

# On Children's Literature and the (Im)Possibility of *It Gets Better*

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## **I** *It Gets Better* and Children's Literature: An Overview

In response to a devastating rash of reported queer youth suicides in the fall of 2010, American writer Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller founded the *It Gets Better* project, a website inviting adults to submit videos that offer messages of hope and encouragement to youth who may be struggling with their sexualities in difficult environments.<sup>1</sup> Fueled by contributions from public figures like Barack Obama and a host of celebrities including Ellen DeGeneres, *It Gets Better* has garnered widespread attention and received over fifty thousand user-created video submissions that have been viewed more than fifty million times ("What is"). The *It Gets Better* book, co-edited by Savage and Miller, was released in March 2011 and appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list within weeks, and an *It Gets Better* documentary special profiling several queer teens was broadcast on MTV and Logo in February 2012.

<sup>1</sup> In the autumn of 2010, five American gay teens took their own lives in the span of three weeks (see "Raymond Chase"). One of the most publicized suicides was that of Tyler Clementi, the Rutgers University student who killed himself after one of his sexual encounters with another man was filmed and broadcast on the internet by his roommate (see McKinley). For more on *It Gets Better*, see [www.itgetsbetter.org](http://www.itgetsbetter.org).

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As *It Gets Better's* popularity surged, however, critiques of the project quickly surfaced.<sup>2</sup> Tavia Nyong'o notes that *It Gets Better* primarily hails an upwardly mobile class of white gay youth while excluding those for whom adulthood does not necessarily bring a reprieve from forms of anti-queer violence—particularly, Nyong'o writes, “gender nonconforming and/or trans” people. Sponsored by the Gay-Straight Alliance of San Francisco, the *Make It Better* project takes aim at the passivity implicit in *It Gets Better*—the idea that simply enduring adolescence will result in improved social conditions—by offering practical tools for taking action against homophobia in schools and communities and on a national level.<sup>3</sup> In a *Guardian* article, Jasbir Puar expresses concern with the narrowing of queerness' significance for both adults and youth: she argues that *It Gets Better* showcases a narrow class of successful adults and reinforces the idea that queer youth are inevitably prone to suicide and bullying. For Puar, many adult *It Gets Better* contributors are invested in versions of the family that stray little—if at all—from the heteronormative and from narratives of upward mobility that “[echo] the now discredited ‘pull yourself up from the bootstraps’ immigrant motto” (“In the Wake”). She concludes, “And thus [‘it gets better’] might turn out to mean, you get more normal” (“In the Wake”). And in a frank Facebook post, queer activist Charlotte Cooper challenges the idea that queer youth require adult stories to survive, writing, “I wish there was some kind of an *It Gets Better* campaign in which fucked up queer teenagers give reassurance and advice to windy and pompous bourgie grown-up homos.”

There is a provocative tension between *It Gets Better's* stated purpose and the way it seems to circulate. On the one hand, *It Gets Better* claims to be about queer youth: the project directly addresses itself to this audience and the ostensible crisis in which it finds itself.<sup>4</sup> As Savage notes in his introduction to the *It Gets Better* book, “the point of the project is to give despairing LGBT kids *hope*. The point is to let them know that things

2 Although many of these critiques are authored by academics, most have been published in online venues that seek to mirror *It Gets Better's* broad reach.

3 For more, see [www.makeitbetterproject.org](http://www.makeitbetterproject.org).

4 The terms LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) and queer both appear in this essay. Although “queer” is frequently used as an identity catch-all that replaces bulky acronyms, I understand it as resistant to the concept of identity. As Lee Edelman writes, “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (17). *It Gets Better* is more invested in an identity-based LGBT politic than a queer one. In this essay, I use queerness to describe a range of non-heteronormative sexual identifications and practices that do not necessarily result in a concrete sense of sexual identity.

do get better, using the examples of our own lives” (6). On the other hand, taking into account the ever-growing array of responses to and critiques of *It Gets Better*, the project appears to be more about adult hopes and anxieties surrounding how queer youth should be addressed than about queer youth themselves. As it circulates through a variety of media, *It Gets Better* accumulates (mostly adult-authored) personal stories that echo the project’s primary, teleological narrative of development and resilience and an expansive body of (mostly adult-authored) critical interventions that interrogate the pedagogical value and appropriateness of the message that “it gets better” while gesturing, more broadly, to the project’s political failings. In other words, *It Gets Better* does not circulate according to the ways that it imagines its audience.

