posttraumatic stress disorder (20%) in comparison to the general population (8%). Furthermore, their results showed that of the 447 two-spirit participants, nearly a quarter had attended boarding schools with a high percentage indicating they had a negative experience. There was also high frequency of the two-spirit participants who were raised by someone who had attended a boarding school (Evans-Campbell et al., 2012).

Indeed the umbrella term of queer has not been inclusive for those at the margins of society at large and within the LGBTQ community due to histories of state-inflicted violence. For example, the “gay cosmopolitan”<sup>vii</sup> urban communities can be exclusionary, white-centered, classist, and focus on issues from a non-intersectional approach. Cathy Cohen unpacks the ways in which hierarchies form within the LGBTQ community in her compelling article, *Punks, Bull Daggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?* Cohen underscores that rights and legal based discourse in the LGBTQ community misses the mark, because they often gain advantages for individuals who have more privilege. She also addresses that there are heterosexuals who fall outside of heterosexuality because of their race, sexual practices (e.g. kinky sex, having multiple sex partners, BDSM), family arrangements (e.g. -polyamorous relationships, non-nuclear family structures), low socio-economic status, and individuals dependent on state welfare benefits. In particular, recipients of welfare benefits are often demonized, portrayed as being at fault for their poorness and taking advantage of the state. Recipients of state welfare are disproportionately poor women of color, teen mothers, and single mothers – thus emblemizing them as “welfare queens” (Cohen, 1997).

Similar in the way that Dean Spade calls for a movement of abolition over reformation, Cohen’s argument challenges us to see a queer politics that transcends the binary of queers versus straights and that a new form of homonormativity<sup>viii</sup> has emerged, creating marginalization within the LGBTQ community. Moreover, mainstream LGBTQ movements are not dismantling the existing structures and creating new ones, instead they are attempting to gain mobility within an existing system that is single-issue (e.g. - same-sex marriage and repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”) and entrenched with racism, classism, colonialism, sexism, respectability politics, homophobia, transphobia, and ablism. Cohen boldly begins her article by

calling out racism at the AIDS organization Gay Men's Health Crisis, by revealing that three black board members resigned due to racism and exclusionary practices at the organization. She goes further to demonstrate that privatization of basic human rights (e.g.- healthcare, access to education, housing, and a livable wage) is creating a rift between queers who are in more privileged positions and queers who are low-income, non-white, transgender, gender non-conforming, disabled, and people who are dependent on the state for services, such as welfare.

### **The Gay Neighborhood as a Site of Exclusion:**

#### **Neoliberalism, Public Space, Homeless Youth and QTPOC**

Coming out of the closet is an opportunity for personal growth, in that you begin to live in an authentic part of your identity. On the other hand, coming out also comes with a unique set of challenges such as the risk of social exclusion from friends, family, community, loss of employment<sup>ix</sup>, and at an increased risk of violence (e.g.- physical bashing, verbal harassment) and homelessness. In fact, over 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ and were kicked out of their homes after coming out (in particular QTPOC). LGBTQ youth often seek refuge in cities, yet, they face further invisibility in the urban gay enclaves, often dominated by white, middle-upper class cis-gender men (Reck, 2009).

In one particular study, Sociologist Jen Reck looked at The Castro, an iconic gay district of San Francisco, as a site of both inclusivity and exclusivity for QTPOC homeless youth. The youth in her study discussed how The Castro was a place where they were able to live openly with their LGBTQ identities and feeling safer compared to when they lived with their former families. They were able to form new kinships and families with other youth in similar situations and create networks of solidarity and support for one another. On the other hand,

many youth also described how their identities of being persons of color, LGBTQ identified, homeless, and taking up public space resulted in marginalization due to police harassment and their inability to participate in the consumerist culture of The Castro, such as, shopping in the trendy boutiques of this neighborhood. Furthermore, many of the homeless youth in Reck's study explained how occupying public space in The Castro was not a viable option for them due to gentrification of The Castro and increased police presence targeting QTPOC who are hypervisibilized because of their race. Reck also revealed that the LGBTQ homeless youth in her study were often viewed as a nuisance to more privileged LGBTQ people in the neighborhood. In one instance at a youth center in The Castro, youth described that a couple living next to the center complained about the presence of the youth for merely sitting or standing in front of the center for too long. It was the expectation that they (homeless youth) should be inside and hidden from public view. The youth were not committing any criminal acts, but were automatically assumed to be criminals. In many ways we can see a connection here to the ways in which many people in society have internalized the U.S. motto of the "American Dream" and how the presence of the homeless LGBTQ youth in The Castro are stark reminders of the fault lines of single-issue and rights-based politics that do not address or abolish structural and systemic inequalities in society.



Picture above showing the iconic Castro District or “Gayborhood” in San Francisco, California.

Bisexual and Transgender gender people are pushed to the margins of society both within and outside of the LGBTQ community. In discussions with my friends who are genderqueer, transgender, and bisexual I often hear that there is a lack of attention brought to their issues. At the same time, there is the other side of this spectrum where they also felt hypervisibilized because their identity is fetishized and exoticized. To illustrate this, a transgender youth in Jen Reck’s study describes how trans visibility and invisibility work simultaneously in the LGBTQ community in that: “[T]he gay community looks at transgenders, drag queens, all that, as kind of like a mascot or something . . . you know, they worship transgenders . . . no matter how ugly you

look, or how buff you are, or how bad your skin is– ‘Oh, you go girl, work it out!’ You know . . . it’s a gag to them, sort of, you know? Entertainment.” (Reck, 235).

Bisexuality, like my own genderqueer identity, is dangerous and threatening to the rigid binaries of gender and sexuality in the context of the U.S. Both of these identities transcend the binaries of either/or and exist in a category of their own. Specifically in regards to bisexual identity, there are instances of bisexual phobia from gay and lesbian identified people. One of my friends described her experience of being bisexual as precarious because on one hand she receives unwanted attention from straight cis-gender men who fetishize her attraction to female identified people. On the other hand, when she has dated Lesbian identified women some of them have expressed fear that she will leave them for a man. Leon, one of the interviewees in my own study stated the following in coming out as bisexual in the LGBTQ community:

“Especially when I was first coming out, people were like, ‘Oh, well you’re just gay and you don’t realize it.’ Stuff like that... For me, like I identify technically as bisexual... Like, I definitely identify as bisexual, but realistically emotionally, physically and all that other stuff I’m definitely attracted more towards men. Usually day-to-day I go by gay, because I just prefer that I guess. But technically I would say I’m bisexual, I was with my last girlfriend for five years and I very much loved her.” Leon demonstrates that his identity is fluid and that “day-to-day” he goes by “gay” but acknowledges that it always re-immersing – or as Stuart Hall would say, “becoming” (Hall, 1990).

### **Neoliberalism**

The pervasiveness of neoliberalism can be seen with the privatization of services such as: health care, education, massive accumulations of student debt, and individual success or failure

framed as personal failings instead of being attributed to systemic inequalities (Harvey, 2005). Within the frameworks of Dan Savage's IGB, we can see this call to upward mobility in the way that Savage and his partner position themselves as the nuclear family, overcoming adversity, and middle-upper class telos. The questions that remain for this framework are: who is Dan Savage's intended audience of this message? And how does this message apply for LGBTQ youth along lines of race, class, ability, and citizenship status? Within the context of the U.S., achieving the ideal that Savage presents to his audience is one that is not accessible or easily attainable while navigating neoliberal economies. This is especially apparent with the skyrocketing costs of living and lag salaries. For example, the median salary for U.S. workers between 1973 and 2011 only increased by 4%, yet labor productivity increased over 80% (Mishel, 2012).

IGB reinforces the respectable LGBTQ citizen subjects aligning with the state apparatus. The respectable citizen subject is one who is productive; embodies the American Dream of "narratives of improvement in the US are deeply infused with rags-to-riches tales" (Meyer, 2017); middle-class status; and the nuclear homonormative family. Lisa Duggan coined the term homonormativity to reveal the ways that the mainstream LGBTQ community has been attempting to gain respectability within heteronormative frameworks (Duggan, 2002). Duggan argues that privatization is not just in the arena of health and education, but of the queer family itself. The queer family within the homonormative framework models after Eurocentric, heteronormative notions of kinship and family demarcated to the private sphere of the home. In Duggan's words: "it 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."

### Section 3: Analysis of “It Gets Better” Videos

In this section I am going to discuss my analysis of IGB videos and how they reflect the corporeal reality of participants in my study. Additionally, I will juxtapose the backdrop of IGB videos with the documentary “Kicked Out: LGBTQ Youth Experience Homelessness” to reveal societal productions of homophobia and transphobia in relation to hetero-patriarchal family structures (e.g.- the nuclear family). I will also demonstrate through keywords that I noted throughout the ten videos, how the videos reify notions of personal responsibility rather than structural and systemic oppression. Keywords that I noted throughout the videos that I analyzed were: **progression, support, travel, tourism, choice, birth family/kinship, family structures, success, overcoming, becoming, self-blame, strength, safety, monogamy, college, “normalcy”/normal, diversity, inclusion, the city, unlimited/limitless.**

The first IGB video is from the Austin Police Department and there are texts of words on the screen in between interviews with police officers that read: “Before we put on our uniforms. Before we go to work protecting the citizens of Austin. We are part of Texas and we are gay.” In the next part of the video there are a series of short clips from different officers stating their attributes to society such as going to college, being presidents of clubs, being cheerleaders, getting straight-A’s, participating in sports, and a future that will be filled with success. What I found most interesting in this video was that there was a majority of white people in it, no black people in it, and four Latinx people. Only one of the Latinx people (Officer Correa) who were interviewed described the contention around identities of race and sexual orientation – describing the impossibility of being gay in a Mexican and Catholic household. Embedded within Officer Correa’s rhetoric of coming out, there was a split along lines of race, religion and sexual

orientation. While Officer Correa did briefly talk about being Mexican and Catholic there was not a lot of depth to this aspect of her identity. There was more focus on her gay identity and the video quickly transitioned to another officers story after she explicitly right after Officer Correa revealed her Mexican and Catholic family.

Other officers described the difficulties of growing up in small, rural towns in Texas and moving to the city of Austin where life became easier due to it being a city that is “liberal” and a “blue dot in a red state.” In the narratives of all the officers, there was a common theme of middle-class ethos, upward mobility, and lack of depth to positionality of race, gender, and class. One example is when one officer states: “Focus on the future, don’t focus on the problems you have going on right now, focus on the greatness of your life that’s going to become.” The notion of “becoming” was also prevalent throughout the video, that one will become better through specific actions and participation in middle-class society.

The second video I viewed chronicles a Canadian family with three children, two males and one female, who identify as LGBTQ. One of the sons identifies as gay, the other is bisexual, and the daughter identifies as lesbian. The parents described loving their children regardless of their sexual orientations and “just thought they were normal people with different sexualities”. The mother mentions, “I never imagined having gay children.” Throughout the video it shows the family laughing together and appearing to be very close knit – framing their children coming out brought them closer together as a family. Later in the video what stood out to me the most was when the father says that all of his children are gay, but the mother makes a distinction that one of her sons is gay, while the other is bisexual. The video quickly shifted back to the family being together in the kitchen and happy together. I found this part interesting because of

society's perception of bisexuality, in particular for males. When I first came out as bisexual in my teenage years I had many people tell me that my bisexuality was a phase and that I would eventually just be gay. In fact, one gay-identified man told me that I was just taking the initial steps into "the gay world", as if it were only a transient identity but not a fixed one. It was a coercive outing, and the implication was that I should just be gay. Additionally, Leon, one of the participants in my qualitative research, identifies as bisexual and has had similar reactions when revealing his orientation. I will unpack more of this later in the "Analysis of Qualitative Data" section.

In the third video presented from the Harvard Business School the interviewees were master's students talking about their experiences of coming out to their families and academic life. Immediately in this video I noticed that transgender people, genderqueer, people of color and women were conspicuously absent – all of the interviewees were male and majority white. One of the interviewees was Filipino who mentioned that he was from a very Catholic country and that he was ostracized due to the religious elements of his community. Other people of color in the film were only shown very briefly with them saying short lines. Their lives were not brought into focus and depth like the white participants in the video.

One gay male interviewee stated that by not coming out his life was passing him by and that "life is here, I get one life and it's passing me by and I've really got no one to blame but myself 'cause I'm the one making the choice." He positions himself being in control of his destiny and that there are choices in the matter of coming out and a future of happiness. He later states, "It got better. After I came out my life began!" What remained lacking in this narrative was specifically what became better and the process of being in a bad place to becoming better.

