Subjective Connectivity: Rethinking Loneliness, Isolation and Belonging in Discourses of Minority Youth Suicide

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ABSTRACT
While dominant medico-psychological approaches in suicidology depict suicide as resulting from individual psychic/corporeal pathologies, suicides of minority groups are frequently understood in much suicidology as having social and cultural causes. At the same time, contemporary media, film, television and other popular cultural representation of suicides of both youth and minorities present an account of suicidality grounded in issues related to loneliness, isolation and disconnection from contemporary sociality. Problematic among these depictions is that ‘ways of being connected’ (and therefore what counts as a liveable life) are understood principally through white, western, older-generational perspectives of what social connection means and how it is recognised. At the same time, such approaches often problematically conflate and interweave complex concepts of loneliness, aloneness, isolation, disengagement, disconnection and disintegration in the representation of forms of suicide causality. In the context of queer youth suicide, this paper (i) examines some examples of popular stereotypes of “suicide-causing loneliness, (ii) undertakes a new critical reading of Durkheim and Joiner’s writings on suicide as related to social disconnection and (iii) deploys theories of networked connectivity and social relationality to determine their efficacy in understanding minority youth dis-attachment in relation to Judith Butler’s approach to grievability, liveability and social belonging.

KEYWORDS
Loneliness; isolation; suicide; connectivity

Introduction
Across popular representation of queer youth suicide, some of the early and derivative work of queer youth suicidology and policy and prevention polemics, a stereotype can be discerned that links notions of isolation, loneliness and with suicide of LGBTQ youth. Like all stereotypes, the loneliness/isolation/suicide compact freezes knowledge on how we can better understand suicidality among marginalised groups and remains spectral in how many people in both professional and everyday settings think about and respond to queer youth suicide. Importantly, the problematic notion that LGBTQ, gender- and sexually-diverse young people endemically experience loneliness and isolation in ways different from their peers – indeed, ways which are seen to reduce liveability – forecloses the possibility to think through the relationship between suicide and social detachment at the deeper level of subjectivity in the context of social process of marginalisation and the positioning of some lives as less-grievable than other lives. While there are some valuable approaches to understanding the relationship between social belonging and marginality in ways which do not reproduce medico-psychological approaches that pathologise and individualise suicide cause (Cover 2016a), not all
social assumptions about queer youth are productive unless apprehended through critical frameworks that address complex discourses of belonging and liveability.

The base stereotype of lonely queer youth is, as I argue in this article, built on an old film and television narrative of problematic representation, but has circulated across many other domains. This includes some of the more liberal-humanist approaches to queer youth suicide prevention, support and inclusivity. Susan Talburt (2004, 32) has cogently argued that some of the contemporary liberal-humanist cultural norms that produce queer youth as intelligible subjects invoke support and prevention frameworks of ‘empowerment’ that, always, are ‘haunted by their opposite of isolation, pain and risk.’ The domination of a lifecycle narrative from isolation to empowered belonging is, for Talburt (2004), a problematic one. Rather than addressing issues of pain, loneliness and isolation, it produces a different kind of disconnect. Those who are unable or unwilling to ‘fit’ this particularly narrow regime of identity and knowledge or, arguably, for whom the pathway to belonging is neither clear, automatic, seamless nor without twists and turns of everyday upsets are excluded from connectivity (Marshall 2016, 91). In other words, the stereotype that invokes frameworks of response, support, prevention and intervention in order to prevent the (as yet undertheorised) presumption that suicide will be the result of queer youth isolation and loneliness, ignores the powerful potential of considering what kinds of disconnectedness, disattachment and dis-integration might be involved in positioning some lives as unliveable lives.

I would like to begin this article with a brief treatment of the way in which the stereotype of queer youth isolation and loneliness has been produced and circulated in both popular culture and early queer youth suicidology, in both cases grounded on what today are arguably very outdated experiences no longer relevant to the contemporary framework of everyday networked connectivity, young peer-to-peer digital communication and social networking, and the widespread media representation of LGBTQ themes, persons and characters. In seeking out alternative approaches to isolation that do not rely on outdated typical narratives, I turn in the second section to a short treatment of Emile Durkheim and Thomas Joiner – both writers who have addressed isolation through concepts of non-integration and non-belonging, to assess their value for an approach to unliveability in terms of social disconnection. In the conclusive third section, I address some of the ways in which theories of networked connectivity might be deployed to understand and remedy queer youth dis-attachment, and end by examining Judith Butler’s approach to the connection between grievability/liveability and social belonging/participation as presenting the strongest approach to making sense of queer youth suicidality in terms of social disconnect today.