The focus of this article is this tension between *It Gets Better*’s purported objective of providing youth with hope and its circulation as a venue for adults to work out their anxieties about the relationship between adulthood and queer youth. *It Gets Better* addresses youth, but its performance of addressing youth is not solely for or even about youth: it is also for its own authors, about affirming a stable adult-identified subject position in opposition to a narrative of tumultuous queer adolescence, and about determining the correct pedagogical approach to queer youth. While *It Gets Better* belongs to a variety of genres—essay, testimonial, autobiography—the adult/youth relationship it evinces suggests, above all else, children’s literature.<sup>5</sup> Children’s literature, as Jacqueline Rose describes it, “rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple” (1). The genre, she continues, “sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker,

<sup>5</sup> *It Gets Better*’s audience, as imagined by Savage and Miller, might be better described as “teenagers” or “youth” rather than “children” (although Savage uses the word “kids” to describe his audience in the introduction to the *It Gets Better* book), so it may be more accurate to call *It Gets Better* “young-adult literature” instead of “children’s literature.” However, critics often include young-adult texts in the broad category of children’s literature, and the pedagogical anxieties and adult/child problematic of children’s literature certainly also apply to young-adult literature (see, for example, Michael Cart’s *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*). Classifications like “children,” “youth,” “children’s literature,” and “young-adult literature” are challenging to navigate, and some scholars have begun to move toward more all-encompassing terms like “(literature for) young people” that recognize the permeability of the boundaries between categories of age and genre. For the purposes of this essay, however, since I draw on the critical tools that emerge from the study of what most scholars have called “children’s literature,” I use this term to describe *It Gets Better* and “youth” to describe its audience while recognizing nonetheless that the project circulates among children, teenagers/youth, and adults alike.

giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between” (1–2). As a result, Rose claims, children’s literature is impossible, not because it cannot be written but because it rests on “the impossible relation between adult and child” (1). In other words, the child of children’s literature is always a product of adult fantasies about what childhood is or should be: there is no real child to whom children’s literature is addressed (Rose 10).

While acknowledging the tragic fact that real queer youth are taking their own lives as a result of hostile and oppressive social conditions, I want to put Savage and Miller’s project into conversation with Rose to consider the (im)possibility of *It Gets Better*. The project addresses itself to troubled queer youth but is ultimately more about the relation between adult-identified storyteller and imagined audience than anything else. Yet *It Gets Better*’s circulation suggests that Rose’s “middle space” between adult and child is not as untouched as she claims. The project is founded upon an impossible adult/youth relationship, yes, but this impossibility—and the exclusions produced through the limited way that *It Gets Better* imagines its audience—is what drives *It Gets Better*’s widespread circulation across media and the large body of critique it has generated from a variety of sources. In other words, *It Gets Better* both supports and complicates Rose’s argument about impossibility: the project is structured around fantasies about a particular young queer audience and critics meditate anxiously about whether or not *It Gets Better*’s pedagogical approach is the correct one given this same audience, but these responses and critiques produce a discursive space that successfully interrogates the adult/youth relation upon which the project rests. While we could say that *It Gets Better* enters Rose’s untouched middle space, drawing on recent queer theory enables us to acquire a different metaphor that conceptualizes the project’s circulation and its effects with greater nuance while also enriching our critical approaches to children’s literature more broadly: what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls “growing sideways” (11).

Queer theorists including Stockton have recently leveled critique at sites that, like *It Gets Better*, privilege futurity as a normative temporal orientation. Puar thinks *It Gets Better* through Laurent Berlant’s concept of slow death, a “concomitant yet different temporality of relating to living and dying” (Puar, “The Cost”).<sup>6</sup> In *No Future*, Lee Edelman attacks the ideology of “reproductive futurism” that functions as the “organizing

6 Puar, summarizing Berlant’s argument, explains that “slow death describes populations that are marked out for wearing out.” For more, see Berlant.

principle of communal relations" (2). Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* explores the AIDS crisis and youth subcultures as disruptive forces in heteronormative and capitalist commitments to reproduction and longevity. In *The Queer Child*, Stockton argues that we require a new spatial metaphor for growth since our language of child and adolescent development is impoverished. To account for how queer or "proto-gay" children grow and delay growth in ways that exceed what she calls "the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up," Stockton introduces the metaphor of "growing sideways," which "suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sorts" (11). Using sideways growth as a heuristic for conceptualizing *It Gets Better's* accumulation of critiques and responses helps us imagine how the project brings youth and adults into the kind of contact Stockton describes. Rose maintains that children's literature "is clearly about [the impossible relation between adult and child], but it has the remarkable characteristic of being about something which it hardly ever talks of" (1). What Stockton's argument provides, in the context of *It Gets Better*, is a method for thinking about how the sideways growth of a text—or even an entire genre—creates space that *does* address and critique this relation in meaningful and productive ways. Examining *It Gets Better's* sideways growth allows us to conceive of the project's circulatory accumulations as part of the project itself. As Stockton brings adults and children into contact, so too am I putting the project's "inside" and "outside" into conversation, interrogating not only the stories published directly within *It Gets Better* but also how (if at all) the project circulates amongst and is responded to by audiences of all ages. In other words, this is not a linear mode of analysis that traces the development of *It Gets Better's* adaptation from website to book to documentary and focuses only on the project's adult-authored and youth-aimed stories but, rather, a method for textual analysis that considers non-linear circulations and accumulations that may occur and grow outside of how a text seems to imagine its own circulation.

