Sissy Boys on YouTube:

"Shaun Sperling Bar Mitzvah Dance—Madonna, Vogue—3/14/92," YouTube video, 5:52, posted by Shaun Sperling, Aug. 10, 2012, *http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8XDo4lsa10* (Still: 0:31, 1,245,524 views)

Notes Towards a Cultural History of Online Queer Childhood

by Jon Davies

Eve and Richie

In 1991, *grande dame* of queer theory Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published her now-canonical essay "How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay" in *Social Text*. It is a *cri-de-coeur* against the psychiatric industry's oppressive scrutiny and abusive corrective "therapies" routinely inflicted on children to eradicate gender-inappropriate behaviour. She observed that this heightened policing of children's gender expression came in the wake of the 1986 de-listing of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Surveying the discourse of the time, Kosofsky Sedgwick found a tacit cultural desire "that gay people *not be*."[1] Also in 1991, Todd Haynes' masterpiece of the New Queer Cinema movement, *Poison*, was released. One of its three intercut narratives concerns a 7-year-old queer child named Richie Beacon — bullied and weird, he stands out in his generic American suburb as a freakish, otherworldly presence. We are introduced to Richie only in retrospect, through the lens of a TV investigative news program: he never appears on camera but is constituted through others' stories. Everyone is discussing Richie because, while defending his mother at home one day, he shot his abusive father dead, and then flew out the window. His mother witnessed him ascend to the heavens, but he has never been seen since. Before we begin, let us agree with his mother's conclusion that Richie is "an angel of judgment." And let us say he has been tasked with watching over queer children since Haynes' film was released into this world that prefers "that gay people *not be*."

<u>*Vogue*</u>

Look around everywhere you turn is heartache
It's everywhere that you go
You try everything you can to escape
The pain of life that you know

When all else fails and you long to be
Something better than you are today
I know a place where you can get away
It's called a dance floor, and here's what it's for, so

Come on, vogue
Let your body move to the music…

"Shaun Sperling Bar Mitzvah Dance—Madonna, Vogue - 3/14/92" (Still: 1:19)

"Shaun Sperling Bar Mitzvah Dance—Madonna, Vogue - 3/14/92" (Still: 1:48)

"Shaun Sperling Bar Mitzvah Dance—Madonna, Vogue - 3/14/92" (Still: 3:37)

A year earlier, in 1990, Madonna released the single *Vogue*, thereby transforming the lives of many queer and proto-queer boys across the globe. While that might be an overstatement, it is safe to say that the dance routine in the accompanying music video was studied like a holy text — queer scripture — and all its moves carefully mimicked, rehearsed and committed to muscle memory by an as-yet-still-underground and dispersed population of male-born children who burned with a fierceness that would one day manifest as a queer or trans sexual/gender identity.[2] Through the wonders of home video, these boys and their flaming dance routines were committed to magnetic tape. Thankfully, many held on to these videos into adulthood, transferring them to digital media along the way, and finally sharing them with the world on YouTube (*né* 2005). On YouTube, they mix promiscuously with sissy-boy fellow travellers recorded more recently while performing their own song-and-dance routines — to Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Britney Spears, Beyoncé — at recitals and Bar Mitzvahs and, closer to home, in bedrooms, dining rooms and kitchens. All of these artifacts stand as fragmentary but compelling evidence that queer children exist,[3] when many would claim that they are quite simply an impossibility. YouTube is essentially one of the most vital cultural archives of queer childhood we have.

"<u>I was</u>" vs. "<u>I am</u>"

In her book *The Queer Child* (2009), scholar Kathryn Bond Stockton notes that the queer child is typically conceptualized in retrospect: we are more likely to declare "I was a gay child" than "I am a gay child." With this "backward birth," the child is "remarkably, intensely unavailable to itself in the present tense."[4] She writes, "The questions, in fact, 'When did you know?' 'Did you know as a kid?' ask queer adults to account for this child (as if they could): a child who was knowing something of 'gay' or of things turning strange on her."[5] As I write this in the last days of 2013, a YouTube search generates scores of videos of very young people's coming-out stories, oral narratives recorded with an eye towards supporting other kids who might be watching, which effectively declare to the world: "I am a gay child." The song-and-dance videos, however, make their declaration in a very different way: corporeal rather than discursive, ecstatic in lieu of didactic. I am reminded of Susan Sontag's definition of "character" from her "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964): "a state of continual incandescence — a person being one, very intense thing."[6] In the blinding intensity of these young people's performances is something above and beyond "It Gets Better."

