Narrative Theory Unbound

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“No Future” vs. “It Gets Better”

Queer Prospects for Narrative Temporality

Our queerness has nothing to offer a Symbolic that lives by denying that nothingness except an insistence on the haunting excess that this nothingness entails, an insistence on the negativity that pierces the fantasy screen of futurity, shattering narrative temporality with irony’s always explosive force. And so what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here.

—Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive

Many LGBT youth can’t picture what their lives might be like as openly gay adults. They can’t imagine a future for themselves. So let’s show them what our lives are like, let’s show them what the future may hold in store for them.

—It Gets Better Project

There’s joy coming for you.


No Future is Lee Edelman’s imperative against the specious futurity of normative politics. It Gets Better is Dan Savage’s message of hope to LGBTQ kids at risk of suicide. No Future insists against the image of the Child, defining queerness as a refusal to reproduce the futurity that image represents. It Gets Better broadcasts futures for real kids who otherwise might not have them, let alone represent them. No Future might seem to disallow
Savage’s optimism, and *It Gets Better* sounds likely to reject Edelman’s theoretical intransigence. But these two versions of futurity offer complementary ways to think about queer time. If *It Gets Better* is optimistic, its optimism is mitigated by something very much like Edelman’s negativity, which reconfigures its futurity. If Edelman seems to promote an impracticable negation of time itself, Savage’s project indicates how that negation might usefully inflect even our most practical utterances. This complementarity invites a better appreciation of *It Gets Better* even as it proves that Edelman’s theory, despite its intransigence, has positive real-world applications. And positive implications for narrative theory: despite Edelman’s interest in “shattering narrative temporality,” *No Future* lends itself to ways to rethink narrative temporality as a pattern for queer practice. If *It Gets Better* does respond to Edelman’s imperative, it does so through pedagogies at work in narrative temporality itself. To set these two imperatives against each other is to discover a shared form of queer dissent in the very time it takes to tell a story of what’s to come. It is to learn what narrative temporality means for queer possibility.

Edelman attacks “reproductive futurism” for its heteronormative compulsion. Making the image of the Child the “perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics,” this futurism makes social reality a compulsory fantasy and a perpetual deferral of anything we might really want (3). The politics of futurity abject queer possibility. Queer resistance must therefore be something other than a politics. It must oppose itself to futurity as such, aligning itself with the death drive: “The death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (9). Precisely because the queer is called forth to figure the death drive, it must do so, for only then can it “[imagine] an oppositional political stance exempt from the imperative to reproduce the politics of signification” (27). Only then, in other words, can it do what it must: offer access to jouissance, alert us to the fantasies that structure sociality, refuse identities, and disrupt norms. These fundamentals of queerness depend on a refusal to fantasize about the future of children.

Dan Savage, by contrast, has encouraged a widespread phantasmatic culture of futurity, in which thousands of videos claim that time will naturally bring about a queer future. Savage launched *It Gets Better* in response to the deaths of Justin Aaberg and Billy Lucas in 2010. Aaberg killed himself at fifteen after years of bullying at his suburban Minnesota high school. Lucas hanged himself in a barn on his grandmother’s farm in Greensburg, Indiana—also at fifteen, also due to homophobic bullying. Savage says these two deaths prompted him to think about the problem of antigay bullying—to recall how it had destroyed his own life at that age, and to contrast those awful years
with the happiness of his life today. If only those boys could have known how things would change; if only there were some way to tell them, in spite of the fact that “schools would never invite gay adults to talk to kids; we would never get permission” (Introduction 4). Savage recalls the day he thought of a way:

I was riding a train to JFK Airport when it occurred to me that I was waiting for permission that I no longer needed. In the era of social media—in a world with YouTube and Twitter and Facebook—I could speak directly to LGBT kids right now. I didn’t need permission from parents or an invitation from a school. I could look into a camera, share my story, and let LGBT kids know that it got better for me and it would get better for them too. I could give ‘em hope. (4)

Together with his husband, Terry Miller, Savage made the project’s inaugural video, in which the two men say that all the bullying they suffered in school, all the family rejection and self-hatred, did not last. Enthusing about their sixteen-year relationship as well as their adopted son, D. J., they promise young viewers that “however bad it is now, it gets better, and it can get great, and it can get awesome.” Four weeks after the video made its debut—as Savage notes in his dramatic account of the project’s runaway success—he got a call from the White House: “They wanted me to know that the president’s It Gets Better video had just been uploaded to YouTube” (5). Savage heard from young people, too, and from parents, who confirmed that the project’s increasing number of videos—more than ten thousand, at this point—were indeed giving them hope. A vast host of major public figures and first-time videographers have contributed to this celebration of LGBTQ futurity. Untold millions of viewings have transformed public discourse as well as private lives, supporters will argue, so that kids who once might have been unable to think past the bully around the corner now can imagine how easily he will become a thing of the past.