In what follows, I will illustrate the following claims about *It Gets Better*: first, as a work of children's literature, *It Gets Better* rests on an impossible adult/youth relation in that it invents the youth it seeks to address (there is no real youth behind the idea of *It Gets Better*); second, this impossibility is responsible for the project's political failure since the youth *It Gets Better* imagines is limited and exclusionary or, to paraphrase Rose, the project believes that there is a queer youth who is simply there and easily spoken to; third, precisely because of its impossibility and political

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failure, the project succeeds as productive cultural discourse in its generation of countless responses and critiques; and fourth, the circulation of *It Gets Better* troubles Rose's argument about the middle space between child and adults, since the project demonstrates a kind of sideways growth that brings adults and youth into contact with one another. Thinking *It Gets Better* as children's literature permits a critique of the project that points to its (im)possibilities, failures, and successes, and it also has the potential to reshape our approaches to children's literature more broadly.

### **Political Failure and the Queer Youth of *It Gets Better***

Before addressing *It Gets Better's* political failures, which spring from the limited version of queer youth the project imagines, I want to acknowledge some of the project's strengths. Without a doubt, the wide reach and popularity of the *It Gets Better* campaign contributes to increased awareness about homophobia, bullying, and queer youth suicide, social issues that persist in spite of the ostensible progress being made in the realm of liberal gay rights in our North American context. We can safely speculate that many queer youth who regularly confront homophobia or feel isolated due to an uneasy fit with normative expectations surrounding gender and sexuality have been touched by an *It Gets Better* video. As Savage writes in the introduction to the *It Gets Better* book, "thousands of LGBT adults who thought they were going to contribute a video found themselves talking with LGBT youth, offering them not just hope but advice, insight, and something too many LGBT youth lack: the ear of a supportive adult who understands what they're going through" (6). Since, as Savage notes, many *It Gets Better* videos are created by openly LGBT adults, we can also credit the project for heightening the visibility of non-heterosexual identities, which might in turn provide young people with a broader sense of sexual possibility: as Michael Warner argues, sexual autonomy requires "access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them" (7). For youth who grow up in areas where queerness seems invisible, *It Gets Better* may provide them with a sense that a non-heterosexual existence is, in fact, possible.

Critics concerned with the political failure of *It Gets Better*, on the other hand, primarily emphasize two points. First, as Puar puts it, the project has undeniable "affective attachments to neoliberalism": investments in the growth, development, and productivity of the individual as opposed to a broader interest in social collectivity and the forging of creative modes of relationality ("The Cost"). *It Gets Better* largely suggests that the ideal telos of an individual's development is a monogamous relationship, stable

career, and family—all of which constitutes a heteronormative model of existence according to queer theorists and, when replicated by people in LGBT communities, is frequently dubbed “homonormative” and understood to have close ties with neoliberalism.<sup>7</sup> The queer critique of neoliberalism and hetero/homonormativity is lucidly articulated by Warner. “Like most stigmatized groups,” he asserts, “gays and lesbians were always tempted to believe that the way to overcome stigma was to win acceptance by the dominant culture, rather than to change the self-understanding of that culture” (50). Critics of *It Gets Better* take issue with the project’s emphasis on acceptance and conformity and its overall disavowal of the potential of queerness to create and reshape non-normative social worlds. Next, and most important to this essay, these critics gesture to a longstanding critique of how queer youth identity gets narrated and interpreted: adults often understand queer youth as what Eric Rofes calls “Martyr-Target-Victims”—the voiceless, passive, suicide-prone victims of inevitable anti-queer violence and bullying (41). As Susan Talburt argues, this trope not only limits the complexity of the discourse surrounding queer youth but it also constitutes “a production of subject positions in which adults administer a group with problems and needs—and participate in inventing those whom we would help” (18). Indeed, the way *It Gets Better* coheres around a very specific idea of queer youth is what structures the project’s impossibility and is responsible for its political failure. As I will illustrate, *It Gets Better* imagines a limited and exclusionary version of queer youth that is ultimately more about its adult authors. Inspired by Rose, “instead of asking what children want, or need, from literature,” I want to ask, “what it is that adults, through literature, want or demand of the child?” (137). More specifically, in this case, I will explore what adults ask of queer youth through *It Gets Better*: what investments, in other words, do adults have in the pedagogical approach to and representation of certain versions and narratives of queer youth?

