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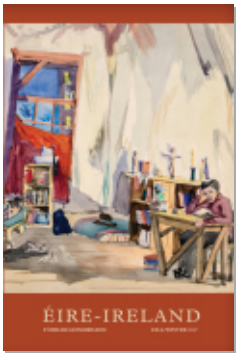

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Setting the Scene

Drag queen Panti Bliss should be conservative Ireland's worst gay nightmare. Erstwhile organizer of kink nights, openly HIV positive, landlady of a Northside Dublin gay bar, and author of a memoir detailing performance art that involves pulling interesting things from her anus, Bliss strays very far from what some queer theorists (e.g., Butler, "Kinship"; Warner; Duggan; Mulhall) consider assimilationist political strategies—that is, from gaining rights through modeling gay lifestyles on heterosexual ones rather than through challenging heterosexual institutions. Yet in 2014, following a series of high-profile media and legal events, Bliss became a unifying figurehead for Ireland's marriage-equality efforts, a self-professed accidental activist whose efforts were crucial to securing a resounding 62 percent victory for the Yes Equality campaign in Ireland's referendum on same-sex marriage.

This article draws on performativity theory to argue for the counterintuitive position that it is precisely Bliss's status as an ostentatious drag queen that renders her palatable to a heterosexist and homophobic society. It analyzes Bliss's now iconic "Noble Call" speech from the stage of the Abbey Theatre on 1 February 2014 as well as the messaging tactics of the Yes Equality campaign in order to contend that drag provides Bliss permission to speak denied to everyday queer behaviors and identities. This analysis complicates assumptions that the success of the marriage equality referendum signals the absence of societal homophobia; it also makes the case for drag—the politics of which are often called into question[1]—

1. Some theorists understand drag as reinforcing gender stereotypes, and some understand it as subverting them. Radical second-wave feminists (e.g., Marilyn Frye,

as a potentially powerful subversive strategy in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

Bliss had an impressive history of LGBTQ+ rights work in Ireland prior to the referendum (Walsh, *Queer Performance* 21–45), but her activism with regard to marriage equality began with an appearance on RTÉ's *The Saturday Night Show*, hosted by Brendan O'Connor on 11 January 2014. Bliss had been invited to perform a drag number, with a chat as her alter ego Rory O'Neill scheduled afterward. In her autobiography *Woman in the Making* she explains that she went to the studio with "nothing more serious on [her] mind than what colour lipstick [she'd] wear" (O'Neill 225). Since the November 2013 government announcement that a marriage-equality referendum would be held in 2015, LGBTQ+ rights had been a frequent topic in Irish social and political discourse, but concerted campaigns for and against marriage equality were yet to get underway. It was no surprise, therefore, that following Bliss's performance O'Connor asked O'Neill if much had changed in Ireland with regard to social attitudes to LGBTQ+ people. O'Neill replied positively but pointed out that columnists still wrote "horrible and mean" things about gay people in newspapers (*Daily Motion*). After O'Connor encouraged O'Neill to identify these people, O'Neill named the *Irish Times* columnists Breda O'Brien and John Waters as well as the Iona Institute, a right-wing, predominantly Catholic think-tank with prominence in Irish media. O'Connor introduced the word "homophobia" into the conversation, attesting, "I wouldn't have thought John Waters was homophobic." O'Neill explained that homophobia can be subtle and gave a personal definition of the term, saying that anyone who argues that gay people should be treated differently from others or that gay relationships are less valuable than straight relationships is homophobic (*Daily Motion*). Notably, it was O'Neill as opposed to Bliss who made these remarks—the conventionally handsome, clean cut, (comparatively) polite, and just a little camp O'Neill, whose opinions on homophobia were to cause such consternation.

In response to the *Saturday Night Show* interview, five individuals—O'Brien, Waters, Iona Institute founder David Quinn, and two

Erika Munk, Janice Raymond, and Alison Lurie) view drag as a mockery of women, whereas queer and cultural theorists (e.g., Jack Babuscio, Richard Dyer, Jeffrey Escoffier, and Andrew Ross) read it as an ironic exaggeration and critique of gender.

other unnamed members of the Institute—initiated legal proceedings against O'Neill and RTÉ for defamation, while a further Iona member initiated proceedings solely against RTÉ. RTÉ removed the interview from its website, and two weeks after the original broadcast O'Connor issued a live statement distancing RTÉ from the content of the interview and apologizing for O'Neill's behavior. The national broadcaster then paid out €85,000 to O'Brien, Waters, Quinn, and three members of the Iona Institute, which, as Fintan Walsh points out, "effectively meant that homophobia could not now be called out in public" ("Cyberactivism" 104). In an environment where gay people could not publicly name their oppression, in which their use of the word "homophobe" was so threatening to conservative ideology that it provoked legal attacks, camouflage was needed to allow gay people to speak; only queer tactics would ensure that they were heard.