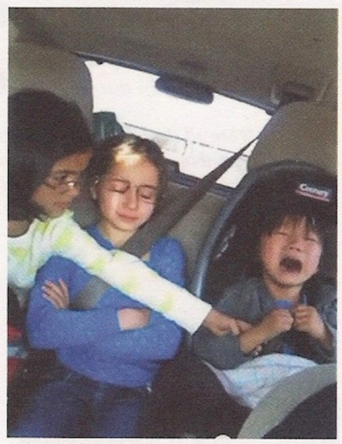
Privacy and Publicity

Once the structuring fact of queer identity, "the closet" required subtly navigating privacy and publicity, passing and disclosure. This dynamic continues to be at play in the lives of queer children who are still often seen as incapable of knowing that they are queer. When they are loud and proud about it—adopting a larger-than-life personality as a way of getting by, for example—they are accused of pushing the limits of tolerance and even "asking for it" when they are attacked. The "coming out" story is the narrative form that the conquest of the closet takes, but what to make of these videos that speak in vogue and twerk, not testimonial? I find something restrictive about the "coming out" format—too cozy with the idea that the Self is somehow knowable. Singing and dancing express a queer feeling, not necessarily an identity, which carves out a space of joy and fabulousness that is socially stigmatized for male-born children. The feeling of "queer" seems to have a privileged connection to the volatility of childhood affect and specifically the fraught performative continuum that mixes and matches shame-laced interiority with exhibitionistic theatricality. With a heightened sensitivity to the vicissitudes of these messy feelings, I am profoundly moved by what I have started calling "Sissy Boy YouTube Videos." Such videos provoke a visceral identification and empathy that is even stronger, I think, precisely because they seem pre-identitarian (if not pre-political).

The mode of these performance videos is that of mimicry, with their incandescent self-exposure coming from a gender-deviant identification with and euphoric adoration of a pop diva that finds expression in dazzling performance, as if it cannot be contained inside the body and must be unleashed on an audience, or public.[7] Drawing deep from pop culture's dark well of fantasy, they are experiments in evolving a public image and self-presentation—vulnerably in process. Academics Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh have noted that "cyberspace as a domain of identity play complements, if not parallels, similar dimensions of queer theory that gesture toward the fluidity and performative play of sexualities and identities."[8] Putting aside questions of the ultimate value of personal empowerment in the prison of 21st-century global capitalism (for now), these videos harness the power of queer spectacle—and instead of promising access to a true, authentic, knowable and articulate subjectivity, they revel in the glories of self-mythologization, imagination and DIY glamour. They are windows into queer childhood's private spheres, manifested as extravagant public pageants. Where once the development of queer knowledge was a circuitous, subterranean coming-of-age, the Internet now provides a thousand potential paths. Additionally, the thorny process of growing up queer is publicly broadcast online rather than wrought in the shadows—in confidence and in so-called "safe spaces" more subject to discretion.

Root

Ryeberg.com is a website dedicated to curating and writing critically about YouTube videos. In 2010, Sholem Krishtalka and I delivered a "Ryeberg Live" presentation in Toronto entitled "The Gays of Tomorrow" about queer childhood, shame, diva worship, and sissy boys rapturously singing and dancing to female pop vocalists on YouTube.[9] Krishtalka traced the traumatic "root" of this child's potential gayness of tomorrow to this decisive shaming moment: "Single Ladies Devastation," YouTube video, 0:49, posted by Carlos Whittaker, Mar. 29, 2010, *http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9eL3ejXmE* (Still: 0:10, 6,847,313 views)



"Single Ladies Devastation" (Still: 0:28)

As Krishtalka writes about this child, interrupted mid-dance during Beyoncé's beloved *Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)*: "His face is still while the gears move and all the pieces of anxiety and self-doubt arrange themselves in his mind: 'I want to be a Single Lady; I thought I was a Single Lady; The Father has told me I am not a Single Lady; The Father has told me that I do not and cannot belong to this club; The Father has revoked my membership, and therefore told me that wanting to belong to this club is wrong.' And all of those pieces then lock into place, and the seismic shock of this realization is too much for his 3-year-old mind to bear."