*It Gets Better* presumes a queer youth audience with specific kinds of mobility.<sup>8</sup> According to the project, to survive the transition into adult-

7 See, for example, Warner and Duggan.

8 For the purposes of this essay, I have limited my analysis to the hundred and five *It Gets Better* stories contained in the book version of the project. Featuring textual transcripts of videos curated by Savage and Miller as well as a handful of original contributions from gay public figures, the book also functions as an archive of core texts, those ostensibly deemed by Savage and Miller as truest to the project’s central narrative. In the book, there are undeniable similarities across stories that raise questions about who gets to be a representative teller of

hood queer youth must be physically and geographically mobile, moving from small towns to big cities that are ostensibly more accepting of non-heterosexuals; upwardly mobile in terms of class and career; and able to move through a linear and teleological narrative, one that sees queer youth grow from troubled martyr-target-victims into successful adults who openly embrace an essential and stable sexual identity. While Savage notes the centrality and importance of hope to *It Gets Better*, the project's version of hope has particular content that can be accessed only by making particular movements through time and space that are available only to particular individuals. *It Gets Better* fails politically in part because of these exclusionary spatial and temporal assumptions: spatial in that the project suggests that queer youth must physically relocate in order to survive, and temporal in the project's insistence on futurity and rehearsal of a simplistic, linear narrative of progression from tumultuous adolescence into stable adulthood.

The narrative framework of the vast majority of *It Gets Better* stories can be described as follows: I was raised in a conservative small town and/or in a conservative family and/or as part of a conservative religious community. I was bullied violently at school, felt isolated as a result, and contemplated suicide. I endured high school and moved to a big city and/or attended a college with a diverse campus. I found a community of like-minded queers, accepted my true self, and came out. Love, a successful career, and a family followed. Many queers have lived and/or are living lives that echo this narrative, and I do not intend to diminish the real experiences of *It Gets Better's* storytellers. However, with a few small exceptions, reading the *It Gets Better* book cover-to-cover is like reading and re-reading this story over and over again. Under the guise of telling one hundred and five stories, the *It Gets Better* book essentially tells only one, and its characters are almost always the same: adult-identified authors who have made the transition from troubled adolescence into the safety and sexual stability of adulthood, a place from which they can directly

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an *It Gets Better* tale and why, how contributors reimagine and re-narrate their lives in relation to an imagined audience of young queer martyr-target-victims, and the significance of moments of disruption in the repetition of these stories. The *It Gets Better* book is the clearest embodiment of the project's impossibility. It exists to reinforce and sell the project's foundational message while containing the possibilities for resistance to this message that circulate readily through other media such as the internet and the project's own YouTube site. In other words, the *It Gets Better* book seeks to widen the middle space between youth audience and adult author.

address their audience of martyr-target-victims and didactically advise them to follow a specific narrative.

A key plot point in almost every chapter is the narrator's relocation from a small town to a city or college. Brinae Lois Gaudet explains that "the cool thing about high school ... is it doesn't last forever.... Once you get out of high school you are free.... You can go see the world. You can do things; you can get an education; you can make something of your life" (28). Joseph Odysseus Mastro counsels queer youth to move as soon as possible: "If you're in high school and you're gay, bisexual, or transgender, and you're being tormented, find some way to get through school and then get to San Francisco, get to the Bay Area, get to Miami or Chicago or New York City" (209). And A.Y. Daring stresses the critical importance of this type of mobility: "I can attest to the fact that I honestly, legitimately, literally do not know of a single queer adult who graduated from high school and went on to bigger cities and bigger schools and didn't eventually find a place where they belong" (65). In Daring's story and many others, non-mobile queer youth—youth unable to readily relocate, youth who simply choose to stay put—and their opportunities for finding acceptance and community are left excluded and unimagined.

Of the 105 stories in the *It Gets Better* book, there are two narratives that deviate from the standard "move, or else" story. Stephen D. Lorimor is the only contributor to claim that "college was worse" (238). In her playful story entitled "Rockin' the Flannel Shirt," Krissy Mahan extols the virtues of being a rural-dwelling queer. "As a person who lives in the country and doesn't have a lot of money, I can tell you that not all gay people are urban or rich," she writes; "I've been really happy being a big rural dyke. So, if you want to live in the country, or just can't move away, you'll be fine" (71). Mahan's narrative is also noteworthy for the way it encourages movement away from community and into relative isolation: "One of the nice things about being in the country is you don't have to deal with people all the time. There's land out there, and you can just get away. Go build yourself a little fort in the woods.... You'll be a butch dyke and you'll be hot. Everyone will love it. It will be good" (71). It is striking that stories like Mahan's are so rare in *It Gets Better*; her account is lost in a mass of pro-urban narratives that demand particular types of physical and geographic movements from queer youth.

