

Eugene McMullan
The (Im)Possible Witness of a Suicidal Life

The film opens with a 15-year-old First Nations youth walking along the train tracks in sub-zero temperatures until he sits down at last, closing his eyes. He will not re-open them. Just then we hear the loud whistle of an approaching train.

Cold Journey tells the story of Buckley, whose remains are discovered by the adults Johnny and Big Moses. They compare his body to that of a trapped Coyote. Johnny had been the youth's bosom companion and occasional mentor. Johnny will narrate Buckley's story in voiceover. What would be reported as a death due to accidental exposure had actually been so much more than that. Buckley's situation as a colonized youth had been so desperate that like a wounded animal in a trap he had had only two choices: either chew off a leg, or curl up and die. Johnny concludes that Buckley had *chosen* (as if instinctively) the latter.

An Indian, we learn, does not freeze to death in the cold. Buckley, however, was not an Indian. He was an "apple," red on the outside and white on the inside. As Uncle Joe says, to be an Indian requires living at home with your family, among your people, and learning their ways everyday from birth. Buckley, however, had been forced to attend residential school, where he was deprived of his language. He was also cut off from his culture and history, not to mention his people's knowledge of the land. At one point Buckley's mother ridicules him for his inability to speak Cree. Later Buckley's family literally pushes away from him in a canoe in their quest to find unpolluted lakes to sustain their way of life. As Buckley stands alone on the shore, his departing father sadly advises him to assimilate.

The situation of queer youth today is not precisely that of the residential-school era youth depicted in the film. And yet it is so much more than has typically been reported in the media. Here I will explore some of the contributions that postcolonial, queer and feminist theoretical approaches can make to an analysis of queer suicide, with special attention to recent work on happiness by Sara Ahmed.

Media accounts of suicide tend to explain it as an effect of bullying. This is both helpful and limiting. It is helpful in moving us away from a view of suicide as *ipso facto* evidence of a psychological problem (sickness) or in the even older view, as a moral failing (sin). Psychological problems may in fact be present in some or many of the cases. In reference to the colonized it would seem to go with the territory, as Frantz Fanon, Kelly Oliver and others have argued. The better explanation where bullying is involved, however, is that the sense of desperation caused by the harassment itself, irrespective of the victim's mental health (read: "resilience"), was so great that suicide seemed (or may have really been) the only way out. This account lifts the burden of stigma, and exonerates the youth of any moral culpability, which is right both in terms of compassionate practice—how is blaming a suicidal youth going to help?—and in terms of the larger analysis. From a queer, postcolonial and feminist perspective, it *really isn't their fault*.

The problem is not, however, limited to queer youth. Queer persons of any age are more likely than non-queers to consider, attempt or complete a suicide. But we don't see that. The issue of queer youth suicide has become the primary lens through which both queer suicide and queer suffering are made visible. Media depictions of queer adults these days, unlike in the "past" we are beginning to call "the AIDS years," focus on the happiness of married or nearly-married same-gender couples. Images of suffering are less common, and often revolve around reduced access to the rights, recognition, and privileges reserved to heterosexual couples. We also hear a limited number of reports on the suffering of queers in other countries that are deemed less enlightened than the U.S. and Canada. Work by Jasbir Puar and Judith Butler may help us understand the role these images of suffering play in the justification of empire. North America, with "only" a lingering problem of juvenile bullying, is in a sense exonerated and the imperial project blessed. At the same time all queers are cast as children (a typical function of colonizing discourse), with consequential losses for everyone.

Missing in the queer suicide/bullying narrative are the precisely the voices of the queer youth who are no longer alive to speak. But "voice" implies or assumes not just life, but a mature character [I will follow Mark Jordan's suggestion at the American Academy of Religion that "character" be substituted for "identity."]. It helps if you've *been there*, and lived to tell the tale (or frame the analysis). Thus the surviving narrator in *Cold Journey* was needed to relate Buckley's story. The seemingly impossible witness of the Muselmann (figure of the zombie-like other of the concentration camps, discussed in Giorgio Agamben) needs the conjoined witness of one who was almost a Muselmann, or was only temporarily a Muselmann, but survives. As if buoyed by a coffin, the Ishmaelite witness floats away from the disaster without having necessarily or definitively triumphed. The "mature" character that gives testimony, I would argue, must in some sense remain at sea.

Bullying in the familiar media narrative is caused by a lack of awareness. By this account normative youth and the adults responsible for them just do not understand that teasing, name-calling, and other inappropriate behaviors may cause a vulnerable youth to commit suicide. This reductive approach to the causes of bullying is mirrored by a reductive approach to supposed "cures." The It Gets Better videos, for example, propose to bolster youth by telling them not to kill themselves because life will improve as you grow older. The bullying you endure now is as nothing compared to the happiness that will be yours in the near future (the happiness of same-gender marriage and/or a career in the U.S. military, for example).