Default

Our presentation also included the then-viral video of 12-year-old Greyson Chance singing an extremely heartfelt rendition of Lady Gaga's *Paparazzi* at a school music festival in Oklahoma. During the Q&A portion of the Ryeberg presentation, I was challenged by an audience member for framing Chance as a "gay of tomorrow" despite his never suggesting he identified as such. I could have responded that, when someone uploads a YouTube video, it instantly becomes a cultural object, a performance and arguably also a fiction, and therefore open to be invested with all manner of external projections by anyone who views it. This is the transformation that occurs when a representation is made public. I also could have clarified my intentions and spoken of Chance more as a "sissy," capable, as academics David McInnes and Cristyn Davies note, of revealing the "impossible-to-maintain fiction of gender and normative ideals of masculinity."[10] Instead, my response drew on a sense of urgency I felt that queer/trans futures for all children must be kept open, and that such possibilities and potentials should not be foreclosed. So I replied that it was time to set a new default for sexual identity, and in the 21st century, we should begin assuming that every child will grow up to be queer, rather than the opposite. In functioning—politically, socially, culturally, aesthetically— as queer performance, sissy boys on YouTube visualize the existence of queer childhoods and the potential of queer futures.[11]

"Greyson Chance Singing Paparazzi," YouTube video, 3:38, posted by greyson97, Apt. 28, 2010, *http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxDIC7YV5is* (Still: 1:20, 51,807,806 views).

"Greyson Chance Singing Paparazzi," (Still: 3:02)

Family

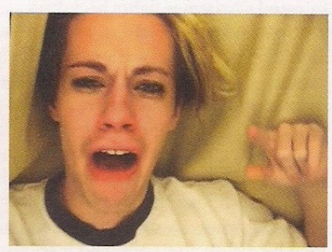
In October 2012, two twenty-something friends—playwright, director and filmmaker Jordan Tannahill and his partner, performer William Christopher Ellis—opened Videofag, a storefront space dedicated to video, film, new media and live art in Toronto's Kensington Market. In January 2013, I organized a "Sissy Boy YouTube Night" screening there as a way of unearthing more videos and continuing the research that began with the Ryeberg presentation. The small room was packed and the audience enthusiastic, cheering on the sissies in their grainy, homespun routines. After the screening, many people described their own incandescent queer childhood performances to me—music videos, comedy sketches, variety shows—all committed to home video but often misplaced over the years. Watching these videos in a room together, collectively empathizing and identifying with these flaming young creatures—recalling and perhaps even being haunted by the queer children we once were—was a potent experience. The tangible micro-community of Videofag—bathed in the warm glow of the chosen family that queer/trans subcultures can be—acted as a refuge from the derision and derogatory comments these videos are subjected to by legions of anonymous online trolls. Videofag henceforth became a research centre for all matters sissy boy and YouTube.

"I'm Chris Crocker and I'm the future"

Soon after, in March 2013, I showed Chris Moukarbel and Valerie Veatch's HBO documentary *ME @ THE ZOO* (2012) to friends at Videofag. The film recounts the history of YouTube—and Web 2.0 more broadly—through the figure of Chris Crocker, the "Tennessee hillbilly" kid who achieved infamy in 2007 with his "LEAVE BRITNEY ALONE!" video, in which he tearfully defends the troubled pop star against the paparazzi destroying her life and the haters who revel in her misery. Over a number of years, beginning on MySpace, Crocker developed his online video performance persona into a DIY star-image, channelling all the rage he felt as a constantly bullied, gender-deviant, abjectly queer teen who stood out so fiercely and whose safety was so endangered that he had to be home-schooled. Crocker filters his life through his camera, his constant companion and the engine that drives his interactions with others. (*ME @ THE ZOO* is largely constructed of video Crocker shot himself.) One could go so far as to argue that his primary relationship is with his own video image.[12] Affect in freefall, Crocker astounds with his delirious video glamour-fits.