In the standard *It Gets Better* story, moving to an urban centre enables upward mobility, career growth, and the accumulation of physical, emotional, and financial assets: "Do what you love to do," writes Dave Holmes, "and I guarantee you there is a place in this world where someone will pay

you to do it. So find it” (191). While it is undeniably important for young queers to recognize that they too can obtain employment, the problem as Puar illustrates it lies in the simplistic way that successful queer adulthood is equated with a successful career (“In the Wake”). In his introduction, Savage writes: “[W]ithout gay role models to mentor and support them, without the examples our lives represent, [youth] couldn’t see how they might get from bullied gay teenager to safe and happy gay adult” (3). *It Gets Better* imagines that queer youth must make the exact transition from precarious adolescence to the sanctuary of adulthood that Savage describes. “I am a gay man who loves his life,” proclaims Darren Hayes, former member of pop duo Savage Garden; “I have a career that I love. I’ve got a partner that I adore beyond all comprehension. And I am surrounded by friends and family and a community who accept me and support me for who I am” (151). Jenn and Erika Wagner-Martin advise readers that “we’re not so different from those kids from high school who used to harass us and pick on us for being different.... I have my family. I have my life. I get up and go to work every morning” (97). And Jessica Leshnoff claims that she and her partner are “ridiculously normal. As in: We fall asleep on the couch together and watch movies and go grocery shopping and do laundry and go to Starbucks and make meat loaf.... And you’ll have that one day, too. You really will. I promise” (252).

The more this narrative is staged in *It Gets Better*, the more the project’s impossibility becomes clear: through its direct address to an imagined audience of young martyr-target-victims, *It Gets Better* functions primarily as a medium for the rehearsal of fixed adult identities. The project’s retrospective narratives of movement through space, class, and time, told with the distinct pedagogical force of a second-person address, evince contributors who imagine themselves as having navigated the martyr-target-victim/out-and-proud narrative and achieved an ending that enables them to become *It Gets Better* storytellers: adulthood is a vantage point from which they look knowingly back on youth as a period of flux and turmoil that ultimately produces a complete adult self. *It Gets Better* is rife with the language of essentialism, as though sexuality both concretizes and becomes transparent once uncovered and is never again subject to change: “Finding my true sexuality has changed my life and I wouldn’t change anything that I went through for the world,” writes Hunter Brady; “I have found who I really am and I am happy now. And that is all that matters” (144). Brady is a sixteen-year-old, not an adult in the traditional sense, and yet she qualifies as an *It Gets Better* storyteller because she has successfully progressed from martyr-target-victim to stable, confident bisexual. The “I”

in *It Gets Better* is adult-identified, if not adult in the traditional sense: a subject position that has earned the pedagogical capacity to imagine and address an audience of queer youth, an audience that serves to buttress the speaker herself.

These unspoken *It Gets Better* storyteller qualifications slip to the surface in Lynn Breedlove's story. He writes, "[W]hen I heard about this project, I thought, 'I never got bullied so I have nothing to offer,' but then I remembered they always called me 'weird' in grammar school, and I didn't have many pals" (228). *It Gets Better* requires a martyr-target-victim narrative in order to assume the position of the pedagogical "I." This is what enables Barack Obama—president of a country where, despite his pro-marriage equality stance, homophobia remains institutionalized on numerous levels—to tell an *It Gets Better* story, in which he claims that "I don't know what it's like to be picked on for being gay. But I do know what it's like to grow up feeling that sometimes you don't belong" (9). All individual differences may apply, so long as they narrate hardship, culminate in resilience and success, and participate in the address to *It Gets Better's* imagined audience. Breedlove, however, goes on to deviate slightly and tell one of the few stories in the *It Gets Better* volume that celebrates queer creativity and its potential for imagining non-heteronormative social forms. "If I had had a family who said they would love me only if I pretended to be someone I wasn't, things might have turned out differently," he writes; "but if you have that kind of family, you can make your own family who will love you unconditionally. That's why queers call each other Family. We create one that will love us for who we are. We have drag moms and dads, dyke uncles, and matriarchal mamas" (230). Breedlove's version of the family differs dramatically from the others in the collection in its view of social and sexual relations as fluid and changeable: queers can remain relationally creative instead of accepting *It Gets Better's* telos and insisting on the sedimentation of their sexual selves.