Mainstream Irish news outlets were originally reluctant to cover the story, but social media and blogs kept the public abreast of developments (Walsh, "Cyberactivism" 104). As the story took on global significance, and as public outrage grew that license payers' money had been funneled toward wealthy conservatives, Fiach Mac Conghail, artistic director of the Abbey Theatre, invited Bliss to perform a noble call—or invited speech—after a staging of James Plunkett's *The Risen People* (1958). Plunkett's play deals with the oppression of the working classes during the 1913 Dublin lockout, and Bliss—although careful to remind the audience that she is "painfully middle class"—echoed the play's themes to talk about homophobic oppression that she experiences in her daily life. The ten-minute performance went viral, causing #Pantigate, as the affair came to be known, to be discussed in the Dáil, the Seanad, and the European Parliament—propelling Bliss into a global spotlight. Hundreds of thousands of people around the world listened to the speech; the Irish youth charity LGBT Noise printed "I'm on Team Panti" T-shirts; the story was sympathetically covered by global news outlets, including the BBC, CNN, Reuters, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, and the *New York Times*; social media and online publications were flushed with support.[2] Although in

2. The BBC commented on Bliss's rocketing profile after her viral speech (BBC); the *Washington Post* lauded her for driving "a stiletto heel through Ireland's gay rights debate" (Pogatchnik); and the *Guardian* decried the censorious actions of RTÉ (O'Toole).

the run-up to the marriage-equality campaign public consensus that gay people had the right to deem opposition to gay marriage homophobic was by no means unanimous, it was certainly strong. Thus, in early 2014 Bliss kicked the marriage-equality campaign into gear in a fittingly dramatic fashion; she continued to agitate, organize, and speak out until on 22 May the Irish Republic said "I do." It is hard to imagine events unfolding in this way had Bliss given the same address costumed as O'Neill. Bliss reflects on this in her memoir, reasoning that whereas Rory is a real person with ordinary personal baggage, Panti is not: "Panti doesn't poop." Thus people could turn her into an avatar for "the kind of Ireland they wanted" (268).

This essay draws on performativity theory to analyze Bliss's "Noble Call" and to unpack her astute observation that Bliss's adoption as an Irish icon has much to do with her presumably fictional nature. For Judith Butler the term "performative" differs from the term "performance" in important respects: the latter implies that there is an essential self that one's actions can represent or betray; the former positions culturally conditioned actions repeated over time as actually constitutive of the self. When Erving Goffman published *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* in 1956, his theory of performed negotiations between self and society took a stable essential identity as given. In Butler's theory, conversely, there is no immutable internal self; rather, one's conditioned actions repeated over time become, and tenuously constitute, one's identity. A blunt shorthand might be to think of the behaviors of a character on stage as performance and of those that make up our everyday lives as performative. In a more subtle register, whereas Goffman's mode of thinking about identity is theatrical (there is a self underlying the performances that we adopt in different social situations), Butler undermines the theatrical (there is no "true" character underneath our actions). I argue that in a heterosexist and homophobic society the assumption that Bliss is a performance renders her less threatening than an everyday queer performative identity. Exploiting the ontological slippage that drag can create between performance and the performative allows Bliss to direct our attention to the structural nature of oppression and to counter the tactics of homophobes who cast themselves as victims.

Queer Tactics: Panti's "Noble Call"

In *Excitable Speech* Judith Butler notes that words wound and that "hateful, racist, misogynistic, homophobic speech should be countered," but she asks us to consider the sources of speech's power to wound rather than attributing injury to "a singular subject or act" (50). In trying to understand why homophobic language is injurious and powerful, we need to consider a whole society, not just a specific homophobe; such consideration was occasioned when Ireland's national debate over who should be allowed to say "I do" started with a row over who can use the term "homophobe." The success of Bliss's "Noble Call" is that in manipulating the acceptance that performance space provides, it directs us back to the sources from which speech derives its wounding power.