For the filmmakers, Crocker not only embodies the cultural phenomenon of YouTube, but his rise to notoriety is paralleled with Spears' mass-mediated crash and burn, also chronicled here in gory detail. Spears ends up resembling both Crocker and his hard-done-by young mother, and the mass-media altar on which the pop diva is sacrificed soon becomes Crocker's as well when the "LEAVE BRITNEY ALONE!" video goes viral and he is flooded with queerphobic death threats and harassment, not to mention the flood of press commentary and the vampiric tribute and parody videos that every YouTube sensation of note generates. The violence of the response to the "LEAVE BRITNEY ALONE!" video was so extreme because of Crocker's effeminate self-presentation, for one, and because a trashy blond twink making a grotesquely emotive spectacle of himself to convey the intensity of his love and empathy for and identification with a trashy blonde pop diva obliterated the cool detachment with which we are supposed to devour our celebrities. Ultimately, Crocker comes off as very savvy, a mischievous provocateur and witty brat in full control of his hysterical, camp image—one that is palpable all around us (most explicitly in the performative excess of Ryan Trecartin's millennial video art). The mediated image Crocker cultivates and broadcasts to hundreds of millions of viewers—forged in YouTube's lab for the public performance of identity—evolved from the traumatized, "failed" IRL one that preceded his online existence. The transformative powers of queer shame and online alchemy worked together to cloak the damaged queer child in a media blitz made of a thousand shimmering, deceptively revealing digital representations.

"LEAVE BRITNEY ALONE!," YouTube video, 2:11, posted by itschriscrocker, Sept. 10, 2007, *http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHmvkRoEowc* (Still: 0:00, 47,232,898 views)



"He called it beautiful"

Videofag's Jordan Tannahill wrote a play that was performed live and streamed online in April 2013—a hybrid of theatre and cinema in the form of a "direct-address monologue to a webcam."[13] rihannaboi95 is the online username of Sunny, a 16-year-old living in the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood of North York in Toronto who takes 45 minutes to speak to us—the YouTube community—from a state of crisis. The piece is "very movie-like, very dramatic" (as Sunny/rihannaboi95 describes one particularly heightened moment), with the teen simultaneously narrating, working through and re-enacting the events that led to him taking refuge in his friend Keira's bedroom from the bullies who are coming for him. It is a video about making videos, about desire and identification, and about all the pleasures and risks of the attention economy.

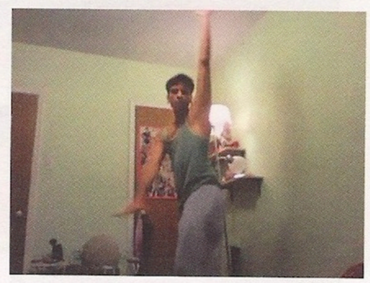
Sunny/rihannaboi95 addresses us, his YouTube audience: "I make these videos for you—whoever you are—watching in your bedrooms with the volume low down, or on your headphones, under your covers. I love you. And I need you tonight. More than ever." He asks us for advice on how to get out of this trouble, which began with Sunny's fascination with Rihanna, his strong desire to "watch her, learn her, be her" and to do all of her dance moves himself. He first hit the record button by accident but was enamoured by his own mimicry: "And after I was done I watched myself over and over and my heart was like racing. It was kinda embarrassing but also so... good. I mean, *wallahi* I looked so good. Sexy. Like a real dancer. And for some reason I wanted Mr. Bailey to see me like this. To understand something about me."

"Mr. Bailey" is the supportive Denzel Washington-esque gay teacher who loaned Sunny a laptop for his schoolwork. When Sunny shows Mr. Bailey his homemade video for *Only Girl (in the World)*—whose fantasized audience was the teacher himself—Sunny becomes fixated on a contemplative gesture the man makes, as if "he was looking at a painting in the fucking Louvre" rather than just a teenage boy "dancing like a faggot on YouTube." Sunny is transformed: "And when it was done he said, 'It's beautiful.' He called it beautiful. Or maybe he meant I was beautiful."

Friend Keira's laptop webcam patiently listens to and records Sunny/rihannaboi95's performance, which Owais Lightwala performed each night of the play's run. Unlike a confession booth, however, the laptop is engaged in a constant *pas de deux* with the teenager: the webcam is always on the move. He takes it on a tour of Keira's bedroom and swings it around to the tune of *Only Girl (In the World)* to capture the elation he felt listening to the song in Mr. Bailey's white Honda. He also takes cover with the laptop under Keira's desk to illustrate how he had to hide under the sink from his older brother when interrupted in the bathroom during a particularly baroque Rihanna video shoot involving a headband, mom's lipstick and a tablecloth wrap costume, shot against a floral shower curtain and Christmas lights backdrop.