*It Gets Better's* repetitiveness recalls Judith Butler's "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in which she describes heterosexuality as "an incessant and *panicked* imitation of its own naturalized idealization" (314). Butler continues:

That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it "knows" its own possibility of becoming undone: hence, its compulsion to repeat which is at once a foreclosure of that which threatens its coherence. That it can never eradicate that risk attests to

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its profound dependency upon the homosexuality that it seeks fully to eradicate and never can or that it seeks to make second, but which is always already there as a prior possibility. (314)

In this case, *It Gets Better*'s repetition functions to sell the project's grand narrative, disavow its exclusions, reinforce its imagined audience, and sustain the fantasies of stable sexual identity expounded by the project's adult storytellers. In terms of the impossible relationship between adult and youth that the project evinces, minor variations in narrative like Mahan and Breedlove's stories are insignificant. All *It Gets Better* stories are about how adults (or adult-identified youth) imagine pedagogical and temporal relationships to the youth on the other end of *It Gets Better*. The project's dominant repetition of this primary narrative produces the exclusions and adult/youth relationship that are responsible for *It Gets Better*'s impossibility and political failure.

A tragic example of this failure involves Jamey Rodemeyer, who committed suicide weeks after having uploaded an *It Gets Better* video.<sup>9</sup> Rodemeyer's death is a brutal illustration of Puar's point (and the message inherent to the *Make It Better* project) that *It Gets Better*'s focus on futurity "lets the politics of the now off the hook" ("The Cost"). According to Puar, *It Gets Better* disregards "what suicide might actually be, which is an inability to reconcile the current moment with some projection of the future itself. It's an impassive temporality" ("The Cost"). In other words, *It Gets Better* attempts to force a temporal identification between adult and youth where one may be impossible. As I have illustrated, *It Gets Better* rehearses a linear, largely adult-authored, future-oriented narrative of growth and development in service of an imagined audience of young queers who have access to the forms of mobility that survival ostensibly requires. What Rodemeyer's case demonstrates is that it is possible to participate in the repetition of this narrative—to speak from the position of the adult-identified pedagogical "I"—without being able to live it; Rodemeyer, it would seem, could believe in the possibility of getting better but could not reconcile this subject position with the daily torment and bullying he was experiencing. In this sense, Rodemeyer's death points to the political failure of *It Gets Better*. The future-oriented mobility the project demands is incompatible with how Rodemeyer and many queer youth experience the present. This case further illustrates how the adult-identified "I" of *It Gets Better* requires the invention and pedagogical maintenance of young martyr-target-victims on the other side of the project

9 See Praetorius for coverage of the suicide and a link to Rodemeyer's video.

to sustain the notion that adulthood brings safety and stability. The youth of *It Gets Better* is the child of children's literature, "the [child] which the category itself sets in place," in Rose's words, "the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes" (10). Tragically, Rodemeyer's case illuminates the impossible relationship that structures *It Gets Better*: the project's imagined youth audience failed to properly bolster Rodemeyer's adult-identified "I," the subject position that, according to *It Gets Better*, is supposed to be secure and hopeful.

Although Mahan and Breedlove's stories mark moments of dissonance in *It Gets Better's* dominant narrative that are nonetheless part of the impossible relationship that structures the project, these stories also have a simultaneous different effect. They cause *It Gets Better* to grow sideways, producing critique, indicating the project's overall exclusions, and enabling the project to circulate in ways that contribute to its success as productive cultural discourse. As I have argued, the critical attention *It Gets Better* receives has as much to do with the project's status as a cultural phenomenon as it does with concerns that it is teaching (or attempting to teach) young people the "wrong thing." Precisely because *It Gets Better* is founded on an impossible relation and fails politically on a number of levels, the project circulates in a way that makes something possible. This possibility is the work of critical cultural discourse, accomplished by Breedlove and Mahan's stories—which provide us with narratives about creative social relations that challenge hegemonic notions of age, family, community, and sociality—and political critiques from the likes of Nyong'o and Puar. These critiques and responses take place both inside and outside *It Gets Better*, in a space that is best understood as *It Gets Better's* sideways growth.

### **The Possibility of *It Gets Better*: Children's Literature and Sideways Growth**

*It Gets Better* is striking in its ready and frequent adaptation and mutation into a variety of forms—from web-based project into book into documentary film—and from these core *It Gets Better* texts spring countless responses, ranging in tone from critical to satirical to celebratory, which themselves take multiple shapes. *It Gets Better* circulates feverishly through and across media and technology such that the project grows sideways, bringing adults and youth into a kind of contact that Rose suggests is impossible in children's literature. Mapping *It Gets Better's* sideways growth not only sheds new critical light on the project itself but also pro-

vides us with a useful methodology for children's literature that approaches the ostensibly untouched middle space between child and adult.