Edelman might note that the future Savage would gain for our queer children actually has no place for them. Moreover, he might note that young people hopeful about the future will fail to redefine the social order in the way queerness should—in the only way queerness can and must do so. They achieve happiness only by “shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else,” to quote Edelman’s account of what happens when queer people fail to identify with the negativity of the death drive (27). This is not to say that Edelman’s theory demands any rejection of Savage’s project—indeed, the two obtain at very different levels of engagement, and Edelman makes clear that he is not talking about “the lived experiences of any historical
children”—but rather to say that Edelman’s theory should make us question the temporality through which It Gets Better hopes to make a difference in the lives of LGBTQ youth (11). This questioning has already begun, in terms that amount to an applied version of No Future. Activists, for example, have noted that promising LGBTQ kids a better future may make them unlikely to seek betterment in the present. Rather than agitate for high school reforms, these kids might just decide to wait it out, producing a situation similar in everyday terms to the burden-shifting and political deferrals Edelman warns against. Other responses to It Gets Better would seem to confirm Edelman’s sense that futurity really only reproduces ideological norms. Jack Halberstam has noted not only that “the representation of adolescence as a treacherous territory that one must pass through before reaching the safe harbor of adulthood” is “a sad lie about what it means to be an adult,” but that “only a very small and privileged sector of the US population can say with any kind of confidence: ‘It gets better!’” Even if “silver spoon in the mouth gays” are now happy enough, the idea that “teens can be pulled back from the brink of self-destruction by taped messages made by impossibly good looking and successful people smugly recounting the highlights of their fabulous lives is just PR for the status quo.” Halberstam’s rejection of It Gets Better shares Edelman’s intransigent refusal of the promise of a false future, one invalidated by cryptonormativity and false optimism—futurity as status quo. Other responses stress the fact that the occasion for the project has been a dubious sentimentality that singles out recent teen suicides for special, tokenizing compassion, further confirming that deep suspicion of It Gets Better gets theoretical support from No Future.

Moreover, Edelman’s critique of the futurity embraced by It Gets Better corresponds more generally to queer critiques of temporality—critiques that also cast doubt upon any hopeful sense that time naturally unfolds toward queer outcomes. Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Roof, Judith Halberstam, and others have argued that “chrononormativity” and “reprofuturity” demand that we define queerness against time. Indeed, the queer critique of time generalizes Edelman’s sense that queerness itself has an antitemporal basis or posture and that it depends upon its chances of queering the normative patterns time enforces. For Freeman and Halberstam, queer temporalities subtend any truly queer possibilities, supplying the basis for sustaining historiographies and subcultural survival. Freeman defines “chrononormativity” as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity,” and she explores those queer forms of representation that are queer for their resistance to normative temporal practice (3). In that exploration, and in her account of “reprofuturity” and what it takes to refuse it, Freeman links
“temporal dissonance” to “sexual dissidence” (21, 1). Halberstam “[tries] to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities,” and notes that this estrangement can enable us to “detach queerness from sexual identity” and understand it more fully as a Foucauldian “way of life” (1). For Roof, time asserts its normative effects in the linear, teleological narratives that structure human possibility, through “narrative’s heteroideology” so that the viability of any queer possibility demands resistance to just the kind of normative implications asserted by the presumptive futurity of *It Gets Better* (xxvii).

But if this mode of critique of temporality sets Queer Theory against the optimistic possibility promoted by *It Gets Better*, it also indicates how and where we might locate a reconciliation, one that would not only reframe *It Gets Better*, and not only demonstrate compatibility between Queer Theory and LGBTQ practice in this instance, but enable us to rethink the long-standing conflict between queerness and narrativity. Roof, Edelman, and others assert that narrative temporality is the very essence of normativity, and this assertion has often led us to believe that true queerness only exists to the extent that it can defy narrative temporality. And yet these theorists themselves read narrative in such a way as to suggest that narrative temporality need not be queered in order to serve queer interests—that it is itself a mode of queer pedagogy. Seen this way, narrative temporality switches sides: it becomes what enables projects like *It Gets Better* to realize queer possibilities in the face of normative compulsions, and it becomes what enables *No Future* to extend into practical, real-world resistance to the sort of futurity that would only replicate the past. The point, then, is not to defend *It Gets Better* from valid and serious criticism of its motives and implications, but rather to argue that its temporality has more in common with *No Future* than we might expect. It can therefore teach us something about narrative temporality and its relationship to queer possibility.

Edelman claims that queer negativity demands a refusal of “history as linear narrative (the poor man’s teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—as itself—through time” (4). Queerness cannot permit this “narrative movement,” this “fantasy of meaning’s eventual realization”; instead, it blocks “every social structure or form” (4). In this linkage of normative structure and narrative movement, Edelman develops a theory that is at once formal and political, a theory that makes narrative temporality largely responsible for the political futurity he would oppose. He equates “translation into a narrative” with “teleological determination,” and, in turn, with heteronormativity (9). And certainly the point is well taken by any narrative theorist who knows that narrative itself is defined in terms of its sequential logics, its drive toward closure, and its implication that meaning develops over time.
Further to justify blaming narrative temporality for the specious futurity in question here, Edelman cites Paul de Man—specifically, de Man’s theory of the relationship between narrative and irony, relevant here because Edelman claims irony, as de Man defines it, for the queer refusal to participate in certain rhetorics of temporality. Irony and queerness are alike in their “constant disruption of narrative signification” (24); both refuse narrative allegorization of irony, which would make it conform to a rhetoric of temporality that “always serves to ‘straighten’ it out” (26).