Uploading the videos to YouTube was Sunny's way of amplifying Mr. Bailey's attention, expanding his audience exponentially. Sunny became rihannaboi95 out of a desire to be seen, known and visible, whether people loved him or hated him.[14] rihannaboi95 asks his new public, "Who are you? How did you find me? Of all the millions of things, you clicked on me. Did you watch me all the way through?" Soon all the kids at his school have seen the videos, bullying him relentlessly on Facebook and in the halls. Before long his family finds out, and it seems the whole block wants to rain hellfire on him for shaming them with his flaming faggotry. His family never saw it coming because rihannaboi95—Sunny was born in 1997 but rihannaboi97 was taken—is so different from the solitary, quiet and serious little brother Sunny. This performance is thus the moment of Sunny and rihannaboi95's convergence, the aftermath of his secret identity being discovered—online and IRL crashing together. After being confronted by his family, Sunny escapes by jumping out of his second-storey window—just like our angel Richie Beacon once did—and into a dumpster.

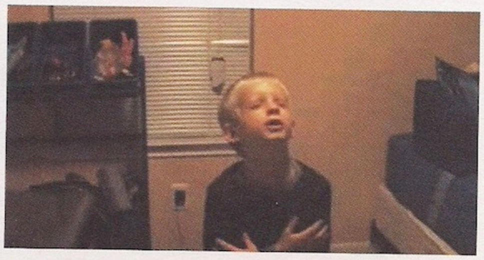
Stills from *rihannaboi95*, written by Jordan Tannahill, directed by Zack Russell and performed by Owais Lightwala, April 23–28, 2013.



A Room of One's Own

The rooms in which these performances take place are temporary safe spaces, part of the legacy of "bedroom cultures" that have thrived through the history of youth cultures.[15] While we do see Crocker outside of his grandparents' home in *ME @ THE ZOO*, his own Britney-plastered bedroom is where the staging of "Chris Crocker" can really happen. In *rihannaboi95*, Sunny's apartment is so small that he has to make his videos quietly. The room he performs from is not his but that of a friend—but it is under siege. The urgency of the monologue comes from the fact that Sunny/rihannaboi95's pursuers could charge through the door and beat him up at any moment. When there is finally a loud commotion signalling their arrival, he slips into fantasy, imagining a day in the future when he can walk down his street without shame—head held high—choreographed "like a music video with fireworks and a sick beat," everyone from miles around watching him: "we're not faggots, we're weapons cocked and fully loaded—we're alive, we're alive, rihannaboi95." In the performance that I saw, the video cuts out right as the door opens on the teen performing Rihanna's *Where Have You Been*, standing tall and "giv[ing] it his all" (as the play's directions read) in what might be his final moments, which summoned to mind the end of this video:

"Mom Scares Gay Out Of Kid," YouTube video, 1:25, posted by nizzy1115x2, Mar. 18, 2007, *http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VzxCkUkiogc* (Still: 0:39, 2,544,518 views)



"Mom Scares Gay Out Of Kid" (Still: 1:16)

A young boy very sweetly and soulfully sings and dances along to Britney's *...Baby One More Time* more to himself than to the camera, alone in a room. At the video's climax, his mother opens the door and gives him such a shock that he screams and collapses to the floor. (Whoever uploaded the video bestowed its disciplinary title.)

This video highlights the play of private and public, safety and danger, in the rooms where many of these Sissy Boy YouTube videos take place—a drama of doors, windows and screens. In the family home, a room with a closed door becomes a performance lab where over-the-top (queer) self-expression can be tried out and tested away from shaming eyes, whether those belong to one's family, or a larger community like in *ME @ THE ZOO*.[16] When the door is opened, the queer spectacle possible in that private, protected universe disappears (and in extreme cases, the escape route is through the window). The screen, meanwhile, is part of a two-way communication between the platform of the room and the outside world, collapsing the self-regarding gaze with that of a vast, impossible-to-conceptualize other: the invisible audience that could be no one or everyone. So everything that happens in this sacred space—staged for the delectation of the webcam—can become available to anyone in the world through YouTube. Finally, these now-public and free cultural representations/objects can be trafficked with no respect for boundaries of space and time, and will have effects that reverberate both in the online realm and IRL.

Whither Narcissism?