Several children's literature scholars have taken issue with this "space in between" aspect of Rose's argument. Karen Sánchez-Eppler and Robin Bernstein assert that the child at the other end of children's literature is engaged in critical, material reading practices that transcend Rose's "reader, product, receiver" version of the child (2). Sánchez-Eppler argues that tracking how children destroy, scribble in, and cut up books provides new insight into the literary history of childhood (151). Specifically, Sánchez-Eppler looks at how the Dickinson children used their bedroom walls and door as a scrapbook of sorts: she claims that child readers repurpose and re-signify texts through material destruction while remaining deeply entrenched in broader cultural narratives. Taking a similar tack, Bernstein draws on Frances Eliza Hodgson's recollection of how she used dolls to reimagine and stage moments from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Bernstein posits a triangulation of play, literature, and material culture as an entry point into Rose's middle space between the empowered adult author and the passive child reader: "[I]t is precisely these connections that deliver children's literature beyond the paradigm of 'impossibility'" (167). "Pace Rose," Bernstein continues, "children not only receive literature, they receive the co-scripts of narratives and material culture and then collectively forge a third prompt: play itself" (167).

In addition to material evidence of children's interaction and play with texts, the sideways growth of a text or a genre includes what Peter Hunt calls "the peritext—that is, the written (and graphic) material that 'surrounds' the story" as well as "the relationship of the meaning made to things 'outside' the text: the ideological implications of the children's book—indeed, the implications of reading at all" (4). Along these lines, Marah Gubar uses children's theatre as an example of how material outside of a dramatic text itself (for example, playbills and children's documented responses to productions) and a consideration of the actual theatre-going practices of children are integral to determining whether or not analysis of a text under the aegis of children's literature will be productive. "Cutting children out of the loop closes down inquiry," she writes, "whereas acknowledging that their reading, viewing, and playing practices can function as one of the fibers that help determine whether a text counts as children's literature opens it up" (215). Nat Hurley also addresses the possibility of a middle space between adults and the child of children's literature. In an article that explores how the ambiguities and impossibili-

ties of children's literature and the way readers play with and respond to texts can be exciting and critically productive, Hurley writes:

One of the aspects of children's literature that I have always found fascinating is its insubordinations: its sites of dissident or non-conforming children, its failures, its surprising circulations, its appropriations—even its misuses—and especially, to invoke Jacqueline Rose, its impossibilities. The stretch for impossibility makes for some of the best and unruly works of children's literature. (119)

I argue that these circulations, appropriations, and misuses, along with the narrative destruction, reconfiguration, and play examined in essays by Sánchez-Eppler, Bernstein, and Gubar, are aptly described as the sideways growth of particular texts and—in the case of children's literature—an entire genre.<sup>10</sup> These approaches to children's literature speak to sideways growth without naming it as such: they track the non-linear circulation and productivity of texts, the material contact between text and child, and analyze the significance of this contact.

*It Gets Better's* sideways growth includes not only its official incarnations (website into book into documentary) but also what the project generates and accumulates as it travels across media and technology and becomes reshaped and reimagined by people other than Savage and Miller and the authors of *It Gets Better* stories. In a way, *It Gets Better's* sideways growth is the most interesting, productive, and successful thing about it. Gabrielle Rivera's story, for example, not only brings the ostensible inside and outside of the project into lateral contact but also critiques the adult/youth relationship at the core of *It Gets Better*. Rivera's clip first made the rounds on social media when it was posted to a blog under the title "It Doesn't Get Better. You Get Stronger" (Cage). Rivera's story drew attention because her message seemed to fly in the face of *It Gets Better* while calling the project on its light treatment of race and class issues. "As a gay woman of color," Rivera begins, "I just want to let the youth know that it kind of doesn't get better. All these straight, rich celebrities: they can tell you that it gets better because they've got money and people don't care

10 A good example of reader appropriation and use in the context of children's literature is slash fiction, erotic stories written by fans that feature same-sex character couplings. I would argue that slash fiction is an excellent example of how children's literature grows sideways to take up a space that is both inside and outside of the genre itself. For more on slash, see Catherine Tosenberger's "Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction."

The project provides an apt illustration of Rose's argument about why children's literature is impossible.

what they do.... But I'm gonna be real, because I live this life and I'm not rich and I'm brown and I probably look like most of you" (45). Although it directly challenges the project on the levels of authorship and ideology, Rivera's story still echoes the narrative of many of the other *It Gets Better* passages: "I'm a normal person that lives her life as a gay individual, has a relationship, and just tries to make it in the world," she maintains (45). The edited text of this video was subsequently published in Savage and Miller's book under the title "Getting Stronger and Staying Alive"—an attempt, it seems, on behalf of Savage and Miller to contain one of *It Gets Better's* rogue circulations, to demonstrate that even critiques of the project drive it forward. In spite of this text's normative elements, it remains an uneasy fit with the rest of *It Gets Better*. Rivera declares that it does not get better in a book entitled *It Gets Better* and her video continues to live online outside of the project under its original title, which points more directly to *It Gets Better's* exclusions and failures. The inclusion of this text in Savage and Miller's book, while reinforcing some aspects of *It Gets Better's* narrative of mobility, gestures to the incompatibility of *It Gets Better's* adult-identified storytellers with its imagined audience while simultaneously demonstrating that the project's political failures fuel critical discourse.

