

# Critical Suicidology

Transforming Suicide  
Research and Prevention for  
the 21st Century

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## Hate Kills

A Social Justice Response to "Suicide"

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This chapter originated as a keynote address delivered at the CASP (Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention) national conference. It comes from a social justice activist orientation that aims to respond to suicide from a broader context than psychology usually allows for. This work addresses resisting individualism, critically engaging with language, and relations of power. I consider political suicides and resistance in contexts of torture, armed and nonviolent struggle, and the resistance of political prisoners with an aim to problematize taken-for-granted ideas that any death named suicide happens in apolitical contexts. Responding to suicide from a social justice activist lens requires giving a wider context and making connections across different domains. I offer a practice example of how I respond to suicide with a supervision of solidarity and re-membering practices that aim to honour the person who has died and witness their resistance and teachings, as an alternative to supervision that aims primarily to guard practitioners against vicarious trauma. Finally I will reflect on some inspiring social responses to suicide from within networked activist communities.

An anti-oppression and decolonizing ethical stance and a social justice response to deaths languaged as suicide are the heart of this work (Reynolds, 2012). Engagement with social justice activism, and therapeutic and community work, have taught me that hate kills (Richardson and Reynolds, 2012). Using the language of suicide masks the heart-rending suffering, daily indignities, and desolation many people struggle with. The language of

suicide quiets our collective discomfort and provides a “cause” for these stolen lives, normalizing the social contexts of exclusion, stigma, and hate in which these horrid deaths occur. In this writing I aim to enact accountability for all the people I have lost to suicide, particularly gender and sexual diverse and questioning youth who did not kill themselves but whose lives were stolen by hate. This is heartbreaking work. I respect that as activists and practitioners we can have broken hearts and continue to do this work. This orientation towards suicide is profoundly collaborative and informed by people and their families who have struggled and died by suicide. I have been informed by social justice movements, resistance against the death penalty, refugees and survivors of torture, rape crisis workers, and working alongside gender and sexual diverse people, and by all the therapists, community workers, and teams that I “super”vise. All of my work and activism is grounded by my father’s teachings on dignity and belonging, our extended and chosen family, and my Irish Catholic/Newfoundland/English culture. I am shouldered up by networked communities of social justice activism and hold an ethic of justice-doing in all of my paid and unpaid work (Reynolds, 2010a, 2010b).

### Resisting Individualism and Attending to the Social Context

In *Suicide: Foucault, History, and Truth*, British scholar Ian Marsh provides a Foucauldian analysis that offers a groundbreaking framework for understanding suicide on which my analysis is built. Marsh outlines the historical shift in understandings of suicide from issues of morality to issues of criminality through to the present construction of suicide as mental illness. Marsh argues that in our contemporary times, “an individualised, ‘internalised,’ pathologised, depoliticized and ultimately tragic form of suicide has come to be produced, with alternative interpretations of acts of self-accomplished death marginalised or foreclosed” (2010, p. 219).

A social justice perspective is in alignment with Marsh’s invitation to resist the individualism of suicide. Suicide is not something that happens to one person, and it is not something that one person does. Nobody simply kills themselves. Events occur in context, and because we live in a society that has not delivered on the promises of social justice, which we are well qualified and able to deliver, we have to structure into our analysis of a person’s death the context of social injustice in which they lived. I resist efforts to locate issues of social injustice inside the minds of clients, and I challenge dominant understandings that explain suicides as expressions of mental

illness. While I do recognize the existence of mental illness and appreciate that not all suicides can be understood through the lens of social justice, at times we can replicate oppression by locating social justice issues inside the minds of people (Gergen, 1989). I believe that hate kills, and hate is not a metaphor (Richardson and Reynolds, 2012).

Canadian-born sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) connected stigma to oppressive practices that “other” people. Goffman argued that you have to attack to actively spoil identities. There is nothing wrong with a child until they find out they are not normal. Our children are born perfect: what is wrong is that we create structures of what is “normal.” Categories are always organized by power (Crenshaw, 1995) and always exclude. Marginalized people are not “belonged,” and are “othered” (Sampson, 1993). Remember when you went to school and found out you were different? I did not know that not everyone shared socks with their sisters – that everybody owned their own “stuff,” and we were all supposed to be really invested in the idea of private possessions and ownership.