This relationship between narrative, allegory, and irony omits something important to de Man’s account, something that might give narrative a different role to play in queer figuration. For de Man, allegory is by no means simply a narrativization of what irony would more authentically disrupt, but a valid form of temporal rhetoric. If allegory does pattern itself out in time, it does so in contrast to the mystifying synchrony of the symbol. In the world of the symbol, image and substance coincide simultaneously. In the world of allegory, “time is the originary constitutive category”; allegory “establishes its language” in the void of “temporal difference,” and this difference is no “straightening” of time but rather exactly what is needed to disabuse any fantasy of self-identity (207). Symbolism is a mode of “tenacious self-mystification”; allegory undoes it, and even if it does so less explosively than irony, de Man stresses that “allegory and irony are . . . linked in their common discovery of a truly temporal predicament” (208, 222). Irony is certainly what Edelman claims, in itself and in its work against futurity, since it “divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic” (222). But irony is not alone in this enforcement of temporal authenticity. De Man notes that “the knowledge derived from both modes is essentially the same,” and he does not suggest that it is essentially an antinarrative property (226). Indeed, even if irony has the more “explosive” negative force toward which queerness might aspire, de Man suggests that allegorical texts might surpass it by becoming “meta-ironical” and “[transcending] irony without falling into the myth of an organic totality or bypassing the temporality of all language” (223). This possibility encourages us not only to rethink allegory as a mode in which narrative achieves authentically temporal demystification of symbolic figurations, but to ask if It Gets Better has something like “meta-ironical” status—encompassing what irony knows but sustaining its power.\footnote{When Edelman elaborates upon his use for de Man’s theory of irony, he does of course recognize de Man’s explanation of the potential collusions of irony and allegory. In his critique of “compassionate love,” Edelman asks if we might “think of compassion in terms of allegory’s logic of narrative sequence, which resists, while carrying forward—through and as the dilation}
Allegory’s intermediary position (between symbolism and irony) may actually correspond to something very much like the place to which Edelman assigns queerness. Edelman does not claim that queerness can or should amount to any absolute refusal of the politics of signification. Rather, he argues that queerness must embody the figuration to which heteronormativity assigns it, the better to assert resistance to the social from within. Its relationship to narrative is therefore one of “perverse refusal” (4), locating queerness at the place where “narrative realization and derealization overlap” (7). Queerness is a “particular story . . . of why storytelling fails,” and, as such, it has an antinarrative force peculiarly amenable to narrative form (7). In De Man’s terms, it is allegorical, not because it would “straighten out” ironical queerness but because it is the place where ironic disruption and allegorical time overlap. In other words, that “paradoxical formulation” through which Edelman defines “queer oppositionality” at once as accession and resistance to the politics of figuration actually lines up well with narrativity and, by extension, narrative temporality. In other words, the queerness Edelman associates with de Manian irony might actually be a property of de Manian allegory, which is not the form of teleological futurity Edelman makes it out to be. If we uncouple narrative temporality and teleological futurity, we may discover that the former can subvert the latter in the spirit of queer oppositionality itself—that the allegorical act opens futurity to antinormative alternatives.

Responses to Edelman’s argument have stressed the need to mitigate his negativity. John Brenkman suggests rethinking queerness as an “innovation in sociality,” not apart from it, to recognize more fully the power Edelman himself assigns to queer subversion, which otherwise lacks purchase upon normativity (180). José Esteban Muñoz has asked if queer theory’s antifutural doctrine might not align it with social realities threatening to the lives of young queer people of color. For very good reasons, Muñoz opts against “no future” in favor of a “not yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up” (96). Muñoz takes a different view of the future as the site of yet to be realized queerness. Inverting Edelman’s argument, forestalling absolute negativity, he prepares the way toward the reconciliation that matches Edelman’s paradoxical formulations to the mixed needs of real queer people—of young queer of time—the negativity condensed in irony’s instantaneous big bang” (92). To do so, he says, would be to “allegorize, to the profit of dialectic, the expense of the unrecuperable irony that compassion necessarily abjects in whomever it reads as sinthomosexual, whomever it sees as a threat to the law (understood as the law of desire) by figuring an access to jouissance that gives them more bang for their buck” (92). Here Edelman describes allegorization as a loss to irony, whereas de Man might be read to allow for a less agonistic effect, or a rhetorical situation in which allegory does not necessarily contain irony by narrativizing it.
people, not coincidentally. “Not yet” stresses the need for futurity, however threatening, and elaborates the means by which queerness might appropriate it. In doing so, it leads the way toward recognition of similar rhetorical compromises struck by *It Gets Better*. Muñoz speaks a narrative language, but one that develops paradoxical formulations able to hold off the future, to allow for a certain provisional need of it. *It Gets Better* does the same, developing a whole rhetoric of such formulations, supplying the critical language whereby Edelman’s “perverse refusal” might make its way into the public discourse.

*It Gets Better* demonstrates that narrative temporality works toward the practical goals of *No Future*. Its stories do not pattern themselves straight toward a future always yet to come. They do not simply take part in ideological deferral in the name of the Child, but rather speak to the queer child in narrative languages that transform futurity. And they do so not because they shatter narrative time but through narrative forms well suited to a pedagogical practice of temporal dissent. What reconciles *It Gets Better* to *No Future* is narrative temporality itself. Its temporal dynamics are at once optimistic and negative, practically positive but aligned with negative critique. Understood as a force against merely teleological futurity, narrative temporality helps say “no future,” mitigating the optimism that might otherwise make “it gets better” a false promise. And it does so not in spite of narrativity, but because narrative discourse itself generates just these possibilities. What follows here is a reading of the rhetoric whereby narrative temporality makes *It Gets Better* a practice of queer negativity as well as normal optimism, a practice through which LGBTQ people teach the temporalities necessary to have no future while yet living for a queer one.

What are the temporalities of *It Gets Better*? The title and the purpose of the project would seem to indicate just the kind of ideologically teleological optimism Edelman exposes, leading us perhaps to expect each of the project’s narratives to have a conformist temporal procedure. We might expect each story to begin with an account of how it got better for the narrator, with a strong teleological drive toward final happiness, with all the dynamics of a classic narrative fraught with conflict but neatly resolved. And we might then expect each story to say how it will likewise get better for the troubled teen, repeating the teleological desire for a positive future finish. Such a procedure would indeed prompt us to want to insist against futurity insofar as it would capitulate to straight frameworks (in the first moment) and ideologically impose them (in the second). But *It Gets Better* tends not in fact to meet these expectations—most notably, by avoiding the future tense. We might expect the future tense to dominate here as adults tell teens what they will find, what will occur, how happy they will be. But instead these narratives tend toward
the present tense and stress the present existence of the future state to come: “You’ve got to hold your head up and you’ve got to look for the light at the end of your tunnel. Because it’s there, even if you don’t always recognize it or you can’t find it, it’s there all the same, and always has been” (Daring 65). This chronotope “detenses” the future; spatial form here collapses the future into the present, and even the past. Consider the difference between saying “you will have a better life” and this typical statement: “a better life is in your future and you can make it there” (Gaudet 29): here again tense gives way to location, in such a way as to bring the future into view. There are at least two interesting variants of this present future place. One involves the present existence of communities waiting to be discovered. “It is important to remember that there are others everywhere who are like us and will love us for who we are” (Feinstein 91): in this case, you will be loved by others who are already like you, and the current existence of social alternatives is really a nonfutural basis for what is to come. This nonfuturity is perhaps more explicit in phrases such as “there’s a whole other world out there of people who can support you” and “we’re waiting for you with open arms” (Mandelin 156; Breedlove 231). The temporality of the waiting future is particularly significant to the project’s location of hope: “The good parts—they’re totally out there waiting for you”; “Just keep in mind there is a big, beautiful world out there waiting for you” (Holmes 191). The future becomes an alternative present, rewriting the present as a place for friendly attention very different from the one where bullies await you around every corner.