There are many other (and significantly more perverse) critiques and parodies of *It Gets Better* circulating on the internet: the "It Gets Bigger" parody, the "It Gets Worse" project (Moylan), and the *It Gets Betterish* web comedy series all poke fun at Savage and Miller's campaign, while the website *Splitsider* offers a list of the "best" *It Gets Better* parodies (Hoban). Created mostly by adults, these parodies reinforce how *It Gets Better's* actual circulation contradicts its own self-understanding: these are adult-identified subjects, not youth, who are largely responding and writing back to the project. What the sideways growth of *It Gets Better* exhibits, in fact, is an overall absence of youth-identified voices. Adult-identified subject positions dominate the project itself and the body of response, critique, and parody that *It Gets Better* accumulates. So while sideways growth as a spatial and temporal metaphor for examining a text and/or genre has the potential to bring adults and children into contact (and does, in essays from Sánchez-Eppler, Bernstein, and Gubar), in *It Gets Better's* case, there is little evidence of youth-identified readers responding and writing back to *It Gets Better*. In this sense, again, the project provides an apt illustration of Rose's argument about why children's literature is impossible: it fails to circulate according to its own expectations, demonstrating instead the messy ways in which adult authorship, fantasies, desires, and anxieties are

inextricably enmeshed with how children's literature produces meaning. Yet the stories that fail to conform to its grand narrative and the critiques that point to the project's political failures are the most productive parts of *It Gets Better*: those moments that indicate discord or slippage in *It Gets Better's* otherwise feverish repetition of near-identical stories. This is where *It Gets Better* becomes possible. It fails politically but succeeds as cultural discourse, growing sideways into a body of work that addresses the adult/youth relationship represented in the project's stories.

### Getting Better at Doing Children's Literature?

Philip Nel and Lissa Paul point out that children's literature is one of the few genres named after its imagined audience, the child it attempts to shape based on the desires and anxieties of its adult authors (1). As I have illustrated in this essay, the impossibility of this adult/child relationship produces starkly different effects and responses than those ostensibly intended.<sup>11</sup> For Savage and Miller, *It Gets Better* necessitates repetition and reiteration to disguise its impossibility and failure. For others—like Rivera, for example—*It Gets Better's* failure invites intervention that results in the project's sideways growth and success as cultural discourse. Texts like *It Gets Better* that attempt to secure a stable adult-identified subject position by iterating normative forms of childhood often, by virtue of the impossibility of their project, have the most potential for sideways growth. It is precisely through its repeated attempts to normalize a specific adult/youth relationship and its failure to do so that *It Gets Better* invites response and critique.<sup>12</sup>

*It Gets Better* speaks to a continuing investment in the perceived power of storytelling, especially as it relates to the growth and development of children and adolescents. As Sean P. O'Connell argues, "stories have at once referential and performative power. They set up possible ways of

11 Tison Pugh makes a point along these lines, arguing that children's literature attempts to teach children about normative sexuality while simultaneously keeping them innocent of sexuality. "A recalcitrant ideological conflict thereby emerges within the genre," he writes, "in which innocence and heterosexuality clash and conjointly subvert its foundations" (1).

12 Fairy tales are another example of what I am describing: we can think, for example, of queer/feminist revisionist versions of ostensibly normative and anti-feminist tales seen in collections like Francesca Lia Block's *The Rose and the Beast* (2000), Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* (1997), and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (2006). For more examples of this subversive form of writing, what Hurley calls "writing back to children's literature" (126), see her article "The Perversions of Children's Literature."

being in the world, invite one to the realization of those possibilities, but they do so by drawing together what has already been, is now, and can be” (100). And as Cooper illustrates with such colourful candour, there are always stories that remain untold, stories that in this case could set up much more radically creative ways of being in the world that do not privilege individual movements through a specific, linear, forward-oriented narrative. As Hurley points out, however, “the productive failures of normalization” generate creative new approaches to children’s literature, allowing us to think “more about the narratives of sociability and the acts of world-making at play in texts for young people” (128). *It Gets Better’s* failures and impossibilities are what render it a productive site for thinking about and critiquing not only the relationship between its adult-identified authors and imagined young audience but also its sideways growth. As contemporary critics of children’s literature illustrate—and as *It Gets Better* itself demonstrates—children’s literature is much more than printed words on a page. It lies also in the material reading practices of its audience, spontaneous play, the physical destruction of books, the creative re-signification of a text at the hands of its readers, and its own provocative impossibilities and failures. Through these failures, *It Gets Better* invites us to take new approaches to children’s literature that call for different conceptions of temporality, circulation, and the relationship between author, text, and audience.

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