### Critical Engagement with the Language of Suicide

When I talk about a critical engagement with language in relation to abuses of power, I am particularly informed by the work of Canadian response-based therapists Linda Coates and Allan Wade (2004, 2007). They have made unique theoretical contributions to understandings of people’s responses to attacks on their dignity and safety that have important implications for work with people who have suffered violence. They outline these four operations of language:

- (1) obscuring violence,
- (2) hiding the victim’s resistance to violence,
- (3) obscuring the perpetrator’s responsibility, and
- (4) blaming the victim.

All four of these operations of language can also be seen in relation to survivors of torture and what gets called suicide:

1. When a survivor of torture dies by suicide, the violence of torture is obscured. What is revealed and investigated is the how depression, anxiety, or pills killed this person. The violence of torture is absent and disappeared.

2. The language of suicide hides the victim's resistance to torture, which is politicalized violence. All of the people I work with survived torture, escaped from countries in which that occurred (unless they are survivors of Canadian residential schools), found me, and participated therapeutically with me. They fought full-on for their lives. Whenever people are oppressed, they resist, and the language of suicide lies about that (Reynolds, 2008, 2010a; Richardson and Wade, 2008). The fact that they lost that battle against torture speaks to the tyrannical power and inhumanity of their enemies; it does not reveal anything about them as the victims of torturers. The language of "committing suicide" hides the victims' resistance to violence and cannot fit within an anti-oppression stance.
3. The language of suicide also hides the perpetrators' responsibilities. When people who have survived torture lose their lives to what gets called suicide, they are held responsible for killing themselves. This exonerates the people who tortured them, the government that gave sanction to the torture and trained the torturers and ensured that they had political impunity – that they would not be held criminally responsible for murder. The corporations that funded governments to use political violence to make the country good for profit and for the neoliberal economics of exploitation are exonerated (Reynolds, 2010a). There are many people who are responsible for this killing, yet the language of suicide only blames this survivor of torture.
4. The language of suicide blames the victims of torture for their own murders. When someone "commits suicide," as in "committing a crime," we can, as Goffman (1963) suggests, create a spoiled identity of a failed person. That conceptualization is dishonouring of the person. They did not kill themselves; I believe their lives were stolen. A social justice stance requires us to resist insidious practices of blaming the victims.

This understanding of the political operations of power is always part of my analysis of what gets called suicide. Here I am going to make visible the diverse but connected political contexts of the deaths that are called suicide in order to problematize how suicide passes for normal and masks social injustices and oppression.

### **Suicide and Resistance in Contexts of Political Violence**

It is important to consider the specific contexts of political violence in which any suicide occurs. For example, when we look at Indigenous communities,

where levels of what is called suicide are alarmingly high, we need to consider five hundred years of colonial occupation, that is, five hundred years of resistance, genocide, land theft, and residential schools – schools that had graveyards and provided very little education (Hill, 2010; Regan, 2010; Harris 2002, 2004; Miller, 1996). We must consider the ongoing apprehension of Indigenous children, a practice that persists because we have not committed to the social structures to keep families together – not because individual social workers are incompetent. We must consider Canada's hesitancy to sign the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>1</sup> When we use the language of suicide we construct not only Indigenous individuals as failed, but also their cultures and families (J. White, 2007). We must be critical about ideas and practices that keep us from looking at the wider contexts of injustice to understand things instead of inviting talk about the faulty interior of the minds of oppressed persons. Oppression does not happen to people in their minds, it happens in the world (Reynolds, 2010b).

What is discursively referred to as "political suicide" also needs to be problematized – for example, the death of Bobby Sands and the hunger strikes of Irish Catholic political prisoners against the British government in the 1980s. The purpose of those hunger strikes was to regain status as political prisoners, which the British government under Prime Minister Thatcher had rescinded, effectively criminalizing dissent. The hunger strike was used as a tactic because the political prisoners had no access to power. Thatcher refused to be influenced by the deaths of Sands and nine other political prisoners; even so, those deaths captured the world's attention, and Thatcher relented under international pressure. Constructing these deaths by hunger strike as suicide, issues of mental illness, and criminality misses entirely the mark of the prisoners' autonomy, courage, resistance, and intelligence. The language of suicide obscures the political situation in which these deaths occurred.