From the Abbey stage Bliss vividly conveyed the day-to-day experience of homophobic oppression and implicitly argued for the urgent necessity of the word "homophobia"—of gay people's right to name the attitudes, behaviors, and people that oppress them. She began by asking members of the audience if they had ever had a group of lads in a car yell "fag" and throw a milk carton at them as they stood at a pedestrian crossing—and then described the feeling that followed this homophobic incident:

> Afterwards I wonder and worry and obsess over what was it about me, what was it they saw in me? What was it that gave me away? And I hate myself for wondering that. It feels oppressive and the next time I'm at a pedestrian crossing I check myself to see what is it about me that gives the gay away and I check myself to make sure I'm not doing it this time. (Bliss, "Noble Call")

Butler observes that "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" ("Performative Acts" 522). If in a system of compulsory heterosexuality all gay people are gender nonconformists, in Bliss's story punitive sanctions are in effect, conditioning O'Neill into a set of stylized gendered repetitions that will produce an approved performative gender. In other words, he adjusts his performance of self in public space, as well as his performative relationship to queer identity. Yet the emotional and psychological act of "checking" himself conflicts with his political commitment to being "the best gay

possible" ("Noble Call"). Bliss continued to list examples of psychological and physical events from her everyday life that "feel oppressive," until the largely heterosexual audience understood the need for a word to name that oppression. In a climactic moment she articulated the moral absurdity of denying use of the word "homophobe" to gay people:

> For the last three weeks I have been denounced from the floor of parliament to newspaper columns to the seething morass of Internet commentary for "hate speech" because I dared to use the word "homophobia." And a jumped-up queer like me should know that the word "homophobia" is no longer available to gay people. Which is a spectacular and neat Orwellian trick because now it turns out that gay people are not the victims of homophobia—homophobes are. ("Noble Call")

In judging Bliss's deployment of the word "illegitimate" and locating themselves as the victims of the word "homophobe," O'Brien, Waters, and members of the Iona Institute attempted to render injurious speech, in Butler's terms, attributable to a singular subject or act rather than to a system of oppression. This is a form of what Barbara Johnson critiques as "muteness envy," whereby "it is not that the victim always gets to speak—far from it—but that the most highly valued speaker gets to claim victimhood" (153). Johnson explains how narratives of male victimhood are used to counter women who try to break the silence around gendered violence, how women's speech interferes with "the official structures of self-pity that keep patriarchy in place" (153). Bliss's "Noble Call" similarly threatens oppressive structures, making it impossible to mistake those claiming persecution for victims. It deftly positions Bliss's performative identity within what Butler calls a system of "compulsory heterosexuality" ("Performative Acts" 524) and draws our attention back to the structures from which injurious speech derives its power.

It is not only the content of Bliss's speech that challenges oppressive structures, but also her ontology as a drag queen. Bliss is an alter ego, a performance so often repeated as to be part of O'Neill's performative identity. She hides the elements of O'Neill that are performance: she does not have to check herself, nor guide her conversation to "safer, straighter" topics. As Bliss explains,

> Journalists always want to know "am I going to be interviewing Rory or Panti" and I always answer, "it doesn't matter—you just ask the questions and afterwards you can decide." Because we're the same person. This isn't a character. I'm not playing a character. I'm not Dame Edna Everage. This is who I am; I'm just expressing it slightly differently. And when I'm on stage performing, it's still me, it's just that certain aspects of me are magnified by the make-up and all of that, and maybe some other parts of the boring daytime Rory have been dampened down a bit, but it's the same person. (Concordia University)

Here Bliss discourages a simple ontological distinction between Panti as performance and Rory as performative. The slippage between performance and performative identity creates the conditions for Ireland to witness homophobic oppression. Bliss believes that her "Noble Call" would not have gone viral if O'Neill had delivered it, that "there would never have been shop-window mannequins dressed in 'Team Rory' T-shirts" (O'Neill, *Woman* 268). She acknowledges that Bliss's visual impact plays a role (270), and also that she lends herself to the status of avatar because she is not perceived as a real person with real baggage (268). However, another reason that people listen to Bliss is that, unlike O'Neill discussing homophobia on the *Saturday Night Show*, she does not immediately demand to be taken seriously. In a heterosexist and homophobic society the assumption that Bliss is a theatrical performance rather than an everyday queer performative identity renders her less threatening.