Stereotypes of Queer Youth: ‘Lonely,’ ‘Isolated,’ and ‘Unrepresented’

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) and otherwise gender- and sexually-diverse young people are marked in public discourses of selfhood, community, identity and health as being vulnerable to loneliness through a stereotypical perception that such young people have a greater likelihood of being socially-isolated from one other and from LGBTQ communities, institutions, networks, social venues, media representation and thereby recognition as subjects of social participation, belonging and liveability. Indeed, the force of the performative assertion that young queer people are isolated and lonely is not only an outdated perspective of the lived realities of the majority of LGBTQ younger people in a contemporary era marked by digital connectivity and widespread media representation, but also remains pivotal to a very specific social framing of queer youth as suicidal. This results in a discursive framing of policy, social, pedagogical and relational imperatives for young non-heterosexual persons to self-manage a process from loneliness as a young person towards sociality as an adult grounded in neoliberal perspectives of consumerism, bought belonging and labour presented as career (Cover 2012). Such a perception of youth loneliness relies on a stereotypical representation of queer younger persons along a predominantly North American model. This model of liveability is built on a common but un-representative narrative that most queer kids grow up in isolated and homophobic small towns in which they experience high
rates of loneliness. As represented across an array of film, television, literature and support models (Cover et al. 2019), young non-heterosexual persons are presented with a cultural support framework that presume the commencement of support involves leaving the lonely life of the small town and moving to a large city with a high population of LGBTQ persons and a substantial queer culture. Cities such as New York and San Francisco in which such isolation and loneliness will not again be experienced are commonly cited as examples (Cover 2013).

The set of assumptions I have described is, on the whole, highly inaccurate of the realities of young non-heterosexual persons today, in which isolation from each other is no longer governed by geographic location in light of digital networks, increasing media representation and much greater likelihood of multiple persons disclosing their non-heterosexual sexualities in towns and smaller cities, including in school environments (Cover 2012). Where LGBTQ youth are depicted as always living lives of vulnerability and victimhood (Marshall 2010), written here as loneliness and isolation, this representation is sustained through contemporary and ongoing practices of media representation (including the continued circulation of older films, television and literature) as well as in some of the still-cited earlier work of queer youth suicide prevention research, policy and advocacy. Such representations exacerbate the depiction of young non-heterosexual persons as living lives that are ‘barely liveable’ on basis of debilitating loneliness, whereas the reality is a greater majority of young non-heterosexual persons are resilient, social and leading lives that are not necessarily framed by endemic loneliness (Savin-Williams 2005, 181).

Just as significantly, such older representations as they persist today tend to radically collapse any distinction between a concept of ‘social isolation’ and an understanding of ‘loneliness’. In this collapse, aloneness, as a form of not being in contact with other non-heterosexual persons, is prefigured as a vulnerability and unliveability that leads to an idea of suicidality. Indeed, isolation framed as loneliness continues in relatively recent literature to be proffered in policy, advocacy and research as a suicide cause. However, the conflation of aloneness, isolation and loneliness is highly problematic: while certain experiences of loneliness might indeed, as I argue below, be understood in relation to certain ways of being that are perceived as unliveable, both isolation (whether real or perceived) and aloneness are better considered beneficial ways of experiencing selfhood as resilient and self-sufficient – that is, as liveable. In other words, there is no specific logic in understanding isolation and aloneness within a negative framing of loneliness which itself is not necessarily always negative-felt in the first instance. Indeed, it might be important to consider from a policy perspective that support, and intervention programs rarely ask queer youth about whether they themselves might feel aloneness to be a positive or negative aspect of their lives.