At the time of this writing, Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence is on day twenty-three of her hunger strike as part of the grassroots Indigenous movement "Idle No More" (Idle No More, n.d.). Her hunger strike is in resistance to Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Canadian government's Bill C-45, which Idle No More activists say radically changes Indigenous rights and sovereignty and environmental protections for land and water, leaving Indigenous territories formerly protected by treaties open for destructive mining and capitalist exploitation. Spence's sole demand is that the prime minister meet with her, which he is refusing to do. On January 4,

2013, the *Vancouver Sun* (*Vancouver Sun*, 2013) ran an editorial titled "Attawapiskat Chief Is Wrong to Blackmail the PM." It began: "The threat of suicide is always ill advised or rooted in selfishness." Besides criminalizing protest as blackmail, the unnamed editor was declaring Spence's actions selfish, individualizing her while obscuring her participation with five hundred years of Indigenous resistance against colonization.

A heart-rending recent political development is the self-immolation of Tibetan activists. Almost one hundred monks and nuns "committed suicide" by setting themselves on fire in 2012. This is unprecedented historically and is a sign of how desperate people are in a country that has experienced genocide and widespread torture for over fifty years. The government of China is effectively wiping out the nation of Tibetans. Desperate responses, such as political suicides, are escalating. Understanding these deaths as evidence of the mental illness of any of these people misses the political context in which their sacrifice occurs, obscures their activism, and effectively silences their dissent. A social justice stance requires us to resist understanding their deaths within the realm of psychology and mental illness, and instead situates these deaths in the political world in which genocide, occupation, and torture are happening.

An Eritrean refugee in Halifax killed himself after losing his case to stay in Canada (*Chronicle Herald*, 2010). Defining this person's death as suicide, depression, or anxiety totally obscures the context of his struggles. Other refugee claimants have died by suicide following the Canadian government's most recent repressive changes in refugee law and the massive increase in deportations of refugee claimants to countries where their lives are at risk (CBC, 2012). When questions about Canada's complicity in torture were asked of the federal government, the prime minister prorogued parliament in response, thereby suspending democracy (CBC, 2009). Saying that this refugee claimant committed suicide obscures the fact that he was at risk of being returned by Canada to a country where he would be tortured. Calling the death of any refugee at risk of return to torture a "suicide" mystifies the violence of the Canadian government and state, possibly obscuring a death that may be an act of resistance.

Rape culture (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth, 2004) describes a society that condones, promotes, and accepts sexual assault and a culture of violence (hooks, 2001). Canadians live in a rape culture in which one in three women is sexually assaulted in their lifetime and only 6 percent of these assaults are reported (Johnson and Sacco, 1995). These statistics are not current because all of the funding for researching sexual violence for the

National Action Committee on the Status of Women was cut following the publication of those findings and was never re-established. In the province of British Columbia, 100 percent of core funding for sexual assault centres was cut by the provincial government in 2002; a decade later, none of that funding has been returned. These examples of structural barriers that condone violence against women are alarming but not surprising to antiviolence workers. The UN estimates that globally, one in three women will be beaten, raped, or abused in their lifetime. Most often the perpetrator is a family member (UN Development Fund for Women, 2003). In naming misogyny, hate, and the murder of women, we need to consider the precarious lives of women with different access to power and safety. In Vancouver this means women in the Downtown Eastside (the poorest off-reserve part of Canada), women involved in survival sex work, and marginalized and racialized women. At WAVAW (Women Against Violence Against Women), a rape crisis centre where I serve as clinical supervisor, whenever a woman "commits suicide," we understand her death as connected to the violence of sexualized assault, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and poverty, and resist blaming her for either the rape she suffered or her death.

### Resisting Medicalized Language

Much like the language of suicide, the languaging of "overdose" obscures violence, offering medicalized and sanitized reasons for death. I worked as an addictions supervisor in the Downtown Eastside, and I believe nobody simply dies of an overdose. Physiologically speaking, they do, but it is more complicated than that. Abuse and oppression happen to people in their lives, and when we use the language of overdose we obscure violence by invoking scientific, legal, and medical causes of death. Our question should be, "What is going on that people are dying here – that women's bodies are being found in dumpsters?" We cannot let words like suicide and overdose let us accept these as legitimate and normal causes of death.