The presence of the future in these cases is actually implicit in the phrase “it gets better,” which, different from “it will get better,” makes the future now. It connotes a certain iterative permanence, a certain timelessness, which has unexpected affinities with Edelman’s negativity. Edelman rejects futurism’s tendency to defer the good into deceptive betterment; his stress on jouissance

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2. Citations of It Gets Better narratives will refer to the edited collection of them published by Savage and Miller as It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Having. This choice of archive has a number of significant and perhaps questionable implications. Rather than try to reckon systematically with the thousands of video narratives posted on www.itgetsbetter.org, I have decided to recognize the published print collection as a representative sample. To do so is to disregard those videos not taken to be representative by Savage and Miller—many that might depart from or question the project’s conventional expectations and presumptions. Moreover, it focuses attention on videos made by “important” people Savage and Miller questionably consider to be the best evidence that it gets better. To my mind, however, those implications make the text collection appropriate to the purposes of my argument: for better and for worse, it emphasizes the project’s priorities as well as its problems, and is actually therefore representative in a valid sense.

3. For an account of the tenseless theory of time and what it might mean to engage in “detensing,” see Oaklander and Smith as well as my own “Maurice in Time.”
favors more immediate gratification. “It Gets Better” likewise refuses to defer the future; it does not concede the good to what will come of the false innocence of the Child, but gives it real existence among queer people today. This futurity does not involve hope for the child’s future; it reverses that hope, implying that betterment comes when the uncertain future defers to the real present. The peculiar progressive present of the phrase “it gets better” makes development into the future an ongoing project based in the current moment.

Normative futurity collapses in another way as well: these narratives have a penchant for unlikely sequences or juxtapositions—sudden turning points that bind different states or events. We might expect gradual change as unhappiness yields to contentment and stories slowly build pride, confidence, and opportunity. But change happens suddenly, in narratives that dramatize an inspiring difference between life’s moments by putting them together. For example: “If you had told me when I was in high school that one day I’d be the commissioner of a gay sports league, I wouldn’t have believed you” (Knaub 246). Such a statement explicitly makes the remote future available; the leap from school-sports abjection to sports-league leadership reverses futurity’s withdrawal. The most common version of the unlikely sequence is that which tells of a transformative transition from high school to college:

I wanted to die. Everything was so sad and so horrendous. Before this all exploded, I was trying to get into college; now, on top of that, I was supposed to figure out how to be gay, too. I felt overwhelmed and hopeless. . . . Yet the moment I walked through those high school doors for the last time, diploma in hand, it instantly, instantly got better. In fact, it got wonderful. I immediately fit in at college. (Ridgway 280)

Instant gratification is again at work here. And a related kind of suddenness hurries a host of other truncated narratives: “After college, and a short-lived job in Los Angeles, I tried to kill myself. I was in intensive care for three days. I was twenty-two years old. But here’s the thing: just six months later, things started to get better. I met someone. I got a job” (Gaines 60). Or more dramatically, this summary narrative in which teen misery simply becomes grownup success: “I’ve made a career out of my rage. I’ve turned it into a job” (Shears 126). Rage itself becoming success is a queer futurity indeed; this short narrative could even appear on a résumé for queer theory. To say my rage became my job is to allow negativity to commandeer sequence. Sometimes the truncated unlikely sequence becomes a frame for a more leisurely subsequent narrative: “And so, I’d like to tell you how I got from that world of impossibility to the dinner I cooked one recent Friday night,” the dinner
in question being one this narrator cooked for his partner’s parents (Roberts 82). The long temporal distance between that world of impossibility to Friday’s recent possibility is minimized, and the minimization is what gives hope. To confront an unhappy teenager with a long wait for a better life is probably to make her feel like it will never get better; to put the goal right here is to get the feeling of the future now, its charge of insouciant joy without the distance entailed in more normative forbearance.

But this insouciance can be shocking, especially to those of us who expect testimony about traumatic pasts to deny possibilities for easy recovery or even to stress that violence—implicit in homophobia even when not explicitly at work in these stories—does damage that never gets better. Testimonials confident about recovery and, what’s more, willing to promise it to an unspecified audience would seem to reflect a troublingly heedless faith in what time can do. By contrast, theories of trauma, testimony, and recovery work with a very different sense of time, one much more compatible with Edelman’s skepticism about the relationship between past, present, and future. If Edelman warns that our futures are really versions of the past that void the present, theorists of trauma and recovery likewise question any progressive movement away from a traumatic past through a therapeutic present to a better future. The future promises only the past’s return, unless a broader transformation—“recovery” well beyond the subject—changes cultures of violence rather than just their subjective effects. Edelman also calls for attention to subjective particularities that would rupture any general fantasies of futurity, and theories of testimony share his sense that recovery depends, perhaps hopelessly, on remediation of implacably singular symptoms. But if the insouciance of It Gets Better contrasts shockingly with this rigorous refusal of what recovery might fake, the project also entails tactics better geared toward scrupulous response. Our skepticism about the project’s underestimation of trauma might highlight contributions that likewise stop short of any confidence that psychic wounds heal. Some contributions, for example, say something more like “give it time,” stressing not that trauma will certainly give way to recovery but rather that futurity itself is a form of caring ministration focused on modest gains. In these cases, yet another alternative future comes into play: a temporality of suspension, connotated by phrases like “hang in there” and “you just need to hang around and wait” (Bono 145). More generally, contributors do not so much promise recovery as model the sort of self-authorship that can be a vital first step toward reclaiming selfhood lost to traumatic experience.4 As