YouTube is typically viewed as the pinnacle of exhibitionistic narcissism—and the public sphere is reduced to an audience that is a network of voyeurs alone in their rooms. Rosalind Krauss famously diagnosed narcissism as the very medium of video as an art form, its endemic psychological condition. Video is capable of bracketing the performer's body between camera and screen in a mirrored, instant feedback loop that makes the performing subject an object to himself or herself.[17] The greater possibility of being seen (and becoming famous) offered by YouTube, compared to the more rarefied field of early video art, makes the medium's narcissism even more explicit, to the point that it is simply the *lingua franca* of the socially mediated early 21st century. Despite being perpetually decried, the narcissism that characterizes our age remains under-analyzed; accepting it as a given, what positive effects might we trace? Watching an individual perform for their webcam, themselves and the imagined audience in their head—to claim attention, to become public, to be "real"—there is no predicting whose efforts will stir our empathy and keenly sensitize us to the inner lives of our fellows. I would like to close by repeating artist Emily Vey Duke's call from a decade ago for "narcissism as a viable road to empathy (and the reduction of suffering) in art [...] The element that joins narcissism and empathy is love, and love is good, always, everywhere."[18] ⁕

Jon Davies is a curator and writer based in Toronto. His critical writing has appeared in publications such as *Canadian Art, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Fillip, Little Joe*, and *Cinema Scope*, as well as in many books. He has curated numerous artists' film and video screenings and contemporary art exhibitions including *People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell* (2008) and *Kelly Jazvac: PARK* (2013) for Oakville Galleries, where he is currently Associate Curator, as well as *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever* (2010, with Helena Reckitt) and *Coming After (2011–12)* for The Power Plant.

Endnotes

1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay," in *Social Text* (No. 29, 1991), 26.

2 I should note here that my discussion of queer childhood focuses on kids who are born male and exhibit sissy behaviour that can be viewed as queer performance, rather than on female-born kids' distinctive queer/gender-deviant performances. Whether any of the performers identifies or will identify as queer/trans is left open.

3 "Queer" is understood to be as much about style, sensibility and gender-deviant expression and performance as about non-heterosexual desire and object choice.

4 Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 6–7.

5 Stockton, 2.

6 Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 286.

7 This phenomenon stretches back through histories of queer boyhood and fandom at least as far back as the Classical Hollywood era, and has typically been subject to suspicion and shaming. At the moment I would argue that it manifests most strongly through boys' emotional and embodied attachments to female popstar images.

8 Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh, "'A YouTube of One's Own?' 'Coming Out' Videos as Rhetorical Action," in *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*, eds. Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 46.

9 Accessible at *http:// ryeberg.com/curated-videos/the-gays-of-tomorrow-2/*

10 David McInnes and Cristyn Davies, "Articulating Sissy Boy Queerness within and against Discourses of Tolerance and Pride," in *Queer Youth Cultures*, ed. Susan Driver (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 108.

11 With the vast quantity of information about and performances of diverse sexual and gender possibilities available online—to kids who are using the Internet at younger and younger ages—the Internet itself is partly responsible for the ability of people to say "I am a gay child" and not just "I was a gay child" in greater numbers.

12 A home video appearing in the film of Crocker mincing around as a child in 1992 is not dissimilar to those of the sissy boys I've already discussed, as if to provide historical evidence that he was "born this way" (as Lady Gaga would put it).

13 Quotes and directions from *rihannaboi95* are taken from *Age of Minority: Three Solo Plays by Jordan Tannahill* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2013), 31–58.

14 Remember Oscar Wilde: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."

15 I am reminded particularly of the zines and DIY music of the Riot Grrrl movement, such as Kathleen Hanna's solo *Julie Ruin* album from 1997, recorded primarily in her home. Sadie Benning's diaristic videos of the early 1990s, made as a queer teenager in the midwest, evolved an elaborate visual language for bedroom confessionals, combining direct-to-camera address, favourite musical tracks and the imaginative use of props (the latter are largely omitted from YouTube's pixilated immediacy).

16 In the film, Crocker's grandmother is an indulgent, on-screen sparring partner and his grandfather is a stoic yet innocuous extra, but the outside world is full of hostility.

17 Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in *October* (Vol. 1, Spring 1976), 50–64.

18 Emily Vey Duke, "Suffering, Empathy, Art and the Greater Good," in *C Magazine* (No. 85, Spring 2005).