"Natural causes" is also problematic from a social justice stance. Some doctors have told me about the spiritual pain they experience when they are required to use the language of natural causes to describe what I would call deaths by social injustice. When a thirty-eight-year-old woman doing survival sex work with no teeth, drug-addicted, HIV-positive, Hep C-positive, and homeless, dies of the common cold, it is not a natural death. From the frame of social justice, this medicalized and bureaucratic language, while required for the structures we are in, obscures violence and ends our inquiry.

Medicalized language also seduces us to abdicate our social and collective obligations to change the context in which these kinds of deaths occur – violence, poverty, and homelessness, none of which are natural. This can also direct all research and resources towards corporate medicalized responses to what are primarily social issues.

In the next section I show how this social justice–informed analysis of suicide informs my practice as a therapeutic supervisor responding to clients' deaths.

### Responding to "Suicide" with Solidarity

As a therapeutic supervisor, I respond to suicide by engaging practices of social justice activism and solidarity, and bring practitioners together with an ethic of justice-doing. I never sit alone with suicide, torture, and terror. I am shouldered up by my Solidarity Team, the folks with whom I share collective ethics and whom I carry with me in a spirit of solidarity to help me do the hard things (Reynolds, 2011a, 2009). I envision the creation of networked communities (Lacey, 2005) that hold us together in nonhierarchical ways that defy individualism and are a step up against despair (Reynolds, 2011b).

Social justice has brought an "ethic of belonging" (Richardson and Reynolds, 2012; Reynolds, 2002) to all of my work, paid and unpaid. I work towards a context of social justice in which everyone believes they are welcome on this planet. People who are "othered," whose identities get attached and spoiled, receive serious messages that they do not belong in this world. I have worked with men on the Downtown Eastside who have served twenty years in jail and survived it. They have hurt children and women. They come out of prison and are ostensibly seeing me about substance misuse, but mainly they are struggling with suicide. Many of these men feel they should enact the silent death sentence they believe society has put on them. My work resisting the death penalty has taught me that a person is so much more than the worst thing they have ever done (Reynolds, 2010a). We need to embrace an ethic of belonging that says everybody belongs in this world and in the human family: not just the good guys. We are required to create ways for men to be welcomed back into the culture of accountable men and to stop sectioning off who deserves to belong.

Activist communities' resistance to repressive governments that have murdered people in extrajudicial executions, and then have "disappeared" those victims, has inspired me. Activists and other organizers would disappear and there was no accountability for their murders. No bodies were

returned to families, and there was no legal accountability for these killings. The purpose of political disappearance is to terrify and torture society as a whole so that people will not take acts for justice and overtly resist oppression. Political terror is a social project to paralyze communities and thwart active resistance (Martín-Baró, 1994). Activist communities resist these disappearances, remembering their dead loved ones openly, calling for political accountability. As activists we witness people who are disappeared to dignify that they were here, that they matter. Activist traditions of remembering the disappeared and not letting people who are killed by hate and political violence be silenced have had a profound influence in my work, particularly with regard to re-remembering practices. I am inspired by teachings from narrative therapists (M. White, 2011, 2007; Madigan, 1997; Hedtke and Winslade, 2004<sup>2</sup>) informed by American anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1978, 1982), who wrote about the idea of people re-remembering who they were in their lives, who they had been, and who they preferred to be, in what she called identity projects. I will offer an example of what this re-remembering work can look like in practice.

### Re-remembering Practices and a "Supervision of Solidarity"

I supervise counsellors who work with sexual and gender diverse people. While people who are sexual and gender diverse differ in particular ways from people who are subjected to political violence, such as political prisoners, Indigenous people, and survivors of torture, there are important connections as well. People who are sexual and gender diverse are subjected to hate, homophobia, transphobia, and heteropatriarchy, and when they die by suicide I believe that hate has played a central role in their deaths. Recently, another of our clients died from suicide. I met with the therapist within a group as part of a supervision practice I call a Solidarity Group (Reynolds, 2010c). When I respond to suicide as a supervisor, I want to see our therapist within a community, not alone. I resist isolating and individuating a counsellor to help them "get over this suicide." We are not going to get over these deaths – that, I believe, is part of our resistance to oppression. We are not going to accommodate ourselves to tolerate deaths connected to hate, because we have ethical obligations to do something about the social context in which hate-related deaths occur.