Furthermore, it presents a linear trajectory of life of starting at bad and going in one direction towards better, instead of the lived reality of ebbs and flows of good and bad periods in life.

The second interviewee conveys his apprehension about coming out as gay and that he feared losing respect, credibility as a man going into the business world, and being pigeonholed into the stereotype of an effeminate gay man. In his own words: “I felt that I would lose everything that I was and that everyone would see me as this loud, bright, dancing character.” The rest of the interview revealed respectability politics by appealing to upper-middle class ethos and that he was a “normal” person like his heterosexual counterparts. While it certainly is understandable not wanting to be essentialized as one type of gay man, it prompts another question about our society’s perception of femininity as inherently weak or less than – and attachment of gendered behavior to certain bodies. Is being a feminine person the worse one could be? Can we re-frame the narrative of feminine as weak? And how can we transcend a binary of male as masculine and female as feminine?

As I scanned through several IGB videos I noticed there are not a lot of stories about transgender people and none that I could find about genderqueer, genderfluid, or two-spirit people. In one video about a trans woman she talks about being Japanese-American, serving in the military during the Vietnam War (prior to her physical transition), becoming a lawyer and opening her own law practice in 1984. She specifically practices law to help underrepresented populations. She also mentions how accepting her community (friends, family, co-workers) is and that she has been “embraced” by both men and women. I found her description of being “embraced” to be a contrast to my own life and to the lived realities of my friends who are also genderqueer or transgender women and men. A couple of my friends who are trans women often

talk about facing exclusion and discrimination from many people and some have faced the worst discrimination from women, specifically from TERFs<sup>x</sup>.

#### **Section 4: Analysis of Qualitative Data**

From the four interviews that I conducted in my study I identified five different themes of: Identity Formation and Politics, Class, Race/Ethnicity, Religion, and Solutions for alternative frameworks to the IGB project. Religion was the theme that had the most data in it with three out of the four of my participants, disclosing that religion played a major role in their queer identity formation and the process of coming out. In particular one of my participants, Leon a formerly devout Mormon, or as he called himself a “good Mormon boy”, described how the religion created internalized homophobia for him and resulted in him being kicked out of his mother’s home. In Leon’s words: “So, I guess I grew up in the Mormon church and my parents knew about my same-sex attractions, my attractions towards men. Um so they wanted to help me fix that, because they didn’t want to see me go down this naughty, dirty, disgusting road of you know of eventually perhaps being *gay* you know. They didn’t want to see me do *that* and they ended up finding a Mormon psychologist and uh who professed that he would be able to help me and fix all my problems. So, they uh they ended up having me see him when I was fifteen, I think I had just turned fifteen, and I um, saw him for three years um at least once a week or maybe every other week, for at least three years and they spent all my college savings basically on this guy.”

One of my other participants, Marcus a self-identified Black/Ghanaian, queer, somewhat male, demi-sexual, also described his experience of growing up in rural Georgia and his family being members of the Baptist Church. Even though Marcus did not explicitly come out to most

members of his family he stated that he knew there was something inherently wrong with queerness. For example, he stated that during childhood he developed the deep-seeded idea that sleeping with another man was wrong and sometimes in the present day when he's feeling vulnerable or emotionally insecure that ideology from church seeps into his mind. Marcus also revealed how he never officially came out to his parents and they found out about his queer identity on accident and he stated that, "when they did find out I wa...was gay, umm I mean they reacted how a lot of Southern people do, which is, they quote bible scripture to you, they uh they tell you about the dangers um, namely HIV."

Petri, a self-identified white, genderqueer, polyamorous, Atheist described how they<sup>1</sup> practiced religion at their own accordance during childhood and their family did not practice an organized religion. They became involved with a predominantly Black and Korean Baptist Church while living in Florida in their early teenage years. Petri noted that what drew them into the practice of religion was hearing perspectives and deep connection of devout believers in God. Petri explained that while their church was more liberal, they specifically remember one story that the pastor told the youth group about how having too many rocks in a river meant that it would get damned up with the rocks, your life then becomes difficult and split off from your intended path. In Petri's words: "then like you can split off and go a different way...this is like a way queerness that occurs. Too many rocks thrown in that river, like and it was very like, it was this weird thing because it was one hand trying to be understanding, but also extremely pathologizing and not really getting that...no this is just the way people are. It was, no we have to find a reason, there's something wrong in how you became gay."

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<sup>1</sup> Petri's preferred gender pronoun.

While Petri did participate in organized religion at her own will, they did experience a turning point where they felt that it interfered with their queer identity. Religion as an identity became less prominent in Petri's life as they developed further into their queer identity. Today they admit that they respect people who practice religion and are fascinated by people who believe in God and how people arrive at their religious practices, but Petri does not personally believe in God or practice religion.

The second theme with the most ample data was under Identity Formation and Politics. Across the interviews there were rich stories about how each of them formed their identity as queer people and combating with stereotypes about queerness projected upon them from their families, communities, the LGBTQ community, and society at large.

One of my participants Shaya discussed how her mother did not have as much of a problem with who she was dating or her sexual practices, but rather had more contentions around Shaya's masculine gender presentation. Shaya was assigned female at birth and has gone through phases of where she presents more feminine and others where she presents more masculine. During the past few years she has been dressing in a more masculine way and often does not wear makeup. Shaya's mother has questioned her about this and tried to convince her to present in a more feminine manner. In fact, at one point Shaya and her mother had a heated argument over Shaya's masculine presentation. For Shaya it was not who she had romantic relations with, but more of how she outwardly presented herself and that crossing the binary line from feminine to masculine evoked her mother's stereotypes about queer identity.

Marcus revealed that he didn't like the concept of coming out and describes it as a performance, begging to be accepted by society. Both Marcus and Shaya explained their queer identities as something that is internally created and explored within yourself. In moving beyond

being accepted by certain standards, Shaya and Marcus suggest that the becoming of a queer identity is something that is very personal and not to be predicated on others' terms. Marcus explains his position on the idea of coming out by stating: "But then again I just couldn't get myself the idea of this, of this, this show and this performance and this begging to, at the end of the performance, begging to be accepted, begging just to...the applause of "oh here you are!". You know, uh, I know that wouldn't have me enter the gay world. Coming out to my parents, coming out to my best friend didn't help me enter it. What helped me enter it is like coming to grips within myself and exploring within myself um what it means to like come out to yourself and realize your own truth."

Similarly, Shaya had a similar response about the IGB project and said: "Um. But it kind of, I think it has a lot of assumptions in it that are not really like you know expressed outloud. Um, the first one being the title of the project, right? Which is like, "It Gets Better" and it sort of like assumes that everybody is going to have the same trajectory in life. Um, which you know, that your only problem is basically just high school bullies...Or you know...like I know, for example, like for a lot of trans people their harassment doesn't end after high school, right? So, I'm just saying that this sort of harassment, whether or *not* it ends after high school is very much dependent on *who* you are. Like whether you're a person of color, whether you um are middle class, or sort of like...how your gender presentation comes off."

Petri discussed how being assigned male at birth (AMAAB) individuals often receive more negative criticism and violence from their peers and families because it challenges the prescriptions of masculinity within our society. Petri stated that as a genderqueer assigned female at birth (AFAAB) person they received less harassment than their feminine MAAB friends and has noticed a trend with other AFAAB's who cross the line of gender into

masculinity. Petri thinks this is because masculinity is praised and viewed as inherently strong in contrast to perceptions of femininity as weak within U.S. society. Therefore, Petri felt that even though they have faced some hardship due to their gender identity they did not get as harsh of a reaction as AFAAB people receive.

Shaya and Marcus demonstrated how race, class, and gender identity politics play a role in the process of coming out. Their stories also underscore how the framework of IGB is lacking for LGBTQ individuals at the margins of society and that coming out and life after high school will not always result in your life becoming better. By taking a more intersectional approach to coming out experiences it can help re-direct our attention to the systems and structures in society that do not allow life to become better when one comes out – such as deeply ingrained societal transphobia and homophobia.

The last two themes, Race/Ethnicity and Class had the least amount of data in my project, but nonetheless did provide some insight into the experiences of being queer and a person of color. Shaya for example stated that she sometimes avoids telling people she's queer not because of homophobia, but because she did not want to be fetishized as a queer Muslim and Iranian woman. She explained instances of being at social gatherings where she felt hypervisibilized because of her dual Iranian and queer identities. At a recent party Shaya describes how this happened: “And people always wanted to know like, ‘Oh, what is it like to be queer in Iran?’ Like, this sort of like very um orientalist, racist picture that like, ‘Oh you want to get behind the veil’ [chuckles]. They do that about women in the Middle East too, but especially queer lives in the Middle East.”

Marcus described that as a black person he often feels torn between being black and being gay. He recalled that when he was first coming to terms with his sexuality and learned

about the term “gay”, that the term “gay” had a white connotation to it as an identity. Many reasons he felt this was based off media representations he saw of gay people – in particular white, gay men. Marcus stated that when asked in high school if he was gay that he would say no and that he was homosexual. For him the term homosexual did not have a connotation of whiteness in the same way that the term gay did. To this day Marcus admits to feeling that gay identity is attached to whiteness and is an identity that he cannot fully embrace because he cannot detach or simply forget about his black identity.

The class theme had the least amount of data in my study. Marcus discussed briefly how class has impact on his queer identity and stated that he felt he marginalized because of his status as a working class, black person and entering many queer spaces did not feel inclusive because he perceived them to be catering to queer people with greater class privilege. Marcus states that in his experiences, many queer spaces will not be inclusive, “because you may not be white, middle class or above. You may not be what they call a ‘professional’.”

### **Section 5: Conclusion & Reflection**

Completing this project has made me realize that my passion is listening and gathering the rich stories of people. Especially collecting stories people who have been marginalized due to the proliferation of capitalism within the U.S. and beyond our borders.

This project also helped me see how we can collectively interrupt the narrative of a single story. The goal of this thesis was to understand why life does not get better for everyone once they come out as LGBTQ and ways that we can restructure a narrative that can speak to the realities of people whose lives became more difficult. As a femme, genderqueer, and queer person myself I certainly have navigated a precarious path with periods of time where life got better and other periods where life became a lot worse. For example, in 2008 when I was

diagnosed with HIV my life felt as though it were spinning out of control and the innocence of my youth died. Subsequently for several years after my diagnosis I struggled with severe panic attacks, anxiety, and my already existing depression worsened. My life reached such a low point that I was often afraid to leave my house in fear of getting sick, being a burden to others, and wanting to retreat from the harsh reality that my body would forever carry an incurable virus. Since then I have had continued ups and downs in my life due to circumstances and my depression.

The limitations of this project are that I need more participants to build a more complete picture and more time. I did not get as much data about class status and this is an area I would like to explore further when I attend graduate school. Additionally, I did not have any binary transgender men or women in this project, which could have provided an additional perspective in constructing the framework.

I would like to suggest as an alternative framework and re-naming of “It Gets Better” is to draw from my interviewee’s response about how her life became different and rename it to “It Gets Different”. By changing the name and narrative of a project, that is suppose to speak to LGBTQ youth, we can help youth see how life does not follow one linear path. Reframing and expanding the “It Gets Better” project could also help make it more inclusive and speak to a wider audience and especially for youth who may have been kicked out or abandoned by their families when they came out of the closet.

## **Section 6: The Interviews**

### **Marcus Interview**

**C= Colin M= Marcus**

C: Ok, so, umm, could you tell me a little about, umm... What's your name? Where were you born?

M: My name's Marcus. Marcus Wilson. I was born in Opa-Locka, which is about 30 minutes from Miami. But, I grew up primarily in Southeast Georgia.

C: And... umm.. what races or ethnic groups do you most closely identify with?

M: Ummm African American and Ghanaian.

C: Umm.. what do you.. what is your gender identity?

M: [laughs] hmmm.. complicated. Umm. [asks himself quietly] gender identity? [then talks in middle volume and more audible level] somewhat male, I'll say that. Yeah, somewhat male.

C: And, what do you consider your sexual orientation?

M: ummm, a homo-romantic, either, homo-romantic asexual or a homosexual–demisexual.

C: And do you practice a religion or do you grow up with a religion?

M: I grew up with a religion, I grew up in the uh Baptist Church. But, currently umm no I don't.

C: Ok. And you said you had a chance to watch the video I sent you...

M: mmhmm.

C: And umm, I guess I just want to hear some of your thoughts about it. Like..

M: Ok.

C: What were your initial reactions? And I guess in what ways do you identify with it or what ways do you not identify with it?