An early moment in the "Noble Call" (time stamps 1:53–3:03) betrays the audience's confusion when asked to negotiate between performance and the performative. As Bliss—semiotically coded in a heterosexist society as a visual gag—describes her worry as to what "gave the gay away" and led a car full of lads to shout "fag," the audience laughs, likely thinking it humorous that an ostentatious drag queen should ever have to wonder what "gave the gay away." However, this is not a joke. Bliss is referring to homophobic abuse that she received when presenting as O'Neill, and her distressed confusion as to what "gave the gay away" is genuine. An expert comic performer, Bliss does not smile or give the laughter time to sit; she abruptly denies the permission granted to humor elsewhere in the address. When she repeats the phrase "what gave the gay away," nobody laughs. In

this moment we realize that the audience fails to perceive Bliss as more than a performance, to imagine her offstage, or to recognize that someone presenting herself as she does might be more than just an act. The status of performance might appear to neutralize Bliss politically, but in fact does the opposite, providing the stage on which serious things can come out of her ostensibly silly mouth.

Butler suggests that placing a theatrical frame around gendered acts allows us to maintain our ontological assumptions about gender: "Indeed, the sight of a transvestite on stage can compel pleasure and applause, while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" ("Performative Acts" 527). Without the theatrical frame, gender performance and/or performativity become dangerous. Although the perceived distinction between what is real and what is just an act functions to uphold heteronormativity, it also opens up subversive potential (527). In a homophobic society everyday performative queerness—Butler's transvestite on a bus or simply a queer couple holding hands—provokes the most distrust, whereas Bliss's theatricality acts as a kind of camouflage, paradoxically providing an occasion for queerness to be witnessed.

Signs of the Time

The posters and slogans used during the referendum campaign period provide further evidence that queer identities continue to need camouflage in Ireland's fight for LGBTQ+ rights. A number of groups, including Ireland's major political parties, distributed Yes posters. The biggest suppliers were Yes Equality, an independent civic-society campaign established by organizations that had advocated on behalf of LGBTQ+ people for many years and had the resources to erect 5,000 posters (Healy, Sheehan, and Whelan 55); GLEN (the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network); Marriage Equality (a single-issue grassroots advocacy organization); and the ICCL (Irish Council for Civil Liberties).

Yes Equality initially used several different posters based on the same adaptable template (Healy, Sheehan, and Whelan 29), the most prominent of which were bright text-based placards with a cheerful white speech-bubble containing the words "Vote Yes" and a smaller

FIGURE 1. Yes Equality poster. Courtesy of Yes Equality Campaign.

bubble containing qualifying slogans, including "For a Fairer Ireland," "Because Marriage Matters," and "For a More Equal Ireland" (53; figure 1). Toward the end of the campaign, Yes Equality introduced a series of posters featuring smiling individuals holding signs with texts such as "I'm your granddaughter, your cousin, your workmate, your friend—You can let me marry too." Gráinne Healy of Yes Equality explained the intention behind these later posters: "This referendum is not about some theoretical notion of equality. It's about real Irish people and these are real Irish lesbian and gay people, some of whom are nephews, uncles, teachers, friends; others might be sisters, your neighbour, people from all walks of life" (qtd. in Pollack). These posters of individual citizens asking for their right to marry were affecting and, in hindsight, also effective. Yet in a campaign for marriage equality direct representations of gay couples and families were conspicuous by their absence, a strategy far from accidental.

Yes Equality's organizers carried out detailed research before making image and messaging choices that followed polling and consulting with companies and individuals, including Red C, Bricolage, and Thalia Zepatos.[3] Yes Equality concluded, "Concerns about children were the soft underbelly of the marriage issue" (Healy, Sheehan, and Whelan 43), and decided that therefore images of children should be avoided. Research also revealed that well-known gay celebrities

3. Zepatos was director of research and messaging for the highly successful U.S. organization Freedom to Marry.

should not figure as advocates, since voters would be best persuaded by people "like themselves": for example, straight parents advocating on behalf of their gay children (43). Moreover, gay individuals and couples should be presented in the context of their families, "preferably in group shots where voters had to look closely to guess which of those pictured were lesbian or gay" (45). Clearly, queer subjectivities and kinship had to be camouflaged.