Stereotypes have enormous social and linguistic power, linking and fixing a particular not-necessarily-untruthful set of attributes or social conditions to a specific identity. In the case of both queer youth and queer adults, the attribute of loneliness in causal connection with suicidality circulates in a broad history of film and television representations, public discourse, gossip as well as in policy and in some now-outdated academic studies (Cover 2004; Rosello 1998, 17–20). Stereotypes produce a particular kind of recognisability of such a linkage: for example, a performance of loneliness can be read as ‘evidence’ of non-heterosexual identity; conversely, a non-heterosexual person can be understood as being ‘at risk’ of being lonely (Dyer 1993, 42). The centrality of recognisability to the circulatory power of stereotypes in public-sphere allows them to operate as a node by which particular valences of performance can be taken on-board to produce or articulate oneself as an authentic minority subject. This includes viewing aloneness as a negative trait that must be performed by a queer subject. Alternatives to stereotypes usefully help to unpack and disavow the power of the stereotypes, although as Mireille Rosello (1998, 19) has pointed out, this very often results in an adjustment to the stereotype whereby the core knowledge remains: for example, in the case of queer loneliness, that queer people are not necessarily lonely but, at heart, are at risk of self-isolation and social withdrawal.

The notion of young queer persons as isolated and lonely is an older stereotype that has been given legitimacy through the dual scaffolding provided by both popular culture representation
(particularly film and television) and suicidology (including the genealogical trace of older studies informing more recent work and filtering into prevention policy and support discourses). Across both frameworks, concepts of loneliness and isolation among young people are applied in individualistic and sometimes-objectifying ways when conceiving of youth broadly – for example, the loneliness of the ‘only child’ or the young person growing up in a remote rural setting. However, in the context of youth who belong to minority populations, particularly sexual and gender-diverse groups, a discourse of loneliness has been utilised since the early twentieth century to describe and make sense of minority social conditions; this occurs through the application of stereotyping young queer lives as ‘lonely lives’.

Minority groups are often the subject of stereotypes circulating in popular culture. In the case of queer identities, this has at various times involved the linkage of male homosexual identity with effeminacy, rampant consumerism, over-stylisation, dishonest disposition or hypermasculinity (Cover 2004, 86), and lesbian identity with mannish imposter, fanged vampire, prim professor, frustrated nun, or man-eating monster (Creed 1995, 87). Core to many of these early stereotyped depictions of sexual non-normativity is the notion of failure, inadequacy, exclusion and shame (Halberstam 2011, 39–40), as seen in particular in the stereotype of the ‘sad young man’ identified by Richard Dyer (1993, 87–88), which links homosexuality with attributes and dispositions of aloneness, isolation, non-belonging, marginalisation, unhappiness and ultimately suicidality connected with the shame of difference. It was once a common narrative function of texts involving lesbian and gay characters to invoke or reference suicide in some way in order to provide non-heterosexuality with a melancholic quality of loneliness. The melancholic, lonely representation of homosexual males in film reached its peak in the mid-1970s, although the trace marks contemporary perceptions of queer youth, principally today as the risk of failure to produce the self as a resilient or empowered self (Talburt 2004).

The use of aloneness as a narrative mechanism for non-heterosexual characters to depict a solitary, side-lined existence outside of social belonging represents what Dyer (1993, 22) suggests are familiar narrative functions that repeat and reinforce existing stereotypes: a woman’s lonely gay male best friend or the threatening, psychopathic and self-destructive lesbian bent on destroying another woman’s marriage in revenge for her own social isolation – neither stereotyped character finding happiness in such a narrative but led to further melancholia and self-destruction. Even more recently, stereotypes of queer youth maintain the spectre of loneliness by depicting queerness as a struggle that occurs in temporal terms across stages of isolated through closetedness and non-disclosure of non-normativity (Saxey 2008) towards that disclosure and integration into community in which loneliness is depicted as being overcome. Although such stereotypes are now regularly challenged in the broad shifts in queer media representation in Euro-American cultures over the past half-decade, the core of the alone, sad and lonely queer youth stereotype remains in circulation as a knowledge framework informing the contemporary understanding of queer lives as disconnected from a normative sociality. Important here is that, in the context of younger persons from minorities in which there may be less diversity of resources for the construction of intelligible, liveable lives (Cover 2012), the persistent circulation of a melancholic stereotype risks producing a particular way of performing a life as an unliveable one. This potentially involves suicide as a logical response (Kral 1994) to recognising the self as a lonely self and thereby finding the normative remedy is a suicidal pathway.