M: Ok. Umm. I will say um what I agree with first, which is funny it came at the tail end of the video [says with slight chuckle in his voice]. Umm, I think, uh, one of them, I don't know if it was Dan or Terry, who said um, "Living well is the best revenge". Um I slightly agree with that because I think if you [pauses to think] I think at some point those people who slander you, who abuse you, they become irrelevant as you come into your own, as you know you live your truth, you come out or you, or even if you don't come out, you live your life and you're in a space where you're um, your expression is honest and those people become irrelevant. I mean, even if you don't see them anymore, they still become irrelevant. So, I kinda agree with that. Ummm. I wrote don't some other stuff here too. Yeah and they mention something about umm outgrowing your tormentors, which again I slightly agree, because in a sense you do if you come out or even if you don't come out, it's just again if you, um, if you... if you live in your expression then you uh in a sense out grow your tormentors and those people, those experiences are information for

you, so you can use them instead of um let it having them work against you. Ummm... Initial things that I was um sort of critical of, it was um, I felt like um, I worried about the audience basically. Umm it seemed to be it was um geared towards, you know, white men. Um white, middle class men. Um. I, um. Like there wasn't any concerns for, like, uh like people of color, and that wasn't the only video I saw, and like there was no mention of that, and there was also no mention of like um, other types of who do or who may come out. Such as, trans people, or you know, um, like I don't even think they were gearing it towards lesbians even. It just seemed, it was towards white, gay men. Um, that was an initial critique from me, I was just worried about like who...who were they speaking to basically, 'cause I didn't feel like it was me. Ummm. I wrote down some other stuff, but we can get into that later I guess.

C: Then, um, I guess like if you could tell me..um. What was your experience of coming out um, how did your family react? Is your relationship better with them? um, has your life become better since you've come out in certain ways?

M: Um I never came out actually. Um, not fully, I only sorta pseudo came out to my uh best friend, which was, that was in high school, I think I was a sophomore in high school. Um, but I never came out to my parents, I never felt the need, I never, I never.. [pauses and stumbles over an un-audible word]..even when I realized I was gay it was just, internally like something bothered me about having to um, I'm gonna wrap this in quotations "prove" you know your identity or like you know show yourself to your parents whereas I felt asexuality is something very private to me and I didn't feel like I needed this, this stage...this show of like coming out and you know whatever that comes with, I, I just never felt like doing that, so...when they did find I wa..was gay, umm I mean they reacted how a lot of Southern people do, which is, they quote bible scripture to you, they uh they tell you about the dangers um, namely HIV. That's what they're worried about. Umm, what else? I mean it was just a, I wasn't a full thrown negative um reaction, just because I have this special rel-, uh unique uh relationship with my parents whereas I don't speak to them that much. And so when I did speak to them I mean it was just like um generally sort of concerned I guess that I am going the wrong way. There was no like abuse or anything, the was no uh violent or anything like that, thankfully. Um, but, since I did not come out, but I am now like open, you know I am living openly, umm has my life gotten better? Ummm, I would say yes and no. Yes, because I'm comfortable with my sexuality, whatever it is at the time because it changes, of course, for me. Umm, but I would say yes because I am living openly, I'm able to express myself, I'm not around people who would force me to, you know, revert. Um, or want to be straight-passing or anything like that. And I would say no because what the video failed to mention I think, which is another criticism of mine, um, it doesn't really...it didn't say anything about, you know, the people within the gay community, or the queer community, themselves that can be harmful towards you. It like, it like casts like, you know the people of authority: your parents, your friends, people in high school basically. They kinda modeled those as like the only tormentors a gay, or queer, lesbian, or trans person can, you know, face which I don't think is true. I think while that is true you can face those individuals and there can be some retaliation with those individuals, um, I think when you do come out and you go out into the world and you see... and you gain, these experiences, umm it can contrast things. Like for me it did it. Like I went out to the clubs and I saw how harmful interactions are between you know gay people or queer people, and I think that's something the

video didn't necessarily bring up. I don't know if they didn't...I don't know if they didn't take it into account, but they just didn't bring that up.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah.

[long pause of silence with construction noises from outside the apartment]

C: I definitely agree with that. [laughs]

M: [laughs]

C: And then, I guess this kinda ties into what you were just talking about, but um...like I guess how do you feel about the mainstream LGBTQ community? Umm. And then do you ever feel split or torn between, like, your ethnic, racial, religious identity and your LGBTQ identities? Or is there ever a split there? Umm...

M: uh definitely, yeah for me. Even um when I was uh first coming terms with my sexuality it was. Which is interesting um that I still remember this, but I uh I remember first found out about the term, you know I had the language for it, like it was called "gay". And that's apparently what I was um at the time. And I remember thinking that word was specifically white. Like I thought gay meant you were a white man or a white boy. And so, in high school when people would ask me, um my last few years of high schools and like college, people would ask me "ok are you gay?" I would strictly no. I would say I'm a homosexual. Because still, like I, even to this day, I think that word has a connotation where it's white, uh patriarchal, and just overtly masculine about it.

C: hmm.

M: I don't know why. It just seems that way for me. So, there is a split there um for me because I felt like...ok they call it gay but, like, I'm obviously not white so, there has to be some other arena for me because I never felt like I fell in the typical, mainstream idea of what a gay person is. Or, what they should be. Because there is this racial thing that I'm divided on, religious thing that I'm divided on. Because, most...I shouldn't say most...a lot of, that I've experienced, a lot of gay people are religious. I mean, rather they do it internally or they express it outwardly.

C: hmm.

M: Whereas I'm not. So, there's a sort of divide there for me too. Um, I feel like I'm divided by class too, obviously because again, that term "gay", like you go to the gay bars, you go in gay communities, gay neighborhoods, and you see the idea of gay being built off something, like, middle class or beyond. Like it doesn't seem to base out with the working class people, like with someone like me. Um, so there's that. And, there's a social divide for me too because I'm, I

mean I could be very anti-social. But, and again like I go to these gay venues and everything is just so overtly social and then if you're not social something is wrong with you. You're not "gay enough". I mean if you're not flamboyant, if you're not into musicals, if you're not into all these different types of media...

C: Hmm

M: Then, you're hmm, something's suspect. So, I feel that divide obviously because I grew up, you know, I just... I don't hate musicals or anything like that I just naturally don't...I'm not a, you know, raving fan for them or anything like that. So, yeah there's all sorts of divides. And there are times when I try to keep them separate. I try to repress one and let one out. Such as, my race, or I'll repress, like, my sexuality or I'll repress, like, my social ability, I'll repress my emotions and things like that. Yeah. There's a big, like um, war within me I feel with um being gay or slash homosexual.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah.

C: Um. Something I was going to ask you,like, kinda just tailing off of that. 'Cause I know you said you went to your first pride last year, right?

M: mmhmm. Yep.

C: And I guess I remember you told me a little bit about it. But like, could you talk about that a little bit?

M: Yeah sure.

C: What was that experience....

M: I...I definitely didn't see the sense of community there. I mean, immediately almost. I went in and I saw, it was very commercial, it was very overblown, and like, people weren't talking to eachother. It was just...I was with this uh guy and um, he had um asked me to go and I agreed, and we were just walking around, sightseeing. Looking at people, you know, they were gossiping about people like, "Look at her. Look at what they're wearing." It just seemed like a show. Like a circus. It didn't seem like there was any legitimate expression of solidarity or community or you know things like that. It was just like lets put on a show for the straight people who might be here. And the gay people were just like, you know, oblivious, just like walking around and just like a part of this, this show basically. I mean, there were a few I guess positive things about it, I mean the fact there are still pride events I guess that's positive. But, still. And the fact that, you know, all these different races and cultures and religions can meet up, but still I would've liked to have saw...umm you know like a, like a kinda grassroots sorta thing I guess. Like legitimate, like, intimate...intimate sort of meeting, umm. But instead I saw, like this very abstract [chuckles softly], this very abstract thing...

C: Yeah.

M: This very abstract concept. Instead of something that was concrete for me. Yeah.

C: I can definitely see that.

C: How is your relationship now with your family?

M: Umm, in the context of I'm gay? Umm... [short pause] ... I mean if I'm quite honest it's very distant. I fee like I can't um talk to them about it just because they don't, they haven't in the past taken strides to... 'cause I'm pretty sure my parents knew. I'm pretty sure my father knew, even though he left at an early age, like, I saw him off and on. I'm pretty sure he know or someone told him atleast. And I'm pretty sure my mom knew [chuckles softly] 'cause at one point I snuck a guy and then my brother ratted me out and things like...

C: hmm.

M: ...but nothing was ever said to me personally or asked me, personally. She never put the question to me, "are you gay?" Um, so it's very distant and I don't like I can ever bring up that subject just because: a. I don't want to be, like, emotionally triggered and saying like "oh, it's wrong". And I don't wanna be hit with all this biblical stuff and I don't wanna be hit with all these, you know, all these ideas that I've worked very hard to, to drive away. Of like being gay is wrong, or, you know, just all these sorts of things that comes with the connotations of being gay for the outsider. You know all those things. So, it's distant. Um, as far as that goes. Um, I mean there's not much. I really wish I could say more about my familial um relationship, because that seems to be the breaking point...

C: hmm, yeah.

M: as far as like coming out.

C: Yeah.

M: It seems to be getting, getting it to your family, getting it past your family. Your friends are one thing, then like, you know, the people who bully you are, you know, are another if they know. Um, your decisions to either retaliate or just, you know, express yourself regardless. Um, but yeah I don't, I never really had that strong of a connection with my family for other reasons.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah. And so sexuality was just something, another thing that I just, you know, kept to myself. Along with other things that I did in my childhood, it was just another thing I kept to myself and just you know thought of it as none of their business if they don't want to get to know me in other areas of my life. Yeah.

C: Yeah. Fair enough.

M: And I do feel, that I'm in the closet with them as a result of never having said, "Mother, I'm gay". Or, like I've never brought a boyfriend over to either of my parents, um, so I still feel sort of like in the closet so to speak about that. Just because I can't bring it up, I don't bring it up, I... don't even want to bring [slight nervous laughter] it up, you know, and there is some fear there. There's some fear there, not against any sort of physical retaliation that might happen, because I don't think that would happen, it's just like emotional things...

C: Yeah.

M: ...yeah. Because being gay still is a very, very deeply emotional and personal and private ... and very, very conflicting thing to me [slight chuckle] if I'm going to be honest. It is. It's something I'm at war with all the time because of how I grew up in the South and the ideology behind homosexuality and specifically being a black man and being homosexual um yeah...there were some things that I had to really, really and still do struggle with. Things that my mom taught me or my family taught me, or just like the church taught me that was just ingrained in me and still is...in, um, in certain aspects.

C: What about like the church is still ingrained in you?

M: The idea of ....[pauses]...I guess, the deepseeded idea of like lying with another man is wrong. Having sex with another man is inherently, universally wrong. And I'm not even speaking about God here, I guess. Because I took it, even then, like I heard it being preached to me uh that like you know, lying with men is wrong and all the stuff. But I thought in my mind as a child, ok, so it must be, because I didn't believe in God then, not really. But I believed in this universal cosmos idea. And so I thought, ok so it must be universally wrong to sleep with men and you shouldn't want to be this way. And I still feel that. Um, sometimes, when I'm...you know... emotionally vulnerable or insecure about another area of my life and I don't know sexuality is brought to the table. I meet someone and like sex might happen or it's being discussed, I, yeah... I feel that. I feel like I need to revert and I do feel that idea, like it's wrong you shouldn't want to do this and things like that. Yeah, and I think that's the reason why I classify myself as being demisexual now. Because I want to make that emotional connection with someone, to get past that whole "man" label, to get to like a person so I can tell myself umm psychologically that I'm in-love with a person, not this idea of a man.

C: hmm.

M: So, yeah that's as far as like the church goes. I mean there are other little things too, of course, but I mean they don't bother me. So, I'm not going to mention those. Yeah...

C: What do you think...like I guess, um..what would you like to see, I guess like as either... a counternarrative? Or maybe like as an alternative project to "It Gets Better"? Like, what would you like to see?

M: Um. Hmm. Sorry I have to think about this for a moment, to see how I will word it. Hmm. I definitely would like to see like you like racial and all these different sorts of inclusion. And, I really want that term “It Gets Better” to be geared towards, again, like other individuals who may or may not come out. You know trans individuals, lesbians, because I felt like that video and I kinda feel like when people say that, they’re gearing it only towards you know gay men...white gay men. I don’t feel like they’re speaking to me, I don’t feel like they’re speaking to lesbians, they’re not speaking to asexuals even. I mean asexuals sometimes come out, so I feel like it needs to be more inclusive. As far as how that happens...I think it’s a matter of just going out and documenting, you know, expansive cases not just these really, really...really, really closed cases. Such as, like...you know, the idea that the only thing you’re going to have to hurdle as a teenager, because this is what this mostly geared towards, like the only thing a teenager might have to hurdle is a bully in high school. Like high school as this metaphorical figure of resistance, I mean because when you come out and you start dating and you get in the gay scene you’re gonna find out that you’re not welcome [slight chuckle] in a lot of spaces, because you may not be white, male, middle class or above. You may not be what they call a “professional” [laughs].