These research findings support many queer theorists' conclusions about the status of the child in homophobic discourse. Bruno Perreau notes that as marriage equality was debated in France, opponents of the proposed law held signs depicting the street urchin Gavroche, "the poster child for abandoned and impoverished children" (356). Butler observes that arguments against gay marriage "are not only fueled by homophobic sentiment but often focus on fears about reproductive relations," particularly fears about "the child, the child, the poor child, martyred figure of an ostensibly selfish or dogged social progressivism" ("Kinship" 21). Lee Edelman's work on the child as a symbol of political futurity also rails against "the lengthening shadow of the child whose phantasmatic freedom to develop unmarked by encounters with an 'otherness'" has to be preserved from "any collision with the reality of alien desires" (25). For Edelman the symbolic child whose innocence must be protected is an almost uncontested cultural value to which liberals and conservatives alike defer (18–20). Such insights by queer theorists were not only borne out by Yes Equality's research; they were also supported by the No campaign's image and messaging tactics, revealing that its market research yielded similar findings (Healy, Sheehan, and Whelan 117).

The biggest distributor of No posters was Mothers and Fathers Matter, a well-funded campaign group set up to oppose marriage equality, which disseminated an estimated 30,000 posters (Healy, Sheehan, and Whelan 117). One featured a young, attractive white couple and their baby with the slogan "Children Deserve a Mother and a Father—Vote No" (figure 2); a second offered an image of a little girl with the text "Surrogacy? She Needs Her Mother for Life, Not Just for 9 Months—Vote No"; a third text-based poster argued that gay marriage was unnecessary since civil partnerships already existed.

The preceding analysis covers posters displayed in public spaces rather than all leaflets and other referendum material delivered to pri-

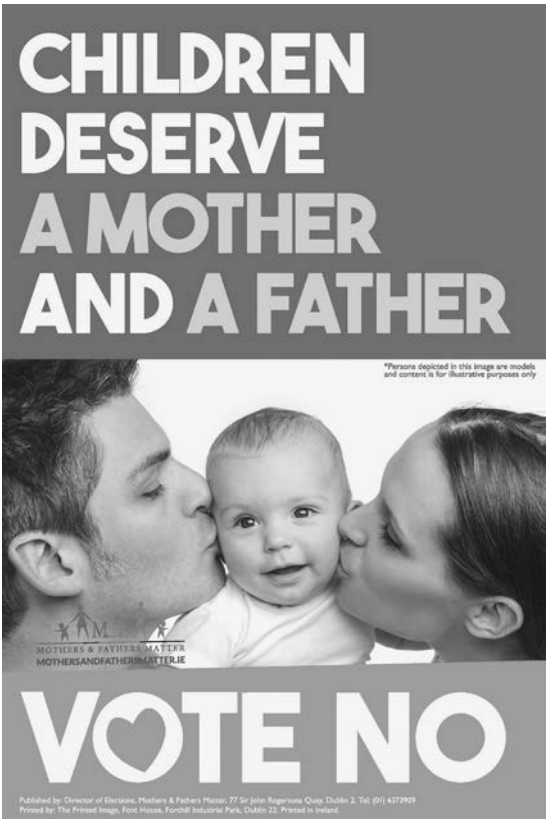

FIGURE 2. No Campaign poster. Courtesy of Mothers and Fathers Matter.

vate homes; Alan Kinsella's comprehensive Irish Election Literature website reveals somewhat more variation in the delivered material, but a similar pattern of campaign imagery. In the run-up to the referendum, as street artists used murals to depict gay relationships, some representations of same-sex couples did appear in public spaces. Joe Caslin's fifty-foot gay couples adorned a central Dublin building and a rural Galway castle (figure 3); Jess Tobin's cartoonish depiction of two women in love adorned a "Wall of Equality" in Dublin city (figure 4). But just hours after it went up, Tobin's painting was defaced with black ink blotting out the women's faces, and Caslin's Dublin mural bore traces of egg a few days after its unveiling (Daily Edge).

Figure 3. Top. Joe Caslin's marriage-equality mural, with egg stain. Photo courtesy of Rebecca Porter, https://twitter.com/beccabee_91/status/587229824269287424.

Figure 4. Bottom. Jess Tobin's marriage-equality mural, defaced just hours after unveiling. Photo courtesy of Fíodhna Horan-Murphy.