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4. Recognizing this need has been foundational to theories of trauma testimony, including Dori Laub’s recognition that “survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive” (63).
we will see, the time scheme implied in the title of the project is less a promise of recovery and more a performance of a practice whereby LGBTQ teens might learn to intervene in the temporal dynamics that structure the stories they live by. And short of that, there is the meaning of the project’s title itself: in the context of skepticism about its underestimation of trauma, “it gets better” sounds less promising and more ironic—less like a claim that suffering will come to an end, and more like the kind of grudging, knowing concession gay people have always made to each other when trying to face the future together.5

These subversions of normative futurity are peculiarly conventional. The point here is not that *It Gets Better* innovates queer languages unavailable to other modes of engagement, or that its narratives develop means of disruption notable for their categorically special temporality. Sociolinguistic analysis and forms of inquiry available also in narrative linguistics routinely discover these rhetorical temporal practices, and indeed the temporalities performed in *It Gets Better* correspond to many of those which sociolinguists have found active in “folk narrative,” what William Labov and Joshua Waletzky long ago called “oral versions of personal experience.” Labov and Waletzky helped found an approach to understanding narrative forms in terms of their natural originating functions. Noting that “it will not be possible to make very much progress in the analysis and understanding of . . . complex narratives until the simplest and most fundamental narrative structures are understood in direct connection with their originating functions,” Labov and Waletzky analyzed a set of tape-recorded, face-to-face narratives not unlike those included in *It Gets Better* (12). Their “functional” analysis enabled them to characterize narrative as a technique for recapitulating experience by making it conform to the terms of temporal sequence. But that matching process entails activity beyond sequential development. In their account, Labov and Waletzky attribute definitive significance to those features of narrative clauses and their contexts that complicate simple sequence, often in order to provide the “overall structure” upon which any narrative depends for its significance. The “overall structure of narrative” depends upon functions of “orientation,” “complication,” “evaluation,” “resolution,” and “coda,” all of which appear as conventional features of any oral version of personal experience, and all of which might well open narrative sequence to the sort of complicating (and even queer) effects at work in *It Gets Better* (32–41).

5. It might also be possible to argue that the forms of trauma glossed over by *It Gets Better* might be the “ordinary” kind potentially appropriate to more routine forms of representation, transmission, and archivization. For discussions of trauma of this kind, see Cvetkovich (10) and Berlant (81–82).
To analyze the narrative-linguistic features of *It Gets Better* and to discover in them folk-statements that disallow straightforward futurity is simply to discover the narrative resourcefulness available whenever people attempt to explain their experiences to each other. Which is not to say that oral versions of personal experience are always queer, but rather that narrative temporality offers resources for representing what is queer in personal experience. What makes the difference is what Labov and Waletsky call the “originating function”—not the purpose of the utterance itself (which could only have little power against heteronormative prohibitions) but the larger pragmatic orientation of the performance meant (in this case) to queer time itself. Recent contributions to narrative linguistics by scholars including Wallace Chafe, Elliot Mishler, and Deborah Schiffrin provide further context for sociolinguistic analysis that would link narrative action, temporal innovation, and dynamic identities.6

Often, *It Gets Better* appropriates highly formulaic narratives in order to innovate queer forms of futurity. For example, two micronarratives we might name “If you die, they win” and “I promise it gets better.” Nothing could be more conventional than the strong plot at work in narratives that encourage kids not to let the bullies win: “But if you are feeling hopeless and you are thinking about doing something drastic, maybe hurting yourself or even suicide, don’t, because they win” (Members 69); “The best revenge against all of those people who insulted you and made you feel bad is to live well” (Orue 36); “Please, please, please do not let the bullies win” (Steward 265). Sounds like the specious comfort people too often give to victims of violence; sounds like proof, perhaps, that narratives tend too much toward stock futures—normative ones, even despite their affirmative content. But the lack of true prospects in these cases—the normalized future—also sounds a lot like the kind of figuration Edelman wants, that which would dramatize the artificiality of social reality. Performativity asserts itself, stylizing futurity. Precisely because this micronarrative conforms to what people expect to hear, it makes a queer difference, harnessing the power of antiterrorist sentiment (one recent source for this narrative) and even the charisma of athletics (presumed to be an anti-queer endeavor) for sequences that would reverse their sociopolitical ends. Rather than capitulating to some normative futural framework, the queer kid inspired by “if you die, they win” actually finds a way to recognize the figural oneness of queerness and the death drive without having to become a martyr to it.