C: [laughs]

M: Those sorts of things. Yeah. But yeah it’s just a case of going out and documenting, like, all these different ranges of, you know, experiences. Yeah.

C: Definitely.

M: Yeah, because I feel like um even they do document like ranges of experiences, always it seems to be a person who is very, very...or so they say, “proud to be gay”, it always seems to be that way. And for me, like I know I war with it all the time and like I used to imagine that um other people did until I started seeing videos like this. I started watching coming out stories and it always seems to be you know...these people who are inherently proud to be gay and these sorts of things. Like I’ve heard um...really, really uh tragic things that have happened to people who have come out or just because they are gay and are found out, things have happened. And I think that needs to be documented, it absolutely needs to be documented. No matter how disillusioning that might be to like a teenager or...I mean I wish I would’ve known. I wish I would’ve known that, you know, people have committed suicide just because they felt like they couldn’t come out you know that sort of thing and just all these different sort of things that happens to people, I wish would’ve had that. Yeah, as honest and heroic as it may be, that’s needed, that needs to be part of the discourse. Yeah. Sorry that was a rambly answer [laughs].

C: No, that was great.

M: Yeah, I mean obviously it’s going to be hard to do that. Yeah, to like change a narrative that is so ingrained in a culture. Yeah, but I think it can begin like simply just making that your eye or your gaze is very, very expansive and inclusive. Yeah. And when you speak of your own personal experiences um, kinda frame them in a different way I guess. Instead of saying like,

“Your life gets better, because my life got better because of this is what happened to me.” Kinda frame it differently. You know, kinda leave an opening for a you know, for other people to enter. Because again, when I watched that video, Dan and Terry’s video, I was just like ok I’m not gonna get married. I don’t believe in the concept of marriage, so ok my life is not going to get better from that regard. I’m not white um, I don’t necessarily believe in steadfast partnership either, so...that’s out for me to [chuckles slightly]. And so, where is my opening there? Yeah, I mean like if I’m a teenager, where is my opening there? If I don’t, If I don’t already believe in those sorts of things. Yeah, even if I’m adopted or I’m a homeless kid who doesn’t have a family to come out to, where is...where is the narrative for that, for someone like that? Or, someone who is being tossed around between families and things like that? Or who is dropped out of school and they don’t have, like the bullies to counter against? Or have the families to come out to or like those individuals who might be, who might be resistant you know? There’s all sorts of things that, like you know, gay people or just people in general face other than like those. Sorry that was rambley too [laughs].

C: No, you made some really salient points.

M: Yeah. I just felt like when I watched that, it was just...I was wondering okay, who are you speaking to? Because you’re not speaking to me and that was what struck [snaps finger once] almost immediately, like within the first couple minutes. It’s a very short video and that might be the matter too, but I just felt like yeah, there are so many different um stories and the narrative needs to be a framed a different way. Because it simply does not just “get better”. I mean it might get good, it might go terribly wrong um yeah. Yeah...Yeah...I guess it only works if, like that phrase, if it helps keep someone from committing suicide. I think that’s what, that’s what it’s so wrapped around the idea of like they don’t want the youth, the uh queer youth to like be suicidal or commit suicide. But that’s not the only feeling a person can have when they’re battling something like that. So, simply saying it gets better because you might be suicidal, or simply saying “it gets better” just because...it’s not enough, yeah it’s not enough. It’s definitely not enough for me. [chuckles slightly]. Yeah, I mean like now that I’m living openly, expressing myself openly um my life is better from a certain standpoint. But then again I wish I would’ve had...um, the information whether it be videos, books, literatures, whatever it is, I wish I would’ve had that information that told me that ok, they gay community can be very insidious. And Things like Gay Pride are now very commercial and things like dating and you know like all these sorts of things, like dating and sex it’s just very, it’s very shallow. I wish someone had told me all of that in addition to you might have to come out to your parents, you might get kicked out um you might commit suicide. I wish I’d had that in addition. Anyway, I’m rambling.

C: Can you tell me your stance of “coming out” or being “tolerated”? I remember we had a discussion about this in the past about your contentions around the word “tolerated” in regards to your identities. Could you explain a little bit more.

M: Yeah, I definitely don’t like the idea of coming out. There is a sort of like an idea of ok they have to “tolerate” your sexuality, something that’s a part of you. There’s something, there’s something bothersome about that to me and that’s why I never came out to my parents and that’s

why I only barely came out to my best friend. Because again it feels like this ...this, show only for somebody to “tolerate” you. You know, it’s almost like saying, “please, please accept me for who I am.” And most of the time the queer youth haven’t even accepted themselves. Like, they’re still battling with themselves in high school, like when you’re first coming on to sexuality, like you don’t, even if you immediately come out are you...you know...you don’t have the experiences yet, I mean most queer youth, don’t have the experiences yet as far as like sex goes, like they haven’t entered fully in the community if they’re in high school. So, they have a very narrow scope to be working with to begin with for themselves, to accept themselves, and then yet again it’s almost as if like okay, well I’m gonna have to have my parents tolerate me too. Like that puts a lot of...coming out puts a lot of psychological pressure on um queer youth, yeah regardless of your orientation, um as far as LGBTQ+ . Um I know it definitely put a lot of pressure on me. Even though I didn’t come out, it put a lot of psychological pressure on me and it has a lot to do with like with things such as, “tolerance” and shame and all these sorts of things and like you’re, yeah. I mean, I mean I guess it could be said that I’m cowardly because I didn’t have the bravery to like open myself up like that to my parents and like you know be willing to have them be shameful of me or you know be ashamed of me or even fear me or you know even dislike me. I mean it could be, it could be perfectly said, “ok you’re a coward because you didn’t do that.” But then again I just couldn’t get myself around myself around the idea of this, of this, this show and this performance and this begging to, at the end of the performance, begging to be accepted, begging just...the applause of “oh here you are!”. You know, uh, I know that wouldn’t have helped me enter into the gay world. Coming out to parents, coming out to my best friend didn’t help me enter it. What helped me enter it is like coming to grips within myself and exploring within myself um what it means to like come out to yourself and realize your own truth. Rather than having somebody else, like you know, tell somebody else your truth and then let them handle it anyway they want. You know that can be damaging and it is damaging for the, uh, the kids that come out, then they get kicked or they commit suicide or they relentlessly get bullied. All as a result of them telling someone else something that they could’ve you know on the reverse side kept to themselves until they built it up within themselves until they can be like around people who they are comfortable telling. Because I feel like a lot of people are forced to even come out, because it’s always like you have to come out to your parents, you have to come out to that best friend, you have to, you know, you have to make it known. I mean, what if you’re not ready? And it’s my idea that a lot of teens might not be. I don’t wanna presume anything, but it’s my idea that a lot of them aren’t ready. Yeah. And again, coming out, the idea of coming out never helped me like progress and enter the gay world at all for me.

C: Yeah. Is there anything else that is lingering or that you would like to share before we conclude this interview?

M: Hmm.. let me check my notes. [long pause and flipping sounds of pages of his notebook]. Yeah, I guess this bears mentioning. I think the narrative needs to be changed as far as like what even coming out means, because it seems to be when you come out you go into this masculine um...patriarchal, sort of, entity. Like, when you come out that’s what you go to. And it seems to be um, like um a lot of gay people, queer people follow within the footsteps of you meet someone, you get married and you do all these sort of things. Like, you adopt kids and all these sorts of things that are heteronormative. And I think that narrative needs to be changed or it

needs to be opened up a bit because it seems to me that you come out, it seems very methodical, like you do this, do this, do this, do this. You hit all these gay goals. You know. Whereas I think the narrative needs to be opened up completely. Or, like that narrative there needs to be abolished. Because things like marriage or even partnership [voice went up an octave with word “partnership”], you know...not everybody wants to marry, not everybody wants a partner, not everybody wants kids and things like that. And so, it needs to be worded differently so people can feel, like young people, can feel like they...ok I don’t want those things but if I come out, like there is some space for me. There is, you know, yeah...it’s important even at that age to know that there’s space for you. I mean that would’ve been important and critical for me. I probably would’ve been a different gay now. I probably would be a different homosexual guy now if I knew that there was a space for someone who didn’t want those monumental things. Yeah...yeah. How it can be opened up, I’m not sure [laughs].

C: [laughs] Question of the century.

M: Yeah, how that narrative can be opened up, I’m not sure.

C: Yeah.

M: I guess it goes with how things are perpetrated in the media and then in movies and in books. It always seems like you know, it’s formulaic. They come out, then they meet someone, then they get married. And that’s seen as the like The Thing to do. You know you’re working class, you’re “professional” [laughs], you know you have this nice house, you know you do all these sorts of things and it just seems very formulaic and very shallow and very non-sensical to me. Yeah, because I think if a lot of queer people thought about it and realized how, you know, heteronormative most of these things are and how societal these things are um I think yeah...yeah. Because I think the idea of being or being queer is just breaking apart from all that shit. You know, I mean...that’s what it means for me, that’s what it kinda meant for me back then even. Not this idea that gay was like “accept me”, my sexuality, and I like men... But I’m also willing to you know try to do the right thing and like get married, and do all these “normal” things. I mean being queer is being radical in my mind and break out and finding your own space. If you want to get married that’s fine. But, I think it’s just being forced on people through the media, I mean rarely ever see a queer story where this person just you know has there own space. I mean it happens, there are people out there, but it’s rarely ever documented...[voice trails off] rarely.

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## Shaya Interview

C= Colin S=Shaya

C: Ok, so if you could tell me a little bit about yourself. Like, where were you born? Or um I guess what races/ethnic groups do you most closely identify with?

S: Yeah, so I was uh born in Iran and I grew up in Iran until I was fifteen and then at the age of fifteen I moved to the United States and I went to high school in the U.S. and basically stayed here, uh and continued to live here. Um for in terms of races, that's always sort of been sort of a difficult question because um I identify as Iranian, I identify as Middle Eastern. But, when it comes to like the U.S. census there's no, usually there's no spot for Middle Eastern and usually Middle Eastern's are considered white. Um, so I was actually very confused because the Middle East is also part of *Asia* [higher tone in her voice on word "Asia"] so....so officially I actually never knew if I am white. So, usually I would just "other" in official forms...

C: Hmm.

S: Especially because there's no sort of race discourse in Iran, so then coming to the U.S. and having this race discourse is very...so yeah usually I would just write "other" even though I should've technically put "white" [laughs].

C: [laughs]

S: But I didn't quite see myself in that category either. Um I guess Middle Eastern, Iranian.

C: Cool.

S: That's the closest [chuckles] I can come up with.

C: Ok. Um and then I guess what is your gender identity? Preferred pronouns? Your sexual orientation?

S: Hmm. Um. I mean I identify as queer both in terms of gender and in terms of sexuality? Um, I think, I identify as both I guess as, I identify as both cis-woman and like a genderqueer cis-woman, I guess would be the most accurate way um of describing myself. Sometimes, I use like the word dyke to describe myself in sort of like this playful manner. Um, but usually queer I think is the sort of best [clears throat] descriptor. Um yeah, what was the other part of your question?

C: Umm...

S: Sexual and gender identity?

C: Yeah, I guess. Your preferred gender pronouns? Sexual orientation? But I guess you kind of already answered that.

S: Yeah, she/her is fine. Also partial to they or them.

C: Cool. Umm...oh and also I forgot um..do you practice a religion? Or did you grow up with any religion?

S: Um I grew as a Shia Muslim. But, um I...I mean my family was never very religious and now I don't really identify or I don't really practice any religion. Growing up it was sort of on and off. Like sometimes I would practice and sometimes I wouldn't. So yeah.

C: Cool.

S: Um yeah, I mean now that I am in the United States, I identify as Muslim um and I think that's more sort of because of the political climate [laughs], because of islamaphobia and all of that in the U.S. that it becomes more of a political identification. Um, but I'm not really practicing anything.

C: Yeah. I can definitely see that.

S: [laughs].

C: Um and then...so, you said that you got a chance to watch the video I sent you?

S: Yes.

C: Have you seen other videos? Um from "It Gets Better"?