While stereotypes of loneliness informed earlier popular culture depictions of young people that persist at times today, a perception of minority LGBTQ youth as problematically isolated from each other, from minority community social organisations and from media representation has marked some of the earlier work of suicidology. Isolation, in this framework, is collapsed with loneliness as an affective formation of queer youth disconnection, concomitant with risk and vulnerability, and has been presented as a suicide causal factor. Represented as the inaccessibility or inability to communicate with other younger persons of diverse sexualities, the unlikelihood of seeing face-to-face another person of sexual minority, or the inability to access lesbian/gay institutions such as clubs, bars, venues, youth groups or arts and cultural establishments due either to age or geographic distance, it presents
a normative framework for belonging in opposition to this experience and on the assumption of a linear pathway in the production of queer youth identity. At times, this involves depictions of youth living in non-urban and rural areas who are understood to have had to face that sense of isolation in a notably more hostile or discriminatory environment (Gudelunas 2005; Nicholas and Howard 1998, 29), in environments lacking media representation or reflection of queer lives (Fenaughty and Harré 2003, 8; Gross 1991), or feeling isolated through both deliberate or implicit practices of differentiation and marginalisation with few opportunities while young to find support in those who share similar experiences (Zhao et al. 2010; Smalley, Scourfield, and Greenland 2005; Morrison and L’Heureux 2001; Kendall and Walker 1998; Macdonald and Cooper 1998). Such depictions emerge genealogically from early work in suicidology, appropriate to its time but not in longevity through cultural shifts, that viewed a link between discriminatory estrangement of non-heterosexual identifying persons and suicidal outcomes (Rofes 1983; Gibson 1989). The genealogical trace of early writings that represented LGBTQ youth experiences as isolated and lonely depicted ahistorically across time implicitly sustains and reinforces a stereotype that all queer youth are always victims, at risk of isolation and failed social connection (Marshall 2010). While popular perceptions of suicide and death are more broadly marked by an understanding of death’s connection with a radical aloneness (Lingis 1994, 175), what is significant here is that there is a need for a critical response to the view that LGBTQ youth continue, without regard for culture, time or diverse experience, to be ‘lonely, afraid and hopeless,’ to use Paul Gibson’s (1989, 133) inaugurating phrase. Rather, it is important to turn to more grounded experiences in order to acknowledge that, even by the late 1990s the idea of a ‘queer media invisibility’ was significantly outdated (Cover 2000), and that by the late 2000s digital communication was facilitating widespread access to LGBTQ resources, interactive communication among queer youth peers and supporters and engagement with digital and social networking practices not of isolation but of innovative, regular and normative communication and identity production (Cover 2016b).

In attempting to disentangle the perception of isolation and loneliness being the same thing (or mutually causative) it is necessary to consider some of the ways in which loneliness more broadly is positioned as non-normative and therefore debilitating, rather than to consider some of the ways in which loneliness and aloneness have been figured as ‘reason’ for suicide within a queer ‘suicide logic’ (Kral 1994). Rather, what is at stake is the need to think through the relationship between loneliness and unliveability. If, in Judith Butler’s (2004) terms, a sense of liveability is produced through an affective relation with the knowledge of having always been a subject born into and constituted in social relationality, then we might understand unliveability as being a form of felt dis-connect with that sociality as the result of frameworks of being that are constituted in marginalisation. This is not, of course, to suggest that such marginalisation is the product of an identity but to think about the ways in which a temporary loneliness might produce an affective disconnection in temporal terms: a catalyst for suicidality for a subject who is neither negatively affected by a disposition of aloneness or the experience of isolation. In pointing to the problem of the persistent stereotype and assumptions about queer minority youth as isolated and lonely to the point of suicide, it is thus important to understand that the forms of isolation and loneliness that were previously experienced are no longer structurally-determined by geographic isolation, lack of role models, invisibility in media representation and immobility in communicative terms in the twenty-first century. I do not want to suggest that affectively-felt disconnection is not a social factor that can help us to make sense of the conditions that position some minorities to find suicide a logical solution to emotional pain. Rather, what is needed is to understand how loneliness, isolation and disconnection might better be understood in terms that help us to provide frameworks for approaching suicide prevention.