When I met with this team, I interviewed the counsellor – I will call him Elliot – in front of the team. I did not start the interview with questions about how Elliot's client killed himself or how Elliot was affected. Instead I

asked Elliot to introduce us all to this person, because we were meeting about a human being, not a "case." I used these questions:

- Teach me who Jonah was. What did you respect about Jonah? What did you appreciate about Jonah?

As a therapeutic supervisor with a social justice ethic, I could not move on and talk to Jonah's therapist about the disappearance of this person if I disappeared Jonah by not bringing him fully into the room as a human being.

- How did you honour Jonah's resistance to oppression and hate in his life?

This is very different than, "How did Jonah die?" Instead I would say, "Jonah resisted homophobia and hate, and attacks and gay bashing. How did you bring forward these sites of Jonah's resistance?"

This line of questioning is vital to our sustainability as workers:

- What difference might you have made in Jonah's life?

When you think about it, here is a person who had been disappeared, killed by hate, not seen as a person, not seen as a human being.

- Did it matter that you actually witnessed who he was? That you talked about how he was treated as a youth? That you took a position on that and said it was wrong? Did it matter? What difference might you have made in Jonah's life in terms of dignifying him, treating him as a human being, treating him with respect?

As an act of accountability, and honouring our clients as our teachers, I asked:

- What difference did knowing Jonah, being a witness to his acts of resistance and his life, make for you? For your life and your work?

I have learned my work on the backs of my clients, and it is the people who have struggled with suicide and lost their lives to it that have informed me. They have offered the most useful teachings that I hold.

The last question is informed by activist practices of re-membering the disappeared:

- How will you keep what Jonah taught you alive in your life and work?

I always acknowledge my teachers: academics, activists, and clients. We reference our teachers as a practice of witnessing and resisting their disappearance, bringing to life the teachings of people who have taught us this work on their backs and to our benefit.

These are the kinds of questions I asked Elliot in front of a group of counsellors. I then interviewed all the witnessing counsellors. I asked them to connect with where they had lost people and where they connected with Elliot – that is, what resonated for them in the dialogue. Jonah was the person who died, Elliot was Jonah's counsellor, and Sara was one of the counsellors who witnessed Elliot's struggles. (These names are fictional, the accounts are not.)

### Elliot's Reflection as the Interviewed Counsellor in the Solidarity Group

*Our "Remembering Jonah" session today was healing for me as a counsellor and a person. It allowed me to value my work with Jonah in a human, "non-clinical" way. I was trained to examine my reaction to clients in order to provide effective and ethical service. However, none of my training has prepared me for the intense, sometimes overwhelming nature of working with a population of highly marginalized, oppressed clients struggling with mental health and addiction issues. I've often felt my work is a "drop in the bucket" of help and support clients need and deserve. The witnesses reminded me of how precious our relationships with clients can be, how dignity matters. Remembering Jonah's amazing strengths and his resistance against oppression left me with an honouring view on his life, rather than focusing on the tragedy of the loss of such a beautiful person. Your questions about Jonah's gifts, what he taught me, combat my feelings of helplessness, and this session is going to help me in my work with all my clients.*

*The structure of the witnessing today (you interviewing me, then the others in the room, and then connecting back to me) allowed me to start feeling my emotions rather than holding on to the safety of numbness. As the supervisor, your transparency helped solidify how important it is to resist overediting our responses in the guise of being "professional." The witnesses shared their responses of pain in their lives and work, and this validated my struggle losing Jonah. The group helped quiet my inner overcritical voice.*

*On my jog home (more like a walk with a hop than a jog really ...) I saw Jonah's physical features in many people passing me by, and it was a very positive, spiritual experience.*

### Sara's Reflections as a Witnessing Counsellor in the Solidarity Group

*The Solidarity Group Vikki led us in created a space to honour and remember a client in all his humanity. As I listened to Elliot talk about Jonah, I was aware how this stranger transitioned into a man with an identity, soul, and passion. I wished I had known Jonah. Vikki asked Elliot if there was a way that this client's life could enter into Elliot's work so that his death was not forgotten, which reminded me how important it is to honour the intimate knowledge we get from our clients.*

*My mind wandered to how I bring Brenda, who committed suicide last year, into my clinical practice by sharing what she taught me with clients to combat the blame-game of stigma they are labeled with.*