S: Yeah, I...I know about the project. I mean I've heard of it previously. I don't remember any specific videos other than the one I just watched um, certainly not recently. Uh, because I feel like this project is from quite a few years ago.

C: mmhmm.

S: Like 2007 or something, I don't know. Um, so I don't remember watching other videos but I know about the project.

C: Ok. Um, so what were your initial reactions to the video? What ways do you identify with it? Or did you not identify with it?

S: mmhmm.

C: If you could tell me about how you felt?

S: Yeah, I mean...the way I sort of viewed was that it...I mean the project seemed born out of a, you know a good intention to try to reach out to you know young kids who are in middle school or high school who are being bullied. Um and I assume because it came out a few years ago maybe it was because of like, due to like the string of like youth, queer youth suicide and like all of these things that were happening um, that are still happening. But I think for a while there was like a huge like media emphasis on like youth suicides because of homophobia in schools.

So, I kind of see it as coming from like a good place, like good natured, good intentions, you know?

C: Yeah.

S: Um. But it kind of, I think it has a lot of assumptions in it that are not really like you know expressed outloud. Um the first one being the title of the project, right? Which is like “It Gets Better” and sort of like assumes that everybody is going to have the same trajectory in life. Um which, you know that your only problem is basically just high school bullies. Um that if you somehow can manage to get past that you’re not gonna have any other problems. But like, you know, I mean like people have like real-world problems like finding jobs or you know like um getting harassed on the street. Or you know...like I know, for example, like a lot of trans people they’re harassment doesn’t end after high school, right? So, um or even bullying doesn’t really end. I mean I just like literally, you know I’m living in New York. But literally like a few months I was on the, I was like walking to the metro and I got like harassed, some guy went behind me and was like, “Oh are you a lesbian? Oh are you a lesbian?” Like...this sort of harassment keeps happening and I’m like twenty-seven years old and like...

C: Wow.

S: And I’m living supposedly in “progressive” New York or whatever. So, I’m just saying that like this sort of harassment, whether it ends or *not* after high school is very much dependent on *who* you are. Like whether you’re a person of color, whether you um are middle class, or like sort of like how your gender presentation comes off. Like if you’re a more masculine woman or if you’re more like a gender normative woman or man or if you’re a trans person. Like all these factors will effect how sort of harassment and what kinds of violence you might face. So, it kind of...yeah, so the video kind of seemed like it was assuming everybody will have this sort of like really like clear path [slight chuckle]...

C: Hm.

S: ...towards like having like you know their partner and like their son they had adopted and all of that. So, I’m not sure like...how effective a project like this is even though I can that it is like a good um. Like it sort of comes from this mentoring mentality, like we should mentor younger queer kids. Which I think is a good attempt. But I just don’t know if like this is the way to go about doing that, you know? Um, yeah. I think those are some of my initial thoughts on that.

C: Yeah. Definitely. Um do you feel like it um...do you feel like it applied to your life or did it apply to things that you’re wanting in your life? Or...

S: Hm...I think...I mean, I think there’s a certain truth in the video in that your life changes after high school. But I’m not sure if it’s because like *It* gets better. Meaning the world gets better. Um, I think it’s more that *you* as a person sort of become um...you become, you can become sort of a stronger person or maybe you can gain access to certain resources that perhaps weren’t available to you when you were younger or you will gain a different perspective just by

the fact that you're going through life. But I don't think that necessarily means that *It*...and I'm not actually sure the "It" in "It Gets Better" is...

C: [laughs]

S: I think it's like the world will like get better, like I don't know. Um, I'm not sure if that's necessarily the case, because I do think there is a difference between like between being a teenager and then being like, like I'm twenty-seven now, and like being twenty-seven year old.

C: Yeah.

S: Like, your life does change [chuckles]. Um but it's more about how your perspective also evolves and you know sort of resources you can draw on and like, like your personal growth as opposed to like homophobia or transphobia don't just go away after high school. Does that make sense?

C: Definitely.

S: I think like it...I mean it applies in my life in the sense that, yes, my life now is very different than it was when I was in high school. But I don't think it's necessarily because the world like got different. Like I think, I mean like the world has also been evolving, but it's also more about how I've...I as a person have been evolving through the people I've met. You know the activities that I've been involved in, the path that my life has taken. Um, so its yeah. I mean I think it's a more complicated story than what they're presenting.

C: Yeah. I would agree, yeah. So, if you could tell what was coming out experience like? How did your family react? Is the relationship with them better?

S: So, coming out to my parents you mean?

C: Um, yes. I guess I should specify that. Coming out to your parents.

S: Yeah, so um I. So when I came out to my parents I was 17. It was my last year of high school, like my senior year of high school. And I was already in the United States and my parents were in the United States. Or it was in the summer between high school and college, or something like that. I think that's why they were in the United States. And um. I actually had no intention of coming out, um like it kind of just happened because of our uh our friend who got kicked out of her house for being queer uh. I mean so yeah that happened. I was recounting this story to my parents and mostly to my mom, I mean my dad was like there listening but he was probably on his phone or computer or something. But um my mom was sort of like, "That's not right to kick out your daughter because you know she's gay. No matter what your child does you should love them." So you know this very like, kind of critiquing like the parents for like kicking out their child. Um, so that was sort of like the first, I mean I didn't say I was queer then, but that was sort of like the first conversation, or the first sense that I sort of tried to get from my parents of how they might react. Of course it's very different if it's your own child

opposed to somebody else's child, right? Um, and then that was first year that I went to pride and um I, you know, like I went to this gay that was open to people under twenty-one. So, all of those things caused my parents to ask me like, why are you doing all these things?

C: [laughs].

S: They never opposed it. They never told me don't do this. They were like why are you going to gay pride? Why are you going to these gay clubs? Why are you hanging out with all of these gay people? Like, it was just...they didn't quite understand I guess or were more just like what is that all about? And I think I just in a very causal way said well, why do you think? [laughs].

C: [laughs].

S: Like I tried to play it very cool. Like I never sat my parents down and was like, well let me tell you something. I never did that. I was just like you know...oh I remember actually I got this pin that said "I Heart Girls" and my dad saw that and was like "what is that?"

C: [laughs].

S: And I was just like...what like. So what. I just tried to be super cool, like so what, this is not a big deal type of attitude. Of course like inside I was like dying [laughs]. But I tried to put on like a this natural kind of like spin on it. So then my mom started asking questions and then I, at that point I was saying well I like women and men. I tried to sort of put it in this way of you know, like I like both to...like at that point I was still trying to figure out my own sexuality and I hadn't had relationships prior to that or I hadn't both like, either romantic or sexual relations at that point. Um, so it was like an open question for myself, but also like it, I thought that was more acceptable to them. You know, um or maybe could be perhaps more acceptable to them. So then my mom started uh arguing a lot with me, but her arguments were all like you don't know yourself kind of arguments. Saying oh you're too young, like when I was seventeen I did things without thinking but I was wrong. [laughs].

C: [laughs].

S: I was like okay mom. Thanks for the advice, but that's totally irrelevant. Um so, she I think at the beginning my mom thought that...so she's, like her way of dealing with something is to like argue with you and like try to convince you that you're wrong. Because she didn't really have any good arguments against it. Like I said they weren't very religious, so like for her to have a religious argument would be kind of like hypocritical. But then she tried to be like oh it's unnatural. Um or, at first she said it's immoral, then she said it's unnatural, it's a disease. But then I'm like, ok it can't be both...

C: [laughs].

S:...it's either a disease that you can't control or you're doing an immoral act, they can't be both. So, in the beginning it was more like argumentation. It wasn't, like for her she hadn't

internalized it, like it hadn't become personal, like it was more of we're going to argue about this like we argue about everything else, like a political issue or social issue. But my dad didn't say anything and then later on I found out from my mom that apparently it had affected him a lot.

C: Really?

S: He was very upset. But he didn't argue with me or didn't say anything. Like he was just, his mode of like quiet, like silent anger kind of thing you know. Um but yeah, later on my mom said that, that really affected him and he was really upset and bothered. Like he took it very seriously. Whereas I think my mom, she maybe, my sense was that they didn't take it as seriously, or my mom atleast, didn't take it as seriously. Like may she thought, oh she's just like...yeah. She told me oh you're just being influenced by your friends. Like you're saying you're this way because you're hanging out with these people and they're influencing you. So I think she was trying not to take it seriously and sort of blame it on the social world that I was interacting with. Uh, we didn't really talk about it after that and then you know I went to college. And it didn't really come up. And then I had a fairly long relationship with a cis-man. Um and I thought, that they thought that maybe that had turned me straight. Um, but we didn't talk about it, but I assumed that my parents were going to think that I am straight just because I'm having this relationship, which doesn't mean that. So yeah, the conversation sort of went away for a while, for a few years. Like I would tell them that I am working at the LGBTQ center at my university or doing...like they knew that I was involved in like going to pride or queer-like related activities. But um they didn't really comment on it, their way of dealing with was to sort of like deny it. That you know....

C: Yeah.

S: But then after I broke up with that guy that I was dating, I actually asked my mom if she had actually thought that, um at this point I was twenty-three. And she said uh no. I was actually surprised, she was like uh no your dad and I are still worried about that, we're still worried about you being queer and I was like oh that's actually a relief! [laughs].

C: [laughs].

S: I thought it would be worse if they thought that I turned straight because then I would have to got through all this stuff again. Okay the base is still there to work with. Um, so then my biggest problem with my mom was not about being, it wasn't really about the sexual acts of um, it wasn't really the sexual acts that were bothering her I think. It was sort of the label of gay or bisexual or queer or whatever, that was...because she would keep telling me like ok whatever experiences you want to have, fine, but like don't label yourself because you're going to change as you grow up and what if you change your mind and then if you call yourself a lesbian then like men won't be interested in you and you're going to loose opportunities for good husbands. [laughs].

C: [laughs].

S: So, I think she really struggled with these words and because they're not really like...like I think it was easier for my mom at least to accept that...I mean this is going to sound ridiculous, but homosexual acts, like the sexual acts...

C: Yeah.

S: like she wasn't necessarily disturbed by those acts, even though it was probably foreign to her. But I think the identities were the things that she was bothered by the most. Um to like define yourself in a certain way and what that means, I think part of that comes from her sort of like, the stereotypes of what she had about queer people look like, right? Like, she probably had this stereotype of like, you know, like the person with the shaved head and the tattoos and like doing drugs, you know, not that there's anything wrong with those things, but like this undesirable picture in her mind, probably I assume. But actually my biggest problem with mom started like, at the time when I broke up with that guy was not actually so much about sexuality, but about gender, about gender presentation...

C: Hmm.

S: ...and I think that was the other thing that bothered her the most, was like the way that I dressed. If I dressed more masculine um I think that was more unacceptable than whatever private life that I was sort of leading.

C: Hmm.

S: Like the fact that I looked like a lesbian or whatever. She wanted me to be feminine like that was sort of the biggest problem. Um, so finally two or three years ago I got into like this fight with my mom about, at this point I'm twenty-five I think, so...I got into this huge fight with my mom being like you need to respect me. You know, like I'm twenty-five, you know, if I'm deciding to like to dress a certain way you know...yeah that was like a really bad fight we were just yelling at each other the whole time.

C: Ohh.

S: And it was really just ...yeah. She just kept wanting me to put on dresses, she always would be like oh why don't you put on a little bit of makeup, blah,blah, blah. And I was like I don't want to. If I...I mean for a while I did put on makeup and I did present more feminine and that was great and I wanted to do that, but then I got over after a few months. Then, I was I was my same old, sort of like...I don't know...like masculine of center, middle ground person that I am. Um, so that was actually, so after that fight things started to...our relationship started to get a little bit better. Um, I think our relationship also got better sort of because I...I think because I grew up. Um, you know when I was like seventeen it was more about...it was more about arguing back and forth and this person was trying to like prove their point.

C: Yeah.

S: Um, at that point I think, for me it was important for my parents to say like that is fine. But I think that's all I sort of needed for them to say that like yeah you're queer and that's totally fine. And like they weren't ready to do that. But I think that as I grew older I kind of also came to appreciate my parents a little bit more.

C: Hmm.

S: And sort of understand their perspective. Like it wasn't so much about me and my identity, and you know me having to prove and everybody having to accept me for exactly how I am, like I think that's how I was when I was younger. But like as I grew I think I started seeing things from their perspective and sort of respecting them more, respecting them more like as adults and equals and not as a child to the parent, if that makes sense?

C: Totally.