The Yes side avoided posters representing gay couples and families, such as men holding hands, women kissing, and children with same-sex parents, instead favoring slogans and straight people. The No side, however, chose to foreground familiar heterosexual relationships and identities, exploiting common fears that gay parents will harm children and undermine traditional marriage. Edelman notes that identification with the child as an ostensibly apolitical, yet in fact deeply political, symbol of the future is of major consequence for oppositional queer politics (22). He argues that queer politics must oppose the reproduction of identities and futurity represented by the disavowed political vision of the child. According to Edelman, conservatives understand the challenge that queer subjectivities and relationships pose to heteronormative futures more fully than liberals: "Conservatism profoundly imagines the radical rupturing of the social fabric, while liberalism conservatively clings to a faith in its limitless elasticity" (22). Significantly, organizers of the Yes campaign chose not to fight on the battleground of the child, refusing to provoke what Edelman understands as conservatism's greater awareness of queer threats to straight structures (22). On this terrain, their research implied, they would lose.

The Yes campaign avoided acknowledging how marriage equality (the term in itself formulated to camouflage the queer) potentially subverts the heterosexual matrix. Writing on France's path toward "marriage for all" (another opaque handle), Perreau notes the liberal strategy to uncouple gay marriage from the economic and the political by relegating it to an imagined and autonomous private sphere where it presents no challenge to the economic underpinnings of social structures or kinship. Yet marriage governs and regulates inheritance, property, taxation, and state benefits (355). Gay marriage potentially changes the role of adoption from mimicking filiation to rethinking it (358). Unlike those queer theorists who consider gay marriage assimilationist, Perreau locates it within "a long tradition of celebration and parody of the rituals of marriage and family in homosexual subcultures" (353). The No campaign gestured (radically, Edelman might note) toward the differences between gay and straight marriage, whereas the organizers of the Yes campaign offered (conservatively, Edelman might say) soothing assurances of sameness. Like Rory at the crosswalk, they checked themselves lest they

"gave the gay away"; like Panti on stage at the Abbey, they used avatars and symbols to camouflage the threat. And, like Bliss's drag, this tactic of hiding in plain sight was successful.

Denouement

O'Neill's personal opinion on a talk show led to censorship by RTÉ and threats from Waters, O'Brien, and the Iona Institute. In contrast, Bliss's speech from the Abbey stage garnered her national and global audiences and forced her antagonists to retreat from legal intimidation. This essay has argued that Bliss's "Noble Call" directs her community of witnesses back to the source from which words derive their power to wound, thus highlighting the power relations that allow homophobes to position themselves as muted victims. Yet if all queer activism demanded was to remind people that words and subjectivities are imbricated in a historically inscribed web of social norms and power structures, the LGBTQ+ movement would likely have achieved full liberation long ago. People's subjectivities are the products of a heteronormative culture, creating barriers to hearing queer subjects when they name their oppressions or demand their rights. The tactical use, then, of drag's ontological slippage—a slippage that offers drag's glamour a guerrilla force—gave Bliss the opportunity to operate outside the homophobic real occupied by O'Neill. Neutered by nylons, she changed the conditions under which the performative "homophobe" could be spoken and witnessed, returning the word and its political power to LGBTQ+ people in the run-up to the marriage-equality referendum. Indirectly, as evidenced by the success of the referendum, she also helped to change the conditions under which the performative "I do" can be spoken and witnessed.

This article has argued that Ireland's marriage-equality referendum was won not through the absence of, but rather in spite of, societal homophobia; it has detailed some of the queer tactics effective in circumventing prejudice. The research and messaging tactics of the Yes camp disguised queer subjectivities and queer kinship; by extension, they disguised queer politics. The decision not to contest the political vision of futurity, which Edelman argues is represented by the child (who must be protected from queer other-

ness), offers a productive ambiguity. What ideology underlay this decision? Is it what Edelman deems a left-wing conservatism: a vision of an eternally elastic social fabric that can accommodate the changes brought by gay marriage without rupture? Or might it be the more radical possibility, gestured to by Perreau's work, that gay marriage will indeed reconstruct kinship relations and restructure the economic foundations of our social system? In other words, is the campaign in deference to or a rejection of the symbol of political futurity represented by the child? Camouflage tactics leave both possibilities open. But at the same time, they make a fiction of both. They hide queer kinship behind doting heterosexual parents who, naturally, just want to see their children married; they hide queer people in a crowd of straight people and challenge us to spot the difference; the symbolic child is nowhere in sight; nothing here is going to give the gay away. Paradoxically, it is precisely when the gay is camouflaged—whether by an assumed performance of ostentatious queerness like Panti's or by the sleight-of-hand vanishing act orchestrated by Yes Equality—that it is granted an audience and the opportunity to effect change.

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