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6. See Schiffrin’s “Crossing Boundaries: The Nexus of Time, Space, Person, and Place in Narrative” for revisions to Labov and Waletsky through which to read narrative performances as chronotopic constructions of diverse self–other relationships.
Something similar happens when *It Gets Better* makes promises. “I promise you that if you stick it out, it gets better”: here the commonplace performative of the promise adds a peculiar temporality to the simple futurity of the phrase it frames (Tannen et al. 49). It reminds us, first of all, that any account of narrative temporality must consider the difference made by the intervention of a narratorial presence: when a narrator testifies to the sequence entailed in a narration, the relationship between that sequence and the narrator’s temporal position undoes any simply linear procedure, undermining logics of sequence even as it would seem to confirm them. More simply, narrator and narration have different temporalities, disallowing any singular timeline. Even apart from that complexity, however, the promise in question testifies to powers LGBTQ people would be presumed not to have: power over the future, as well as the credibility that promises presuppose. The promise takes part in queer performativity as Eve Sedgwick defines it, counteracting the shame that might lead to suicide by inverting its temporality: to promise that things get better is to perform optimism rather than to feel it, with all the difference that distinction entails for what Sedgwick redefined as “transformational grammar” (“Queer Performativity” 609). Even if Edelman might have reason to question the futurism of the “promissory,” which would make our alienation “vanish into the seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers” (8), this particular promise really resolves alienation at the start, less a promise for the future than a performance of present authority.

We might also describe this effect in terms of the way the rhetorical relationship in play here makes presence possible, its address to its prospective audience actually bringing that audience into being. Barbara Johnson has explained how this sort of direct address, epitomized in *apostrophe*, makes its addressee “present, animate, and anthropomorphic” (185). Building upon Jonathan Culler’s foundational discussion of apostrophe’s way of “peopling the world with fragments of the self” within a “timeless present” (66), Johnson defines apostrophe as “a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee” (185). This effect is vital to both the goals and the questionable implications of *It Gets Better*. Insofar as *It Gets Better* exists to throw life to LGBTQ youth by making them the subject of a personifying address, it works less through any message it sends than through the simple dynamics of a rhetorical relationship.7 Irene Kacandes

7. Johnson’s argument has further relevance here, since she focuses on the problem of animating the unborn child—an activity not unlike that undertaken by *It Gets Better*, which also shares the self-actualizing results of anti-abortion rhetoric. In both cases, “life-and-death dependency” raises questions about the directionality of apostrophe and its effects (198).
has explained a similar result in terms of the ways apostrophic “talk fictions” aim to “fulfill a need for connection,” and do so by engineering dynamics of identification that shore up fragile identities (145). Talk fictions are indeed fictions—they should not be presumed to achieve what they promise—but they entail a temporality that makes the futurity of It Gets Better a matter of rhetorical presence. Once again, futurity gives way to the present, because to say “it gets better” is less to speak to the future and more to invoke the present vitality of the addressee. Put more simply, Culler, Johnson, and Kacandes help prove that talk of the future enlivens present identity precisely because it is not really talk of the future at all. But this deception is not the ideological one Edelman describes. These queer apostrophic performances focus on the future mainly because exaggerated futurity strengthens the affective power theorists attribute to apostrophe, trading futurity for current gratification in the manner of what Edelman expects from queer figuration.8

In other significant ways, too, the future as such is not really at issue here. Often contributors to It Gets Better deliberately conflate their narratees with their own past selves. They say to kids today what they wish they could have said to themselves at that age: “If I could now, at twenty-six, speak to my fourteen-year-old self . . . I would say don’t worry about being gay. That’s who you are” (Tannen et al. 51–52); “It is too late for me to speak to my own sixteen-year-old self, so instead I want all of the misfits and weirdos and artists and queer kids to know a couple of things I wish someone had told me back then” (Coyote 88). Not really about the future, this is a reparative effort, fairly self-involved, and perhaps evidence of what Edelman describes when he says the alleged future is all too often really a fantasy of a more perfect past. And yet we might again reconcile Edelman to It Gets Better by noting that this conflation of narratee and past narratorial self—this strange version of dissonant self-narration—transforms the image of the Child. For Edelman the Child is a deferred ideal—a deferral of our own freedom to some prospective better recipient of it. That relationship is put right when “It Gets Better” speaks to past selves: the child becomes but father to the man. In other words, it does not get better because we give way abjectly to children and to some sense of what they will become. It gets better because we know better: the time scheme of experience supersedes that of innocence to get time really moving again.

8. Culler defines apostrophe against narrative time: “Apostrophe resists narrative because its now is not a moment in temporal sequence but a now of discourse, of writing” (68). Nevertheless it is fair to argue, despite Culler’s association of narrative form and temporal sequence, that there is apostrophic narrative, and that it demonstrates the extent to which narrative temporality might accommodate the sort of tactics that “neutralize” time in lyric poetry.
The difference is crucial. It gives us the opportunity to reconcile these two versions of queer futurity, because it changes the role played by narrative temporality. What may seem to be a linear imposition—the innocent child will become the experienced adult—is in fact a pedagogical proposition: learn how to think futurity as yourself-to-come speaking to yourself-today. Because this pedagogical proposition not only sidesteps linearity but reorients futurity as Edelman defines it, it functions also as a queer form of tutelage. Perhaps the best example of this queer temporal pedagogy at work is what happens in a certain counterfactuality that many “It Gets Better” narratives cultivate. Sometimes these narratives stress not just what did happen but what might have happened had they not found hope for the future: “If I had done something drastic then, I would have missed out on the best times of my life” (Bono 146); had I committed suicide, “I never would have gotten a chance to experience love” (Legacy 262). Such statements may seem to be teleological for the way they affirm a right choice at a critical moment. But they actually confirm only a conditional teleology, laying bare the fragile contingency of life’s “best times.” They adumbrate the sideshadows of time, its forking pathways, and they would prompt young people to practice queer forms of hope embedded most usefully in narrative forms.