S: Um, so I think our relationship changed more because of that. More because I became more of an adult, and I became more understanding of *their* perspective and I was able to have more empathy for them and like the things they have done for me. Then we were able to sort of like have...you know, so then I told my mom like this issue of me wanting to dress a certain way is an issue of personal respect and after that our relationship started to get better. Um, so...it, yeah now I'm in a relationship um with a woman and so my mom met her actually and that was like the first person that she ever met...because like I'd had like random relationships, not even relationships, but like sleeping with women or whatever, but there was never anyone that I wanted to introduce to her.

C: Yeah.

S: Yeah, this actually happened last year. So my mom came to New York to visit [laughs]...

C: Yeah?

S: Yeah. So, we had been dating for like six months at this point and so my mom came and I mean I had told her. And actually I told her before on the phone, but again it wasn't like I had volunteered this information, but she just like asked me. She was like are you dating anyone? And she never asks these things, it just came out of nowhere and then um I was like uh yes. Because my policy is sort of like I'm not going to lie if somebody asks me, but I'm also not necessarily going to volunteer information if they're not interested.

C: Yeah.

S: So, I was like uh yes. Um and then my mom asked a bunch of questions and you know were speaking in Persian and in Persian there's no gender pronouns, so you can think about someone without indicating their gender at all. So it's not like the he/she difference. So yeah, I gave some information about this person and then finally my mom was like oh what's their name and I, uh, the name that I gave was a very obviously feminine name. So then my mom was like huh

okay. She didn't say anything, she didn't say anything critical or positive. She was just like okay. And she came to New York and they met each other and um...and the first night they met and I was talking to my mom afterwards and asked her what did you think? And she was like oh I really liked her and um I didn't sense any wrong and she seems like a really a nice person and blah, blah, blah. Like everything went well um and she said like my only concern is just like for you and like your future and I just want you to be happy and like...basically like she was saying her worry is that I'm, that I'm so how going to end up alone at forty-five years and like I'm not going to have any partners or whatever because...but you think that because you have this stereotype that like gay relationships aren't as stable or as like straight relationships. Um, whereas any relationship can fall apart at any point.

C: Yeah.

S: Um, and you know we have examples of both. And there's like a lot straight couples who stay together for like fifty years and they hate each other. You know, that's not ideal either. So, we sort of talked about this and my mom was like, she was very emotional and she started crying and like...

C: Ohh..

S: ...and I think that was sort of...even though I knew she was coming at this with a lot of like stereotypes in her head, um but it was also coming from a place of like being concerned for like my future well-being, but it was like clearly misplaced. So, we had a very good conversation about it that night and um after that she didn't really bring it up again. And um yeah, like uh now every time she calls me she always asks me about my partner...

C: Aww!

S: ...and I tell them oh like my partner might come...I'm going to visit her and her family in the summer and they were like oh ok. And I say oh she might come to Iran, but we do know yet because of Trump!

C: Oh...yeah...yeah.

S: So that was the plan and then we were like hmm maybe that's not a good plan [chuckles]. Anyway, I'm just saying in like terms of my parents were like...they were very neutral about it, like oh yeah you guys should go visit this place and that place. They weren't like oh my god! It wasn't like that at all. So, anyway to cut a long story short [laughs]...see this is what I told you, you can shut me up.

C: No, this is beautiful.

S: I'm telling you my life story. Um, yeah so yes my relationship has improved and think some of that has sort of come through...sort of continuously talking about things. But also through me

sort of changing and growing and trying to see...not basically having this attitude of my identity is so important that everybody much sort of bend over backwards to accommodate me. Which is a really easy position to take when you're like seventeen years old.

C: Oh yeah.

S: Um, but...now I'm sort of like trying to see, like what are the, what are the things that are important in a relationship of child, like an adult child and a parent, like what are the ways that I can relate to my parents outside of this particular identity, but also in such a way that, like I'm hiding my identity from my parents and like I talk about my partner to them. Yeah we just recently took a trip together and I sent them photos of both of us, it's not that I'm hiding it but it's also that I'm not harping on the queerness being the most important thing about me, that everybody must understand and everybody must know. It's more like what is important to them actually and me trying to relate to them on those issues and that front and then in turn building that respect so that then they come to respect me as a person and over time they accept this part of my life. I mean like that's sort of been...I don't know if this works for everyone, but this has been sort of the path that has unfolded for me so far.

C: Yeah.

S: So, yeah.

C: Yeah, makes sense. Thank you for sharing all of that. So, my last question is how do you feel about the LGBTQ community? Do you ever feel a split between that community and your racial/ethnic community or identities?

S: Um yeah, I mean yeah when I went to college when I was like eighteen, nineteen, um yeah I would say that there was definitely...you know...the mainstream LGBTQ community or even like films or whatever, you know that had representations of LGBTQ people were very much um, a lot of them were very you know white, a lot of them were focused on middle or upper class communities. So I think like the range of like representations in films or whatever, at that point was very limited. I think now it has become much more um diverse in that sense. But uh in 2007, 2008, 2009 I think it was still very you know limited, it was sort of like on the threshold and even like queerness, of becoming more mainstream. So, I think there was definitely, in terms of representation I think there was definitely a problem. In terms of the community itself, I mean yeah I think a lot of um, it was really hard for me to tell people that I was queer and Iranian. I mean for someone who moved to the United States in 2004, that was the height of the Iraq War, like people didn't even know the difference between Iran and Iraq and like that was already hard [chuckles].

C: Damn.

S: And then of course Islamaphobia and all of that stuff. So being Iranian in general and this was before Obama elected and all of that, that was difficult on its own. Um in terms of being queer and Iranian it is very, I try to avoid telling that I was queer because um, not because I was about

their homophobia necessarily, because I felt that somehow that I could deal with that, but what I couldn't sort of deal with was like their fetishization of me being like, being like this queer Muslim woman.

C: Hmm.

S: And people always wanted to know like "Oh, what is like to be queer in Iran?" Like, that's sort of like very um orientalist, racist picture that like, "oh you want to get behind the veil" [chuckles], the real lives of like you know...they do that about women in the Middle East too, but especially like queer lives in the Middle East...

C: Yeah.

S: So, everytime I would like go to a party, for example, I would like meet somebody and sometimes they would detect an accent and they would be like, "Oh, where are you from?" And I'd be like, "Oh, originally I'm from Iran." And you know if somehow I had presented myself as queer and they'd be like "oh you're queer and Iranian." And they'd be like, "Oh, what is it like?" and I'd be like "ah, leave me alone!" [thinking in her head]. Because that question doesn't even mean anything! And so I'd turn that question back at them and be like, "Well, what is it like being queer for you?" you know or whatever. So, you know even being in queer of uh groups, especially in sort of these mainstream groups is always really annoying because um I always had that fear that, that's the first thing that people wanted to know about me without having actually met me. You know, they ask a few questions and one of the first questions they ask is *this*. Um, so that was always sort of a problem. Even when it wasn't a problem it was always something in the back of my head and I so tired of trying to um navigate this fine line between you know...basically I was being forced into a place where I had to defend Iran, which like I don't want to do. Then I have to defend um, but also not fall into like sort of presenting like a very stereotypical image of Iran.

C: Hmm.

S: But also like recognizing sort of you know, but also like being truthful. So, it sort of puts you in this impossible position and it's...it actually made me really not want to talk about *this* to people like I just met and didn't know and didn't trust. Um yeah, like, in some ways I was also lucky because the LBT Center at my university that I got involved in had this like this really kickass like director and you know she's really badass um and I met a lot of, um she is a white woman, but there are a lot of people of color who were hired there and worked there and they were all students and they were very like badass activists on like trans issues, disability issues, and so like I think I learned more working at that center than I did taking fucking classes, I'm not even kidding [chuckles]. So that's how I sort of came to my political like uh positions. Because I had developed some political positions based on sort of like me being queer and you know like I sort already had a critique on, for example, islamaphobia or things like that because I already had experiences with things that. But I didn't know anything about disability and queerness, I didn't know anything about like um you know the history of racism in this country, so I got a lot of education [chuckles] for lack of a better word, through that center and through the people that I met while I was in college. So, I think I was very luck to have had access to

that space and be surrounded by like other queer Middle Easterners or like queer people of color. Um, and like a lot of trans people who were like all leaders on campus doing like awesome, badass things. Um, so I think that helped with sort of like dealing...or maybe not dealing, but insulating myself from like mainstream gay politics.

C: Hmm.

S: Um. Or at least it gave me more of these political positions and I was very lucky have that. In terms of personally I think I did experience um, at the beginning like when I was younger it was very hard for me... to be a queer Iranian. I think like that seemed paradoxical to me...

C: Hmm.

S: ...I mean it doesn't now obviously. But at that point, and again I think it's part of like me trying to figure out like who I am, um but I think the way I actually dealt with it was...I mean this very complicated, I mean I always identified as an Iranian uh and like I never denied that, *but* I think what happened was when I moved to the U.S. when I was fifteen, I kind of like put that identity sort of like...like I didn't put in any sort of work into maintaining that connection. For example, I stopped reading things in Persian...

C: Yeah.

S: ...so, like I would only read things in English. Or, like I stopped umm...yeah I think language was sort of a big thing, like I stopped speaking it with my family, I would speak to them in like this Persian-English mix um and I actually lost part of the language, I mean not the spoken language but like written language, so I think lost that.

C: Wow.

S: Um, and I tried...so, it wasn't really, I think I definitely distanced myself from Iranian things a lot, whether it's like Iranian culture or like movies or even just following the news on Iran, I think I stopped that. So, I think I, I began, even though I would say I am Iranian, like there was nothing about me that would spell Iranian to anyone...

C: Hmm.

S: ...unless they detected any accent or something, right? So, I think I did lose a part of my identity if that makes sense?

C: Yeah.

S: Um and actually it was through thinking of myself as queer and going to like this center on campus and like meeting all of these queer people of color and people who like identified as like Chicana/Chicano and queer or like Palestinian and Queer and blah, blah, blah. Sort of like looking at them and following their examples and how they articulated their lives and identities.

I actually sort of came back at my Iranian identity through my queer identity, if that makes sense?

C: That's really cool.

S: Did that make sense?

C: Yeah!

S: Because I've also been thinking about this myself and I'm like wow...I really like, it was sort of paradoxical, but my queers allowed me to...you know sort of get access to these resources and these people and who really helped shape my vision of the world and they brought me actually back to my Iranian identity in this very like roundabout and unintentional way. Um and I sort of started, I started like getting involved in this Iranian cultural organization and I started reading the news in Persian. Basically, I tried to re-gain some of these sort of cultural works, that was meaningful for me at the time...

C: Yeah.

S: Um. But um now it's not really, I mean this was like eight or ten years ago, but now it's not really like as much of an issue I guess. But occasionally I still get the people who are like, "What is like, really?" [laughs]...

C: What is it like...

S: Like, what is it like being queer and Iranian. So I still get some of those people.

C: Yeah.

S: But, um yeah. Did I answer your question?

C: Yes. Yes, I mean there are no right or wrong answers. Um, this is your story and I'm trying to capture that and I'm getting it, yeah.

S: Okay.

C: And it's great.

S: Okay, cool.

C: Um, I guess that was my last question. Was there anything that you wanted to add?

S: Um...I don't know. No, I think..

C: Sums it up? [laughs].

S: that sums it up. I mean after three hours that's the sum of it [laughs].

C: [laughs] Cool.

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## Leon Interview

### C: Colin L: Leon

C: Hi Leon, thanks for taking to the time for this interview with me today. If you could tell me a bit about yourself. Like, where were you born? What races or ethnic groups do you most closely identify with? Gender identity? Sexual orientation? Religion? Class?

L: I was born in Santa Clara, California. Um group mostly in the Portland/Vancouver, Washington area that's uh...lets see. I would definitely consider my *very* white [laughs], *very* pale. I don't like using that, it feels weird, I definitely prefer European or something, but whatever. Gender identity, I am [clears throat], I am technically I guess a bisexual male, that would be me. Lets see...sexual orientation? Hmm oh oops Gender identity, sorry...masculine side. Sexual orientation? Already answered that and I do not practice religion *anymore*, being the key thing there, because I *did*. I grew up Morman and I wasn't just *any* Morman, I was a very hardcore Morman boy. [chuckles].

C: Really?

L: I...I...oh yes, oh yes. I, um, was very into the church and that's not necessarily just my fault. The church very much tends to like indoctrinate kids from a young age and um I know that like I believed in the church without a single, tiniest bit of doubt. Um in fact I believed in it so much that I remember that I baptized not only my girlfriend, back in the day in high school, but also her brother and one of my other best friends. Yeah, I was a good Morman growing up [laughs].

C: Wow.

L: Yeah. Except I never went on my mission because I also happened to be a gay Morman and uh, that caused some pretty bad issues.

C: Yeah?

L: Yeah.