**Rethinking Isolation: Critical Approaches to Integration (Beyond Durkheim and Joiner)**

From the perspective of deeply-felt attachments to identity, there is therefore some value in interrogating some of the reasons why a deeply felt ‘dis-attachment’ to sociality might in some
cases be produced in situations in which there is a felt sense of loneliness or isolation. In other words, in what ways might we make use of the concepts of isolation and loneliness to critically understanding queer youth experiences of unliveability in ways that move us beyond the reliance on older stereotypes of queer youth isolation that are described in experiences no longer relevant. That is, while the vast majority of queer youth are not suicidal, and it is very important to avoid a deficit model assumption that all queer youth are vulnerability to unliveable conditions, there is value in thinking further about the relationship between marginal youth identity and how that identity is implicated in both the deeply-felt affective experience of the kinds of disconnections that might be understandable as isolation; and then beyond this, how such feelings might be productive of a suicide logic. Two prominent authors of suicide have (at notably different times of writing and from considerably different approaches) addressed suicidality from perspectives relating to integration and belonging which together can be read through notions of isolation, loneliness, disconnectivity and disattachment from sociality in ways which might help us to understand why some queer youth are suicidal in the context of social engagement as the practice of contemporary liveable subjectivity. I would like to critically address their work in this section in order to establish some of the ways in which we might approach liveability in the context of connectivities and disconnectivities for younger queer persons.

Durkheim, whose work can broadly be read outside the contemporary normative suicidology framework dominated by medico-psychological approaches that individualise and pathologise (White et al. 2016), articulated a framework for making sense of suicidal causes in relation to concepts of belonging. In his book Suicide (1952) Durkheim used careful sociological research on the structures of communities in relation to suicide statistics. In searching for an explanation as to why suicides were statistically fewer in the late-nineteenth century among members of highly cohesive religious societies (123–124), Durkheim (1952) developed an understanding he labelled ‘egoistic suicide’. In this approach, which centred on the relationship between subjects as individuals in the context of society, suicidality was more likely to occur when an individual perceived herself or himself as individualised and isolated socially from a strong, well-integrated social community such as a religious community. Durkheim (1952) argued that the less integrated the society the more likely the suicide; social integration thereby operated as a prophylactic against suicidality (124–125). This approach focuses not on the individual’s sense of belonging and isolation as an individualised trait alone, but on the relationship between individuality and sociality: suicide is more likely in the situation in which an individual is detached from social life as the subject’s individual ego, through separation from a felt sense of cohesive belonging, asserts itself as a special form of ‘excessive individualisation’ (167–169). A detachment from society is, for Durkheim (1952), a detachment from life itself since, in his formulation, a good life is a life directed towards society as both life’s source and life’s aim (170). The moral distress produced by a self-perception of non-integration or the lack of a cohesive social collectivity is productive of a notion of a disposition of unliveability through, for him, a melancholy that results from this ‘same exaggerated individualism’ (Durkheim 1952, 172–173).

What Durkheim (1952, 170) identified as a form of suicidality resulting from the lack of integration of the individual into society can be read from a perspective of affective loneliness. This enables us to account for queer youth suicidality both within and beyond an integration/isolation binary, instead fostering the opportunity to apprehend suicide as an outcome of unliveability that results from a particular type of pain brought about by isolation, while acknowledge that the non-integration from collectivity results from a relegation to marginality (non-belonging) within sociality. This integration/isolation binary is not, of course, to be understood as a strict dichotomy, but one which might be seen to emerge in the varying degrees to which a subject experiences a felt sense of not being ‘part of’ that society – alienation or marginalisation in one taxonomy of non-belonging – not being non-integrated, but not being integral. In this framework of thinking, then, we are able to move past both historical and contemporary senses of isolation as loneliness, as geographic distance between a subject and other subjects belonging to a minority community, or as an affective response to a sense of not
being represented or reflected in media. Put another way, it is to bring isolation and loneliness into the perspective of identity in which a distance from the norm or a difficulty perceiving the self within a normative range produces isolation in the specific context of the mutually-constitutive relationship between the subject and the society (Foucault 2007, 63). While such an understanding of the discursive production and positioning of the subject does not form part of Durkheim’s egoistic approach to suicide causality, his framework does not preclude the possibility of understanding isolation and loneliness as responses to a perception of non-integration in the context of constitutive regimentations of subjectivity – a formation to which I will return in the next section.