*When Vikki turned to me and asked what arose for me from this re-membering process I was overcome with emotion about how real the work we do is and how we as counsellors offer moments of truly seeing our clients for who they are and acknowledging their struggles. I was struck by the privilege of learning from clients and how it has shaped my life and shifted my values.*

*I was saddened that we did not make more room for Jonah to be in this society because of prejudice. The act of witnessing allowed me to safely question how I fight for marginalized populations and look for acts of resistance in the face of oppression and violence. It reminded [me] that it is okay to hold the faces I love and have lost in my mind in order to fuel and encourage my work.*

*Thanks Vikki and Elliot for being present and creating a sacred space of remembering for Jonah. I am grateful for the work you both engage in.*

*Sincerely,*

Sara

The purpose of this Solidarity Group and re-membering practice is not to get an accurate account of the crisis, or to guard therapists against vicarious trauma. It is to bring the person who has died to the conversation, to honour their life and their teachings. Whenever I lose a client in any way, I ask myself:

- What difference might I have made in their life?
- What difference did they make in my life? My work?
- What is my commitment to bring their teaching to other clients? To keeping their teachings alive? To acknowledging them as my teacher?
- What is required of me as a citizen, as a social justice activist, to change society so there would have been more room for this person?

This re-membering work does not stop our hearts from breaking, but for me it stops the bleeding. I can continue to work with a broken heart, but I cannot be pumping blood. Doing this re-membering work in a Solidarity Group, in a networked community of others, fosters our collective sustainability and dignifies our client with a witnessing of their humanity.

### Inspiring Community Responses to Suicide: "It Gets Better"

I am going to focus on the domain of sexual and gender diverse youth and suicide, not because they are the most oppressed group or the apex of some hierarchy of pain (Reynolds, 2010a), but because there are inspiring and fabulous social justice-informed responses to suicide that merit celebration in these communities. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are twice as likely to think about suicide as heterosexual youth and three times as likely to attempt suicide (Silenzio, Pena, Duberstein, Cerel, and Knox, 2007). A staggering statistic is that 41 percent of transgender persons have attempted suicide (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2010). These statistics are most likely underestimates because transgender people who die by suicide are not always recognized and obviously cannot participate in this research. This is a devastating situation for our communities. In response to these deaths, American gay author/activist Dan Savage (2010) made a YouTube video called "It Gets Better." Savage does not claim that life will be perfect, but says "try to stick around through this, because *my* life got better." Hundreds of thousands of people have made It Gets Better videos as part of a collective social media response to hate and suicide.

Youth are not killing themselves. Hate is killing our children. Savage says that "LGBT youth can't picture a future with enough joy in it to compensate for the suffering they're in now." The purpose of the It Gets Better videos is for youth to hear people who reflect who they are, saying "my life is okay." Youth who are sexual and gender diverse and questioning are told, "You're going to be kicked out of your church, you're going to be kicked out of your home, you're never going to have love, you're never going to belong, and you're never going to have a decent life." These folks are sending counter-messages that offer youth images of people who are reflecting their identities, saying we have decent, okay-enough lives.

According to Savage, "the culture says they're ours to torture 'til they're 18, and then they can move to New York City." Youth who survive high school can go to San Francisco, or Vancouver, where they might find some safety, or possible safety. This is the old deal. If you survive as a youth and live

to adulthood, that is okay, but you cannot talk to sexual and gender diverse youth. Adults who are sexual and gender diverse cannot talk to children. When they do, heterosexual people like me accuse them of pedophilia, or of recruiting sexually. As a straight person, I can mentor children and people do not think I am trying to have sex with them or trying to make them straight. Social networks and social media mean that Dan Savage does not have to go to a playground to talk to a twelve-year-old. He can put a video up on a website – an act that breaks the old rules and unsettles heteronormative power. But Dan is also calling, as is the whole movement, for us to call events assault when they are assault and to use the legal implements we have to do something about what gets called bullying, the violence of hate.

There is a long history of resistance if we look deeper. One of my heroes, the American transgender author/activist Kate Bornstein (1994), has been especially influential by writing a book called *Gender Outlaw*. She also wrote a book called *101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws* (Bornstein, 2006). The back cover reads: "It gets better." So there are histories of these ideas, just as there are histories of resistance in every domain of oppression. In British Columbia we have an Out in Schools program in which students create antihomophobic videos, because youth videos reaching other youth are effective. Anti-Bullying Day and Pink Shirt Day came from two youth allies in Nova Scotia in response to homophobic-informed bullying at their school (CBC, 2007). We also have the Trevor Project (n.d.), antibullying flash mobs, and multiple examples of communities picking up this inspiring, hope-filled resistance work.