C: So, you said that you identify as bisexual, right?

L: Kind of. For me, like I identify technically as bisexual because I can definitely...I'm still going by the Kinsey Scale, I'm sure if that's something you like or not. Like, I definitely identify as bisexual, but realistically emotionally, physically and all that other stuff I'm definitely

attracted more towards men. Usually day-to-day I go by gay, because I just prefer that I guess. But technically I would say I'm bisexual, I was with my last girlfriend for five years and I very much loved her. I loved her and I probably would've married her if I hadn't thought it were smart for me trying to be with a man to see if I was meant for that that instead.

C: Yeah. And how is it being bisexual in the LGBTQ community? Like, do you ever find um exclusion because of it? Or it's not a big deal at all?

L: I did at first [clearing throat]. Especially when I was first coming out, people were like, "Oh, well you're just gay and you don't realize it." Stuff like that. You know, I'm sure you've heard that before.

C: Yeah.

L: Well, yeah I guess you could say, I definitely consider myself generally gay because of my preferences. But, no I am definitely bisexual [chuckles]. Um, as far as like my like general sexual activity I don't usually find myself with women, ever, to be honest. But, I am definitely a bisexual. I'm definitely attracted to women sometimes, you know.

C: Yeah.

L: But I did have umm yes I did have plenty occasions where gay men were like "oh well you just think you're bisexual." Stuff like that.

C: And you're like, no this is how I identify.

L: Yeah.

C: Yeah. Ummm. So yeah, with your religion, you said you currently don't practice any religion?

L: Right now I am Atheist.

C: You're Atheist right now.

L: I'm not, I wouldn't necessarily call myself anti-theist, but I'm not a part of the new Atheist movement if you're familiar with that. But I'm Atheist, yes.

C: Ok. And it sounds like once you came out you faced quite a bit of exclusion from the Mormon community?

L: [clearing throat loudly and coughing].

C: Are you alright? Do you need some water or a break?

L: No, no I'm fine. Yes, um...as is generally typical with the Mormon community and it doesn't specifically have to do with gender issues either. If you have someone who is struggling with something that they consider sinful or "naughty", then you generally, usually, always face outcast. It is very much a community and um if you don't fit in the community you're not looked to highly upon. I know that um that I...because I was uh kicked out I didn't have to face to much of that because I was nowhere anywhere near my old community anyway. But, I definitely know from experience from my other gay mormon friends or ex-mormon friends that they were definitely outcast. Especially with like uh the older generation, um I know friends who have just barely come out and they're like in their 50s...

C: Yeah.

L: ...and like all of their peers.... [clearing throat] excuse me, have just completely stopped talking to them. They're no longer accepted in the community whatsoever, even if they're no longer practicing, like they're still, like they might still be part of Mormon families or whatnot. But, no um that's grounds for, if they were married to a Mormon, that's grounds for divorce, that's grounds for just being completely ostracized from whatever, not just family but the community that you were part of. You may still have people talk to you, but it will never be the same.

C: Yeah.

L: Mormons love to talk about not judging one another, but you know there's judgement in those eyes.

C: Interesting, ok.

L: Sorry if I got off topic.

C: No, no it's interesting for me to hear because I didn't grow up with any religion.

L: Yeah, it can be pretty bad. Um, so this kinda connects with your earlier question about myreligious phase. I did mention this, I did mention that I am not like new Atheist or like anti-theist, I will have to say though that I do not have good feelings towards the Mormon Church whatsoever. Um...But we can talk about that question another time.

C: Ok. So what was your initial reaction to the like of the "It Gets Better" video I sent to you earlier? Or other videos you have seen?

L: Um well I'll go with that specific video. Um I remember, I think that came out when I had just barely turned twenty and I um it, um at that point I was still a closeted Mormon. Um I, my parents knew about it, knew about me being attracted to men, but um [clears throat] but I have to make a distinction here for the rest of this interview um the knew I was attracted to men, but in gay Mormon families or in Mormon families, or just the Mormon Church to this day, they don't believe that anyone is gay.

C: hmm.

L: They believe people are just um suffering from same-sex attraction. It's just some mental disorder or it's the devil tempting you [laughs].

C: Yeah? [chuckles]

L: Yeah, so um growing up um my parents discovered me, unfortunately, discovered some dirty porn on the family computer back in the day when I was young [laughs].

C: Yeah.

L: So that wasn't a very fun experience, but that's how they found out that I was attracted to men. They figured who it was and it was me for sure. Um lets see here, but that wouldn't really [inaudible word] I...that wasn't really me coming out to them um 'cause I was still very much uh a gay Mormon and I very much wanted to believe in the church and everything. So, I just...uh just went with what I was taught and I just told them that, I said, "I'm suffering from same-sex attraction." And they treated it as that, they treated it as um some kind of disease or whatnot, something I was suffering from. Something that needed to be cured. So, um going to the question here, when I saw that Youtube video um I guess I still hadn't come out yet necessarily to them. But, I knew I was, in their mind, I was still suffering from the same-sex attraction.

C: hmm.

L: But um I need to talk more about this letter in my coming out process, but um....that video gave me a whole lot of hope. I don't know, I'm mumbling my words here sorry.

C: No you're fine.

L: I jumped, I jumped ahead what I wrote on this paper. But um just simple it up, yes it still gave me a lot of hope. Um I still believed in the God, although I was quickly loosing my faith in the church, uh I was taking it so seriously as I had before. I had been very suicidal for obvious reasons...

C: Yeah...

L: Well I shouldn't say obvious reasons. Do you need me to expand on that?

C: Um. I...well, if you don't want to you don't have to.

L: No, I can.

C: Ok.

L: I can definitely expand on that. Um so in the Mormon church...yeah it's like...the idea that there are gay men out there, that there are men attracted to men completely screws up what they call the Planet of Solvation um it's there um...good lord I don't want to get into explaining this to you. It's just their big, divine cosmic planet for humanity where we all eventually turn into Gods, blah, blah. Anyway, in that plan everyone is supposed to be able to be with men and women, because that's how you propagate the universe. You gotta find your wife, eventually become married, become Gods and have spirit children. Well, you can't do that if you're gay [laughs]. So, it, being gay is looked down and harshly upon in the church.

C: Yeah.

L: I remember growing up as a kid constantly thinking to myself, um because I knew I was attracted to men, I knew it from a young age, um I have to deal with certain, nasty things that I did...especially after years of masturbating and like looking at porn and stuff um I, I hated myself for doing that. I hated myself for my feelings...

C: Yeah. Mmhmm.

L: I was very suicidal and the church basically taught me that, the only thing worse than you know than homosexual relationships is killing yourself, is murder.

C: Wow.

L: And So, growing up as a child I was constantly asking myself, "Hey, should I continue to live in a sinful lifestyle?" you know, watching my gay porn, masturbating and you know potentially being with you know a man. And you know wanting to be in that type of relationship and living the rest of myself in a sinful [sneezes, clears throat]...excuse me. In a sinful relationship [clears throat] or um by having tons or by having multiple, slightly lesser sins than murder, you know, but that would completely add up to be far worse than one sin for murder, does that make sense to you?

C: Um.

L: So, as a child I was constantly thinking to myself maybe I should just end myself now so that way I don't have all these multiple sins on my record when I face God. Does that make sense?

C: Yeah, no, it does, yeah. Yeah, I see what you're saying.

L: That was my, my delightful childhood there. And just, you know, one bad, simple thinking and logic that completely ruined my childhood but that's what I had to deal with umm. But that video when I saw it, it gave me hope, because on the outside I was still kind of believing in God, but I still wanted what I saw in that video, there are these two generally attractive white, gay men and they're like lovey-dovey with another and they're smiling and everything. And that stupid video, of course if shows them with their families and everything, like their family is accepting of them and blah, blah, blah.

C: Yeah.

L: And I thought oh my god I want that [laughs]. I just really wanted what they had, I just really wanted to be in a relationship and be open about it with the man I love someday and I was just so incredibly jealous about what I saw them doing and um I knew I was in a very complicated um situation so I kept those feelings to myself. Um, coming out certainly would not be, despite what they were saying, would not be a very good idea for me. Um I guess I need to move on to something else that I haven't mentioned yet. I think you might know, I went through a lot of conversion therapy as a kid. My parents spent tens of thousands of dollars on me seeing a Mormon Psychologist that professed that he would fix me.

C: Wow...

L: Did I tell you that?

C: No, not until now.

L: Oh well boom.

C: [laughs].

L: [laughs]. So, no uh. So, I guess I grew up in the Mormon church and my parents knew about my same-sex attractions, my attractions towards men. Um so they wanted to help me fix that, because they didn't want to see me go down this naughty, dirty, disgusting road of you know of eventually perhaps being *gay* you know. They didn't want to see me do *that* and they ended up finding a Mormon psychologist and uh who professed that he would be able to help me and fix all my problems. So, they uh they ended up having me see him when I was fifteen, I think I had just turned fifteen, and I um, saw him for three years um atleast once a week or maybe every other week, for atleast three years and they spent all my college savings basically on this guy.

C: Oh my gosh.

L: Multiple tens of thousands of dollars um and during this experience um I would have to go through um multiple aversion therapies um where I would have to like "smell" aversion. Are you familiar with aversion therapy? The dark side of Psychology?

C: Uh kind of.

L: Where basically where what I would do, to give you an example, you would take, I will stick with smell aversion. I would make this concoction of something, basically rotted meat or egg, milk, something that would end up smelling absolutely horrible and I would stick it in a vile, just like that, and I would carry it around with me all day long, stick it in my pocket. And what I would do is that I would uh, if I, especially if I was attracted or if I had feelings of attraction or if I wanted to like masturbate or something like, what I would do is that I would have those

feelings of you know, anything about being with a man or something, or some dirty, sexual thought and I would take that vial out and I would [makes inhaling/snorting noise through nose with imaginary vial in his hand] smell, I would take a deep whiff of that, that way my mind would associate that thought of sexual gratification, attraction, whatnot with that smell...

C: Yeah.

L: ...the point was for me not to have that thought anymore [laughs].

C: Yeah.

L: So, I was supposed to, what I did, my psychologist would have me write down a multiple vignette, multiple sentences that would sort of start to like attract me or turn me on or something and right as I start to want to masturbate or whatnot, I would take a whiff of that (the vial) that was something I was supposed to do daily, it was a ritual every night before I went to bed.

C: Wow...

L: And uh I was supposed to do that for years and uh luckily I was lazy and didn't do that every night before bed [laughs].

C: [laughs].

L: But uh, yeah that's what I did for quite some time. Another thing he would have me do instead of smell, would be thought aversion, like have me think of burning corpses, like the most vial, disgusting thoughts you could think of and apply it in the same way um as I have already mentioned. I uh, my bishop actually had me wear a rubber band around my wrist so whenever I started to have attraction I would [shows me wrist and imitates snapping of rubber band on his wrist] I would just like snap myself with a rubber band. So yeah, I went through that as a kid phew...it was not normal.

C: Yeah, that's a lot to deal with. Yeah.

L: That was very messed up. Um, lets see here I can't remember where I was going with that, but I just wanted to get that off my chest so that if I refer to that in the future, I started referring to that earlier in my conversation um when I was telling you about when I had to just turned twenty. At point, after going through that for three years I started going hey this is not right [laughs].

C: Yeah...

L: This is kinda messed up. Um, I started loosing faith in the church. I still believed in God and everything, I just didn't take it nearly as seriously as I had before. So, I wasn't nearly as suicidal as I had been before. But um the problem was that my parents wanted me to take it seriously

they didn't want me to just say "hey, this is bullshit I'm not doing this anymore you know I'm going to accept myself for who I am."

C: Yeah.

L: They were *not* accepting of that whatsoever. So, um around this time actually when this video came out, shortly after like I made it, I tried not to make super clear, but like they were finding it was a lot more obvious that I wasn't interested in fighting my same-sex attraction. I started hanging out with gay men, I started talking to the internet, you know stuff like that. I started interacting with them and um what happened is um lets see here I remember that my stepfather, who I don't think I mentioned yet in this interview. Hold on let me put that thought process on hold. So um, going back to my basic information um my parents divorced when I was two. Um right now I live in California with my dad, my real dad. But I grew up with my mom and step dad in Vancouver, Washington.

C: Yeah.

L: Um so I spent my childhood there with them [clearing throat]. Now that you know that tidbit of information Um my step father was an *extremely* homophobic man. *Extremely* homophobic, *very* far right, he was a police officer. He was not a fun person to be around with at all and uh he definitely contributed to my issues growing up [nervous chuckle].

C: Yeah.