A second author to discuss suicidality in the context of isolation and non-integration is Thomas Joiner who, in his Why People Die by Suicide (2005), articulated the notion of ‘thwarted belonging’ as one type of ‘cause’ of suicide. Although less-easily read from a poststructuralist account of queer youth liveability, the approach is worth remarking on for its framing of suicide in the context of certain kinds of belonging, even if in ways which tend to pathologise those who are isolated by failures to belong. For Joiner (2005), isolation is experienced by the person who remains ‘absolutely unnoticed’ by fellow members of society:

If no one turned around when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met ‘cut us dead,’ and acted as if we were non-existent things, a kind of range and impotent despair would before long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily torture would be a relief (117).

In this account, which is less sophisticated than Durkheim’s perspective on the constitutive relationality of individual-social subjectivity in terms of integration, Joiner (2005) presents a normative view of belonging that is firstly grounded in a notion of basic human need to belong (118) that is universalising, ahistorical and unsupported, and secondly in a framing of belonging as communicative ‘attention’ or being ‘noticed’. While the latter framework is undoubtedly worthy of consideration in that a sensibility of belonging does involve an affective response to being ‘listened to’ (Dreher 2009) and recognised as a subject in the sense of soliciting a becoming and belonging in sociality (Butler 2004, 44), Joiner’s (2005) framing of belonging through real-time attentiveness is very much a ‘surface level’ of connectedness and connectivity that may not necessarily be the way in which all subjects, including particularly minorities and gender or sexually-diverse young people, experience and understand connectedness and belonging – if these are to be the liveable antipodes of isolation and loneliness.

While both Durkheim and Joiner’s accounts of belonging versus isolation (and/or connectedness versus loneliness) are flawed by virtue of the kinds of normativities they presume, both accounts read through a poststructuralist critical lens can provide a language by which to make sense of how suicide is connected to particularly kinds of unliveabilities. Such suicidality, then, is the adopted logical response to perceiving oneself as having a life that does not meld with the kinds of socialities and social participations that are demanded as part of subjective coherence, intelligibility and recognisability (Butler 1990, 31–32). Here, this is to begin to think in terms of why isolation or loneliness might be perceived not as a cause of unliveability but the affective sensibility through which unliveability is experienced. That is, rather than understanding isolation or loneliness in a linear perspective as a ‘risk factor’ for a suicidal outcome, they operate potentially as mechanisms by which a subject comes to view their life as unliveable, regardless of any actual relationship between aloneness and liveability. This perspective presents the narrativisation of isolation or loneliness and allows us to understand suicide causality within complex, cultural contexts rather than in risk/outcome linearity.

Connectivity And/or Belonging In/as Suicide Prevention

It is tempting to consider contemporary frameworks of digital connectivity as providing a workable model of social connectedness and belonging as an opposition, contrast or remedy to felt
experiences of unliveabilty for which loneliness is the symptom produced in a social framework. This might be so by particularly using – or adapting – considerations of the digital network and networks morphologies that do not assume a hierarchical structuration of society-individual (as in Durkheim) nor a framework of belonging as human nature expressed through normative communication and attentiveness (as in Joiner). For Manuel Castells (2000), the contemporary technological paradigm that is the material foundation of the network society has a number of characteristics related to the pervasiveness of information technologies and the processes of individual and collective being which are re-shaped (not determined) by existing frameworks within contemporary informational technologies. In this case, this might be thought of as a network that is adaptable to perceptions, not just of non-loneliness but also of social integration as a lived practice. Such iterative and interactive flexible relationality is key to the kinds of contemporary affiliations, relationships, friendships and communities that operate within a networking logic – the networking of technological information and communication tools responds to the identity-based cultural desire or demand for more complex and flexible forms of identity, including sexual identities that work within a queer theoretical framework of fluidity, complexity, historicity and temporality beyond the strictures of essentialist notions of sexual selves. Within a networking logic of flexibility,

[N]ot only processes are reversible, but organizations and institutions can be modified, and even fundamentally altered, by rearranging their components. What is distinctive to the configuration of the new technological paradigm is its ability to reconfigure, a decisive feature in a society characterized by constant change and organization fluidity. (Castells 2000, 71)

This thereby opens the possibility for the diverse production of new relationalities that may incorporate supportive ties – arguably the kinds of ties that change the circumstance of unliveable positionality to liveable subjective relationality. In other words, a network morphology in this form can be understood to provide a metaphor for social belonging through integration, connectedness, connectivity and relationality in ways which permit the subject to be the product of a mutual formation of ‘becoming’, belonging in structures of relationality and identity, but not altogether free from structuration nor fully able to express agency to choose the forms of belonging through which the subject will be formed.