These beautiful and spirited community responses that resist hate and suicide with love and inclusion embody the social divine (Lacey, 2005). The social divine encompasses moments when we are connected, profoundly belonged, and engaged with an ethic of justice-doing. The social divine is present in the profound, sad, and hopeful resistance we engage in collectively to transform an unjust society, where we hold one another up collectively and take action where our government and society have failed. It is hopeful, and spirited, and it demands ongoing commitments for change.

### Contesting Simplistic Constructions of "Bullying"

The language of "bullying" decontextualizes and depoliticizes hate and violence and obscures the patriarchy and homophobia that inform bullying. The language of "bullying" individuates events and puts the responsibility for a hateful society on particular young boys and girls. I believe that unjustly spoils

the identity of youth who perpetrate bullying. These youth did not invent these ideas. I have worked with youth who have spoiled identities as bullies. They are "othered" too. We can legitimately deny them education and belonging. We are placing the contexts of hate and the responsibility for injustice on the backs of our children and blaming them for these deaths. I am not saying that people are not responsible for their behaviour, but a social justice frame requires us to always examine the social context to understand events.

A newspaper covering the death of a young boy claimed that teasing at school was to blame for his suicide. There are two things wrong with this kind of reporting. First, it constructs as mentally unstable the young boy who died. "Teasing" is neutral and misleading language for the violence of hate. Suicide as a response to teasing is out of proportion. This languaging constructs this youth's identity as mentally unstable, again locating the problem of hate in the mind of the oppressed. Second, reporters name particular boys who bullied him as the reason he died. That is profoundly unjust. Many of us failed this child. All of us who did not transform this society failed this person, not a few youth. I am not saying they are not responsible for their actions; I *am* saying they are not responsible for being socialized to hate. That may seem like a strange position for a feminist to take, but as bell hooks says, "feminism is for everybody" (2001).

### Conclusion

I worked with a young woman from Guatemala over twenty years ago who struggled with suicide and substance misuse. She had been told she would be in psychotherapy for the rest of her life given the extent of the political violence she had suffered. She thought I was a pretty good therapist. Eventually, this young survivor grew frustrated with other professional helpers and foster parents telling her she should stay alone, study, and journal. She resisted this professional advice and participated in the Theatre of the Oppressed with fifty other refugee youths, some of them children and grandchildren of the disappeared, who create political theatre together in Spanish. I asked a question from Australian narrative therapist Michael White: "You've said our sessions are pretty good. How many sessions do you think one political activity was worth?" She reflected a bit and said tentatively, "Probably over a hundred." I hold this humbling teaching close: a spirited activist event can be worth a hundred therapy sessions.

We have power. Many helping professionals try to mitigate or equalize power in their work with people. I invite us to embrace our power and be



accountable to it. I believe we have an obligation to contest neutrality. We are not neutral about hate. We have the power to move things from private pain to public issue (Tamasese, 2001; McCarthy, 2001; Hanisch, 1970) and to resist the privatization of the pain of suicide. As change agents, I believe we need to “belong” people who have been told by hate that they do not belong on this earth, and we need to participate in delivering justice to them and to all of us. Resisting hate, practising solidarity, and transforming society to be inclusive and just is suicide prevention in its most radical form because social injustice, hate, stigma, and oppression create the conditions that make the horrors of suicide possible.

### Dedication

*For all the people we have lost to hate and for everyone picking up the hard and necessary work to “belong” all of our children within the human family; most especially Wendy Wittmack and the good people who have served Peak House across twenty-five years.*

*This writing took place on Indigenous territories that were never surrendered.*

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### Notes

- 1 The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is a nonbinding document that recognizes Indigenous people’s basic human rights and rights to self-determination, language, equality, and land. It was adopted by the General Assembly of the UN in September 2007. To our shame, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States were the only four countries to vote against it. In 2010, Canada endorsed it (CBC, 2010).
- 2 Also see American narrative therapist Lorraine Hedtke’s excellent website, which outlines these ideas and practices: [www.rememberingpractices.com](http://www.rememberingpractices.com).

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