“Sideshadowing” is Gary Saul Morson’s term for the narrative development of nonlinear plurality, the “open sense of temporality” generated when narrative represents the variety of possibilities that actually condition the present moment and its futures (*Narrative and Freedom* 6; 118). Morson is relevant here for the way he has helped narrative theory rethink narrative time: in *Narrative and Freedom* and also in his theory of “tempics,” Morson urges us to understand narrative time as a practice of freedom and plural forms of engagement, not if and when it ruptures chronological linearity, but even in its conventional instances (“Essential Narrative” 279). Morson is one of many theorists who, extending upon classical theories of narrative’s temporal complexity, shift our attention from the linear structure of narrative time to the diversity of temporalities enacted in the practice of it. A main source of this approach to narrative temporality is, of course, Paul Ricoeur, for whom the relationship between time and narrative is one in which any effort to pattern time into linearity runs afoul of time’s prodigious aporias and, as a result, ends in implicit metanarrative speculation about the problem of time itself. Important also to the foundational theories of Bakhtin, Lukács, and Genette as well as recent work by Hilary Dannenberg, Mark Currie, David Herman, Wai Chee Dimock, and others, this more pluralistic approach to narrative temporality lays stress upon the ways narrative form inculcates temporal
complexity. It departs from skepticism about the ideological effects of narrative linearity to understand those effects as part only of a larger scheme of practical engagement in which narrative pragmatically enables diverse forms of temporal recognition. This theoretical context helps explain why we might regard the practice of narrative engagement promoted in *It Gets Better* as something closer to *No Future* than its title might suggest. Just as *It Gets Better* promotes the sort of counterfactual sideshadowing Morson theorizes, it also promotes the inventive temporalities recognized by theorists for whom narrative engagement is all about temporal diversity—for whom narrative temporality amounts to a queering practice. It is no coincidence, as Susan Lanser has noted, that Genette develops his classic account of the temporal dynamics of narrative discourse in response to Proust's violation of its categories (250–51). Those queer violations are themselves classic—conventional forms of narrative instruction. Indeed, we might liken Genette's project to that of *It Gets Better*. Both engage conventional narrative forms only to find that their performance readily teaches narrative insurrection.

This reversal—this way to relocate conventional narrativity to queer theory—has been of interest to queer theorists eager to rethink queer time. Annamarie Jagose has noted that “it's important to question the reification of queer temporality, the credentialing of asynchrony, multitemporality, and nonlinearity as if they were automatically in the service of queer political projects and aspirations” (Dinshaw et al. 191). They are not—and nor are their opposites automatically or simply straight. Jagose goes on to ask, “Rather than invoke as our straight-guy a version of time that is always linear, teleological, reproductive, future-oriented, what difference might it make to acknowledge the intellectual traditions in which time has also been influentially thought and experienced as cyclical, interrupted, multilayered, reversible, stalled—and not always in contexts easily recuperated as queer?” (186–87). One such intellectual tradition is narrative theory itself, for which normative teleological linearity has only been one aspect of a temporal complexity able at once to determine conventional traditions and to enable the projects and aspirations we now call queer. Now that queer theory recognizes reasons to turn from the straight-guy version of time to one that draws on the fuller range of temporal possibilities, it might turn to narrative theory, where study of ways narrative invents temporal possibility out of time's aporetics could enrich efforts to say how best to forward a queer agenda. What this turn means for futurity specifically is a minor but significant change to the relationship between *No Future* and narrative temporality: if Edelman were to accept Jagose's suggestion, he might include narrative temporality within the practice of queer figuration, as
he does, in his own fashion, in his reading of *sinthomosexuality* in Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* and other texts (109). That revised version of his theory might then apply well to what *It Gets Better* does with narrative, not simply so that we might redeem narrative temporality specifically or defend it from skepticism, but so that we might attend to the ways a queer practice of time specifically operates in and through narrative forms.

Jagose might also be open to another intellectual tradition in which time has been thought of as something differently compatible with queer prospects: cognitive psychology. Here again is a field of inquiry in which narrative temporality has been emerging as a practical endeavor not incompatible with the demands of queer figuration. Whereas cognitive psychology might seem to entail the sort of naturalizing, essentialist, normative principles antagonistic to queer possibility, it also recognizes cognitive problems that match up with those dynamics of rupture and revision essential to antinormative practices. Daniel Gilbert, for example, has found that human cognition has problems distinguishing the future from the present. In general, Gilbert shows, “we find it permanently difficult to imagine that we will ever think, want, or feel differently than we do now” (114). When people think about the future, most often they are really projecting present feelings into some empty space of time—often with bad results, because the projection and the emptiness can be a double threat against happiness. Worried about the future, people are likely just to project that worry into an imagined situation devoid of the vivacity necessary to make the future seem like an inviting reality. As a result of this cognitive failing, the future is often just what Edelman says: a specious projection of present anxieties (albeit one unembellished by the ideological fantasies Edelman rejects). What enables us to compensate for this failure and truly to reckon with futurity, in Gilbert’s account—that enables us to get beyond the present and conceive of a future that is actually a full moment rather than an empty space—is information provided by other people. Other people with experience in what we are likely to encounter can teach us futurity even though they tell us about their past experiences in the present: “Instead of remembering our past experience in order to simulate our future experience, perhaps we should simply ask other people to introspect their inner states. Perhaps we should give up on remembering and imagining entirely and use other people as surrogates for our future selves” (224). In this surprising surrogacy, Gilbert actually gives us a good characterization of narrative temporality in practice: people recounting experiences that may lie in our future and thereby enriching futurity itself might be what occurs in cultures of narrative engagement like *It Gets Better*, in which people enact the process through which empty futures fill with true prospects.
On one hand, then, there is the approach to queer temporality that presumes a need for absolute rupture, as if queering temporality must mean total refusal of forms of linearity presumed to be essentially heteronormative. On the other hand, there is what *It Gets Better* and *No Future* together suggest: that queer temporality obtains in forms we take to be conventional—forms of narrative engagement, which respond to temporal aporetics in such a way as to innovate queer time-schemes. But *It Gets Better* further suggests that the queer temporalities enabled by narrative forms become real possibilities through their social practice. Its narratives perform queer futurity, teaching it to future generations, suggesting that narrative itself functions as a form of temporal pedagogy. *It Gets Better* and *No Future* help us understand the pragmatic bearing essential to narrative temporality, building upon classical narrative theory to extend its long-standing view of temporal pragmatics into new territory, so that narrative temporality emerges as a queer practice at once able to make a difference in the lives of LGBTQ young people and to transform the theory of narrative. The relationship between time and narrative now coincides with a relationship between narratological analysis and queer activism, insofar as narrative temporality is at once what develops when “storytelling fails” and when people succeed in teaching each other how to think around conventional futurity.