But happiness narratives, as Sara Ahmed shows, function to legitimate empire, providing ideological cover for the imposed abjections of colonization. In the historical case that still obtains for most of the world's queer youth, the parental love that just wants you to be happy judges your imagined present and/or future queer life as unhappy, thus causing you to be unhappy. If you would only submit cheerfully to colonization, you would share in the colonizer's heterosexual happiness, as if by participation or some version of a trickle-down economic theory. But to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, you will always be *not quite, not right*. The promised rewards of assimilation are elusive, and you will become the colonizer's fruit.

She also discusses the situation of adult queers, for whom recognition is conditioned on manifesting signs of happiness that are recognizable to the heterosexual majority. But this recognition at the same time confers happiness. You are asked to prove that you are happy in order to receive the recognition that will make you happy. As an aside, the historical Christian majority in North America has often functioned in a similar way, rewarding those who manifest signs of being among the saved or elect with a recognition that confers (actual, material and social) salvation.

Queer youth and adults, as Ahmed explains, are unhappy because queer presence felt as such is taken to be (and actually is) the cause of unhappiness *for the colonizer*. The queer whose unsettling mimicry subverts the master narrative threatens to upend the colonial apple-cart. We are dealing with competing and irreconcilable accounts of happiness, in which the happiness of the colonizer must in the end be distinguished from that of the colonized.

But what would constitute the happiness of the colonized? Perhaps it is too soon to say. Ahmed's point is that queers are and in some sense should be unhappy, since the prevailing accounts of happiness refer to the colonizer's happiness, which produces and depends upon colonial abjection. *Be unhappy, be melancholy, be a killjoy*, she seems to say, though she also reads Nancy's concept of happenstance as a happiness-alternative, a queer-sort-of happiness perhaps.

Judith Butler has an essay on doing justice to the life of a person who committed suicide. There and elsewhere she asks why it should be the case that some lives are more liveable than others. Reading Butler, Ahmed asks us to reflect on the bearable life, "a life that can hold up, which can keep its shape or direction, in the face of what it is asked to endure." (97) If happiness is a ploy, or if happiness remains an unfulfilled promise for so many of us, then perhaps it is enough to set our sights on the less lofty project of bearing up beneath the burden of colonial abjection. I am not convinced at this point that it is important for a life to remain, as Ahmed suggests, unchanged in its "shape" and "direction." Perhaps it is just as well that we, some or all of us, are in some sense "damaged goods," subject to the continual impingement of contingencies, including those that we experience as violating us, and forcing us to change.

Nevertheless, I find Ahmed's critique of imperial happiness persuasive. Applying her insights to the issue of queer suicide, I would propose an embrace of abjection per the figure of "the suicidal life" (Butler). While many traditional approaches to suicide take a therapeutic or interventionist approach that assumes we should all be liberated from a suicidal life, it may be more realistic and useful to incorporate the suicidal temptation or tendency in the elucidation of what it may mean to bear, however uncertainly, precisely with that which *does* threaten to annihilate us. I depart here slightly from Ahmed's reflections on the bearable life, as I want to describe a life that may be held in all of its vulnerability, whether or not it is able to maintain its shape and direction.

The suicidal life then, is one in which it does (not) get better, and there is no reason (not) to kill yourself. In this shadow-land, you are free to break down, change, lose yourself, and make love to your demons, even if that puts your future survival in jeopardy. You are the Muselmann; in

the next or same instance you are the survivor who speaks of and “for” the Muselmann. You will not survive once and for all, brandishing your scars like trophies. You will always be at risk.

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire, initiating the Arab Spring, he could not have anticipated the powerful, far-reaching and historical effects of his action. He may have had the more limited conscious goal of calling attention to the particular injustices he had suffered. His situation was more than he could accept. He should have had more access to the conditions of a liveable life. To have the added, final humiliation of being harassed by those in power when he only wanted to sell produce from his cart was almost too much to bear. Strictly speaking his life was not unbearable. He *chose* to commit suicide *in order* to bear witness.

Not all suicides are chosen in such a bold, conscious way. Letting go and succumbing to the cold, as Buckley did in *Cold Journey*, may involve a more ambiguous decision or series of little decisions, conscious and unconscious. Other youths, queer youths, may have boldly chosen suicide, like Bouazizi, *in order* to bear witness. They have made their point.

But if the suicidal life involves being vulnerable and in some sense prone to suicide, it does not follow that we must ever actually go through with it. Perhaps the project of bearing witness itself may be enough to keep us technically alive to a more “natural” end of days. The image that comes to mind is from Elton John’s tribute to Marilyn Monroe. If we are just “candles in the wind,” it need not follow that a cold blast should extinguish any of us before our time, before we have consumed our wax and simply expired. Perish the wind! If things might not get better, still they might; if we do not yet have a version of happiness worth pursuing, still we might find one; if we do not always find a reason to live, still there is in most instances no compelling reason not to live.

Eugene McMullan recently completed a Ph.D. in History at the Graduate Theological Union, where his dissertation was entitled "Queer Witness: Religion and the History of the LGBT Movement in San Francisco, 1948-1981." He is also the founder and lead organizer of Catholics for Marriage Equality in California. His spouse is a Filipino-Canadian.