This approach is not, however, to suggest that connectivity in its online experience is the opposite of isolation and belonging, nor an antidote. While a node in a network can become isolated and thereby not be networked into social relationality, the technological paradigm metaphor does not work fully for connectivity. In recent work, theorist Sean Cubitt (2016) has pointed to some of the ways in which contemporary approaches to networked connectivity are to be understood not as a site of connective ‘saving refuge’ but as a site of existential unhappiness. This is to say that networks of communicative belonging are not precisely the same as other kinds of connectivity. In the case of the latter, I am thinking about the kinds of connectivity that produces liveabilities marked by (i) integration, and (ii) overcoming disconnection, isolation or aloneness. Nor, of course, is it to say that pre-internet face-to-face communication is dichotomously separate from online belonging, nor too is it sensible any longer to argue that it is the superior form of communication and engagement. Younger people, including minorities, are no longer isolated in the same way as they had been fifteen years ago. Today they have the opportunity to consume minority representations (albeit often stereotypical), engage in forms of affective, communicative, or erotic behaviour (albeit via screens, pornography, etc.) and to access resources related to resilience and wellbeing in the context of sexual and gender diversity and minority categorisation (even if such resources are sometimes individualising rather than centred on the provision of community support). However, what needs to be asked is the extent to which the networked culture of contemporary digital communication, networked support, frameworks that move beyond spatial and temporal models of belonging, actually provide an opportunity to overcome disconnection from sociality.

More productive alternatives, then, for thinking about the disattachment and disconnect that could be implicated in queer youth suicide include understanding aloneness as an affective experience being
‘collectively, structurally unprivileged’” (Berlant 2008, ix). In evoking a notion of unprivileged, I am thinking here of a form of aloneness that is experienced in the face of a desire not for connectivity, social proximity, or the kinds of belonging articulated by Joiner, but in Janice Radway’s (2012, 339) terms, a lived desire for a generative reciprocity. In social relationality, reciprocal, ethical relationality is formed in the connectivities which counter the experiential marginalisation that produces a subject who understands himself or herself to be non-belonging in the sense of being a “dispensable sort of being, one who registers at an affective and corporeal level that his or her life is not worth safeguarding, protecting and valuing. This is someone who understands that she or he will not be grieved if his or her life is lost, and so one for whom the conditional claim ‘I would not be grieved’ is actively lived in the present moment’ (Butler 2015, 197). It might be true that a subject whose minority positioning might have nothing to do with whether or not she or he will surely be grieved (by parents, siblings, friends and strangers – indeed, an entire industry of online grieving has come about as a response to queer youth suicide in the form of the It Gets Better project videos, for example), it may also simultaneously be the case that a queer subject affectively and corporeally feel that his or her life is not worth grieving and thereby is ungrievable. Being positioned, then, as an ungrievable subject is the kind of disconnect that produces a sense of isolation (from a society of grievable subjects) and loneliness (in not feeling connected to those other grievable subjects), alongside, rather than causally linked with, suicide as unliveability.

Conclusion

To conclude, then, there is value in critiquing narratives that position queer youth as lonely and isolated (geographically, unrepresented) or as living lives through a kind of non-belonging that has stereotypically been connected with suicidality and articulated as a suicide cause. This also involves a rejection of the kinds of individual-social disattachment of non-belonging in the original Durkheimian sense or the thwarted belonging as a breach of normative connection in Joiner’s sense. At the same time, this is not to suggest that contemporary technological networked models of connectivity are the solution to felt experiences of non-belonging. Rather, what is required is an alternative critical perspective that makes the link between disconnectedness and ungrievability as unliveability. This is not to suggest that queer youth are endemically ungrievable in any way. Rather, this is to point to the operations of the violences of exclusionary practices and marginalisation, including particularly very subtle ones that are often not recognised under policy protections or social mores. Exclusions that deploy normativities in the name of that violence risk always producing a felt sense of being an ungrievable subject and thereby a life that is disconnected and not belonging to a full sociality. This is the context in which certain lives are positioned as unliveable, and for some of those lives that have no other way to forge connectivity with others, a life that is both losable and already lost.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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