To characterize narrative temporality as queer pedagogy is to include it among pedagogical practices through which queer people create or restore queer possibilities. Eve Sedgwick’s account of the “queer tutelage” at work in *The Importance of Being Earnest* trades enthusiasm for Wilde’s all-out deconstruction of normative sexuality for a more pragmatic interest in the way Wilde models intergenerational “avuncular” instruction (*Tendencies* 55–59). Recent contributions to queer historiography explain how archives constructed by queer people have circumvented prohibitions against homosexual historicity, preserving for future generations the structures of feeling through which homosexuality might express itself despite compulsory heterosexuality. Work by Chris Nealon, Ann Cvetkovich, Heather Love, and others has taught us how to endow queer people with temporality despite their exclusion from historical time. And some responses to *It Gets Better* itself have discovered that problems with the project—its insouciant optimism, its potential quietism—become less troubling when the project is subsumed within a pedagogical mission. Ann Pellegrini reports that she has made the project the object of valuable pedagogical work by inviting students to produce their own contributions to *It Gets Better* within the framework of a course dedicated to the forms of critique Edelman and Halberstam promote. Similarly, Gail Cohee notes that teen suicide is the kind of crisis that
should compel us to “normalize queerness as a topic” and to allow for compromises between the theoretical rigor that would refuse any normativity and a strategic, practical co-optation of it. The pedagogical framework has focused attention on the way practical need transforms theory’s ideals; doing so in response to It Gets Better specifically encourages us to understand the project’s time schemes similarly as pedagogical endeavors. As forms of tutelage, these time schemes have a status different from what we might impute to them in the abstract. Moreover, their urgent practicality has an ally in the pragmatics of narrative temporality itself, the storied habit of construction recognized by Ricoeur and like-minded theorists for whom human time is developed in and through narrative engagement. Temporal tutelage is something important both to queerness and to narrativity, a peculiar but significant crux of compatibility between them.

If this discovery of essential compatibility between queerness and narrativity sounds too optimistic, it is worth noting that this sort of temporally reformed optimism has lately been important to queer theorists eager to modify without rejecting the critical pessimism that was necessarily its founding disposition. Muñoz, who hedges against antifuturism, also defines queerness in terms of future-focused temporal instruction, as “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmires of the present” (1). Muñoz joins other optimists—Eve Sedgwick, Michael Snediker—in allowing for practices through which queer people make a difference not just to their future but to time itself. When these theorists look on the bright side, they work with a rigorous intent to change fundamental patterns of recognition, aware that shame and paranoia have temporalities as problematic as normative linearity. They call for change to time itself, much the way It Gets Better understood in terms of No Future bespeaks its optimism only while transforming what it would mean to think about the future as such. That transformation corresponds to Snediker’s redefinition of optimism, which in his account becomes a way of taking an interest in the present rather than an expectation of a better time to come (30). Optimism has been co-opted by a queerness that understands the risks of futurity and nevertheless finds encouragement by making forward-looking demands upon the present. Even if these demands themselves capitulate to the status quo, they also redescribe it, and this dynamic makes plausible

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9. Snediker claims that “optimism’s limited cultural and theoretical intelligibility calls not for its grandiose excoriation, but for its (no less grandiously) being rethought along non-futural lines” (23).
the compatibility between queerness and narrativity. Narrative temporality understood as a form of pedagogical engagement through which transformative time-schemes become available justifies this reconciliation, developing new prospects not just for narrative temporality but for real queer people who have present need for its tutelage.

Even so, these prospects might amount to what Lauren Berlant has recently called cruel optimism. Even if (or especially because) narrative temporality as performed by *It Gets Better* and understood to have the subversive potential of *No Future* teaches LGBTQ kids how to imagine a queer future, those kids might come to believe promises that do them no real good. This is the simple way to sum up the reaction against *It Gets Better*—the various reasons to think it might actually do more harm than good—and it corresponds to what Berlant has in mind when she says “a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). When crises produce hopes for a better future that actually encourage “maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (24), optimism determines forms of present commitment that might be just the reverse of the culture of queer tutelage through which *It Gets Better* teaches futurity: a culture of denial, in which charismatic performances of privilege seduce young people away from demanding what might actually allow them to flourish. But Berlant takes no such entirely negative view of the attachments that cruel optimism entails, and her more mixed sense of its implications can offer one final reason to pursue reconciliations of what *It Gets Better* and *No Future* imply. Berlant speaks of scenes of “negotiated sustenance”—what “makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently” (14). Optimism may help this forbearance cruelly, since it reconciles us to crisis, but it also does get us through, and that merely sustaining negotiation is itself a compelling rhetoric of temporality. Perhaps what is at issue here is less futurity itself than an alternative way to refuse our present circumstances, one neither as intransigent as *No Future* nor as blithely hopeful as *It Gets Better* but determined by a more truly innovative temporality. Stressing its pedagogical character, I have hoped to shift attention from time schemes that shape our lives to those that are shaped by our practices and rhetorics. Neither *No Future* nor *It Gets Better* recognizes the possibility that time itself (rather than our hopes within it) might be open to change, but together they amount to a critical temporal pedagogy that promises transformations at that level. Together, that is, they envision truly queer prospects, forms of futurity not yet determined by norms we know but subject to chance desires and practiced upon by narrative engagements.
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