L: But, the reason I needed to just cut in there, because as I started to continue to fight my attractions um he would, he was definitely watching everything on our computers, making sure that I wasn't watching porn, you know he would specifically go out of his way to do that and he would, I remember this very clearly, he would stay outside and watch me from like in our office to see who I was talking to online, what I was saying...

C: Yeah.

L: ...he would actually do that. You know in the dead of night, it was really creepy [slight nervous laughter], I caught him once.

C: Yeah, that's super creepy.

L: Yeah it was extremely creepy. But yeah he would do that, and he do that specifically because he knew that I wasn't interested in actually fighting my feelings anymore and so for him in his mind he was justified because he had caught me you know not trying to change myself anymore so um...at some point he confronted me about this because after the, the therapy sessions etcetera, etcetera um with the Morman guy, I ended up seeing another therapist um this one for a different reason though. I wanted repair my relationship with my mom, because I wanted to actually come out to her, not as "Hey mommy I'm suffering from same-sex attraction."

C: Yeah.

L: But I'm gay, this is happening, this is real you need to deal with this and accept me as your son. Well, he (stepfather) that was my plan and he got in-between that plan um [says in shaky voice] basically what happened was that shortly, it was actually my twenty-first birthday it was like a few days before that. Um I had been seeing a therapist with mom and like the very next session, it was the very fucking damn next session, I was supposed to go out and do it, I was actually supposed to come out to her and talk to her about it and um have that coming out process with her in the safety of seeing a psychologist, not a Mormon psychologist but a "normal" psychologist. But um what happened is that he knew that was exactly what was about to happen so um he uh, I remember that, this is definitely a little bit of a dark shade of my past, we go into a fight. Um he told me he knew exactly what was going on um he basically cornered me in my room and he started yelling at me and I remember that he actually...I, I didn't feel safe around him anymore I made that clear to my mom earlier, I said that "You need to keep this man, keep yourself between him and I. I don't feel safe around him, I don't want anything to do with him. Please promise me you won't let anything interfere with us you know seeing the counselor and everything." [clears throat]. She made me that promise, but unfortunately she didn't really follow up with that promise. What was that um, he actually cornered me in my room and he told me, typical conservative bullshit stuff: "This is my household. I make the rules here. I know you're not trying to you know um fight your attractions and everything. I know you're talking to gay men, etcetera, etcetera. It's not acceptable in my household, I'm the man, I'm the priesthood holder, everything has to be my way." All that stuff. Um and I told him to get the fuck out, basically that I'm not going to deal with him, I don't feel comfortable around him...

C: Yeah.

L: ...and he told me that in his household he makes the rules and he ended up, he ended up actually pushing me, he put his hand on my neck like right here [shows me where his step-father put hand on the middle of his neck] and he ended up sliding me against the door um...because.. ok let me back up a little bit. I tried to escape, 'cause he'd cornered me in my room like and I'm like I'm not going to take this from you, I don't feel safe with you being here, and I was like uh I need you to leave. And of course he didn't listen to anything that I wanted.

C: Yeah...

L: So, I'm like ok well I'm going to get away from you, because I was starting to get an anxiety attack and I don't feel safe around you. So, I tried escaping my room going underneath him but he was very much like blocking the doorway so that I couldn't get out so um I tried pushing my way through him. But, he refused to let me leave so that's when he pressed me, he pushed me against the wall and just said, basically went off on me "This is my household! How dare you! That's ridiculous, how dare you! As long as you're in my household you need to deal with my rules! I know what you're trying to do with mom and I'm not going to let that happen here." Stuff like that.

C: Damn.

L: Um, so that was definitely a traumatic experience for me [nervous laugh].

C: Yeah.

L: I ended up um, luckily I had been going to the gym. Um, I, I definitely grew up a skinny, white guy and I was like, I felt like going to the gym I needed to do that just to keep myself safe due to the circumstances so, I was able to push my way past him. And I just locked myself in the bathroom and I was just absolutely in tears and going...so angry at that point. But, the worst was yet to come. Uh my mom heard the screaming so she came out and said, "What?! What's going on?!" Etcetera, blah, blah. Um at that point I'm not even joking, my stepfather told her point blank, "You need to choose between our marriage and your son." He actually did that.

C: Wow...

L: [Choking and crying slightly] oh god. I'm surprised I made it through this interview without crying.

C: Do you want me to pause the recording for a little bit?

L: Yeah. I'll be fine. But um, well maybe [chuckles]. No, no I'll be fine. But uh unfortunately, just to continue. She uh made the uh choice that a good Mormon wife would do, she obeyed her husband and uh submitted to his will and they uh kicked me out. Um...[long pause] yeah. So, what happened was uh, of course I'm freaking out, I'm you "you can't do this to me, you're joking. Seriously, you're doing this to me right now." And they were like this is for your own good, you, you can go off and live with your dad or something and you'll be, we just can't have you in our household. And like that's bullshit, that's ridiculous, you know you're kicking out your own son, how, how could you be with a man who would do this to you?

C: Yeah.

L: You know make her, make that choice. [long pause, tearing up]. So um to continue the story, he ended buying me a one-way ticket down to California to live with my dad. Um, it wasn't a plane ticket, like [inaudible word], or even a train ticket. He bought my a bus ticket. Which was one of the *lowest* things he could've done, he knew full-well, he didn't want to spend an extra dollar on me as he could. He was trying to punish me. So, I spent the next, it was 12 or plus hours just on this bus with just a few belongings that I could collect headed down to California just to be with my dad. And that's how I celebrated my twenty first birthday. [crying].

C: Fuck.

L: [crying]. Can I get a second?

C: No, you're fine. I'm so sorry.

L: [crying] This was uh a while ago.

C: Do you want to take a break or anything? We can totally take a break?

L: Um. No I just need to breath.

C: Yeah. Breathing's good.

L: Um. Actually, yeah why don't you pause it for a second.

C: Yeah.

-----Recording stopped. Ending of Part I of interview. -----

**Part II of Leon Interview:**

L: So, that was kinda my basic coming out experience. I had more I wanted to add, but that is the part that pertains to the church part [laughs]. Definitely not a fun experience. Um my sister, I came out to her and uh she was very accepting and when I came down to see my dad in California, he was totally accepting of me. I'm so happy that I had my father to um run to, because he's still a Morman um but he's very left-wing Morman he kind of the "funky" person [laughs].

C: [laughs]

L: There aren't a whole lot of them. He's definitely Christian, but he likes to consider himself, he likes to call himself Christ-like.

C: Yeah?

L: Not necessarily Christian, but Christ-like. I always liked that about him. But he, uh, he's always been like a very macho, masculine guy. But he has a very soft heart, he loves me a lot and couldn't understand my attractions obviously for his own reasons. But he loved me nonetheless, he accepted me and that made me feel so much better. That really helped me out when I came down and I saw him.

C: Yeah.

L: Um but uh. Yeah, it wasn't my...it definitely didn't get better.

C: Yeah.

L: I do have to say that my life has sort of gotten better since I came out though. In the fact though, that I eventually did accept myself and my attractions.

C: Hmm.

L: Um and that has made a world of difference for me...of being who I am and everything. I am almost a completely different person from the Mormon boy I grew up as...oh my lord. But um it definitely has come with consequences and whenever I go see my family, like I went to a family union last year and I just have to remind myself, “Hey tone it tone down a bit.” I still have to keep some stuff about myself a secret and I am just, I am immediately reminded of you know what life was like back in the day when I was completely closeted. It was definitely not a fun and I just have to go through that and I am, as far as I know, the only person in my entire family that has left the church. Much less come out as gay.

C: Yeah.

L: Um and I come from a big Mormon family [laughs].

C: [laughs] yeah.

L: Very large Mormon family.

C: How many siblings do you have?

L: So I have um my sister and I, but were both from my mom. So really it would just be her and I. When you count stepsiblings that’s when it gets big.

C: Oh.

L: So the man my mom married, he has four children. So, I have four step-siblings from that side of the family and my dad recently re-married and my step-mom has five children. So, all together I have what...I have eleven siblings. Technically 13 because my dad has two children from a previous marriage.

C: That’s a lot. So, do you feel like you belong or don’t belong in the LGBTQ community? If you could expand on your position within the LGBTQ community?

L: I definitely feel very accepted in the...uh I prefer calling it, I guess I don’t know if I should, you might not like this...I just like calling it the queer community.

C: Yeah.

L: That’s what I like calling it. Actually I should’ve told you this earlier in the interview, I like identifying myself as queer, I kinda prefer that because I don’t like being well I’m “a gay” or “a bisexual”. I prefer calling myself queer, some people still don’t like that term.

C: Yeah.

L: Um [clears throat]. I definitely feel very accepted in the gay community. I'm going to say that a lot of that isn't necessarily because they like *me*. Because I'm somewhat of an attractive gay man [laughs].

C: [laughs].

L: Realistically, actually um if they actually got to know *me*, mmmmaybe they wouldn't they wouldn't like *me*, nearly sometimes as much. But uh I definitely feel accepted. I remember when I was first coming out or accepting myself I watched the film "Latter Days". Have you seen that?

C: Um I don't so...

L: You haven't seen "Latter Days"?!

C: I don't so.

L: It's super cheesy film back in the day. It basically involves something similar, to what attracts this gay guy in L.A. ... who wants to sleep with this Mormon guy who was on his mission. So uh it goes through the story of this closeted Mormon guy and his coming out basically kinda ruins his life when he came out. But um yeah. It had like had this cheesy ending where they were happy and whatever, that didn't last I'm sure...[laughs].

C: [laughs].

L: But uh yeah, I watched it as a kid and was like, "Wow this is so awesome." Because he was this gay film and here was this Mormon guy and I was like, "Oh my gosh this me!".

C: yay!

L: Except I never went on my mission. Thank goodness. I wanted to go on a mission. Growing up Mormon you have to go on a mission. It's like a cultural responsibility? I'm not sure how you would describe it, but like men are supposed to go on their missions. If you don't go on your mission you're frowned upon. Like, something's wrong with you, it means that not necessarily that you didn't want to go on your mission, but like maybe something is going on with you so you can't go on your mission. Or, something whatever. But basically you're supposed to. Women can, but they're not necessarily supposed to, but if as a man you don't go on your mission that contributes to you, you know, getting in trouble with the Mormon community. Um luckily I never went on my mission, my bishop ha! I told him way too much about myself and he never let me go out on my mission. [laughs].

C: [laughs].

L: [laughs] Um and unlike a lot of peers I did know who decided to keep that stuff secret and they went on their mission. Luckily I didn't have to go. What's not commonly known is that Mormon missionaries like they have to pay for their own mission. Which means that I would've spent two years of my life gallivanting around some part of the world. This *white guy*, telling people what they should believe and how the world works, you know...[laughs].

C: [laughs]

L: But um, thankfully I missed that bullet. [laughs]

C: Yeah...Wow!

L: Yeah.

C: So you said you saw the "It Gets Better" video around age twenty. And you said that it gave you a sense of hope, right? Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

L: Yeah, so it gave me a sense of hope.

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## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup>Term coined by African-American Studies scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham to describe the ways the black community tried to distance themselves from stereotypical and disrespectful aspect of their communities. The term in recent years has been used in the LGBTQ community to describe respectability through same-sex marriage, participation in the military, upward class mobility, and attempting to fit into heteronormativity.

<sup>ii</sup> Is the dysphoria (distress) a person experiences as a result of the sex and gender they were assigned at birth.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/>

<sup>iv</sup> Marginalization is not limited to these examples.

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<sup>v</sup> Violence and negativity inflicted upon transgender female individuals: “the negative attitudes, expressed through cultural hate, individual and state violence, and discrimination directed toward trans women and trans and gender non-conforming people on the feminine end of the gender spectrum.”

<http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/01/transmisogyny/>

<sup>vi</sup> Term coined by Indigenous Studies scholar Andrea Smith referring to a form of colonial formation where foreign people move into a region. Also, an imperial power oversees immigration of these settlers.

<sup>vii</sup> Term coined by Hiram Pérez earlier

<sup>viii</sup> Coin termed by Feminist scholar Lisa Duggan, addressing the intersecting problems of white privilege, sexism, cis-sexism, capitalism, and transmisogyny in the queer community.

<sup>ix</sup> In 28 states you can still be fired for being LGBTQ <https://www.fastcompany.com/3057357/heres-everywhere-in-america-you-can-still-get-fired-for-being-lgbt>

<sup>x</sup> TERFs: an acronym standing for Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists. Feminists who essentialize women to body parts and being assigned female at birth. TERFs do not believe trans women are “real” women. One example of exclusion is the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival that explicitly states that only “real” women are allowed to participate in it.

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