

WEAVING THREADS OF BELONGING: CULTURAL WITNESSING GROUPS

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Abstract: *Cultural Witnessing Groups are structured to celebrate preferred sites of cultural belonging and provide witnesses to amplify the meanings given to these connections. Understandings of culture in this witnessing work are expansive, mindful, and centred in belongingness. A witnessing therapy identifies with the culture of political activism, moving beyond individual pain into social and collective responses to oppression. This article will track a particular Lesbian Culture Witnessing Group conversation in order to illustrate the witnessing structures, the conscious purpose of the conversations, the attention to safety, and the reflexive practices of witnessing. The text comprises the edited transcript and annotations.*

This article is dedicated to the young people of Peak House who belong to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered cultures: especially those for whom we were, and are, not safe-enough to be 'out' with.

Liberation, sacredness, and belonging are the key principles of the Family Centre of New Zealand's "Just Therapy" (Tamasese, 2001; Waldegrave, 1990; Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1993) and are at the centre of the therapeutic philosophy of Peak House. Peak House, located in Vancouver, British Columbia, is an eight-week therapeutic, residential program for youths struggling with substance misuse, oppression, and exploitation. Much of the therapeutic work the staff and residents are involved in engages with our Therapeutic Supervisor, Colin Sanders', 'Poetics of Resistance' (1999) and centres on the liberatory practices of a collaborative therapy that externalizes responses to oppression and encourages liberation from problems. The most recent and exciting extensions of our work owe much to John Prowell's invitations to centre therapy culturally (1999), and to Michael White's "Outsider Witnessing Groups" (1995a, 1997, 1999a, 1999b). This work is centred on "belonging" and the celebration of sites and practices of connection that hold people with each other. "Cultural Witnessing Groups" are structured to bring forward sites of cultural belonging in a safe space, and to provide witnesses to amplify and celebrate these cultural practices, rites of passage, rituals, and connections.

The understanding of culture in this witnessing work is expansive and mindful: we are interested in belonging and in examining preferred sites of culture in the connections people have constructed socially, across time (Bal, Crewe, & Spritzer, 1999). While ethnic heritage is an aspect of culture, it is not the only site, and this broader definition of culture led to the following conversation with members of lesbian culture. (Other conversations have witnessed "the culture of accountable men," "First Nations culture," "the culture of spirituality," "the culture of people taking options against fighting," and "the culture of musicians.")

This article will track a particular Cultural Witnessing Group conversation in order to illustrate the witnessing structures, the conscious purpose of the conversations, the attention to safety, and the reflexive practices of witnessing. Through this text, comprising the edited transcript and annotations, the therapeutic practices of witnessing will illuminate the ethical underpinnings of the theories that inform them. The Lesbian Culture Witnessing Group was specifically structured to provide a space for lesbian cultural belonging and connection to be celebrated, and to honour its relationship to resistance from oppression and homophobia.

The Lesbian Culture Witnessing Group began, as most of them do, as a number of smaller but connected therapeutic conversations in the work of Peak House. Lorraine and Gail, two of the six youth residents, were out as lesbians in our community of concern, and as the therapists were located in heterosexual culture, we began to invite Wendy, our youth counsellor/program manager into the therapeutic conversations as a cultural consultant (Waldegrave, 1990). Wendy had been out as a lesbian at Peak House for several years, and both Gail and Lorraine identified their relationships with Wendy as supportive in their being out at Peak House.

A week prior to the Cultural Witnessing Group meeting, the Lesbian Culture Group, composed of Lorraine, Gail, and Wendy, met privately and videotaped their conversation. Although Vikki, the therapist, was not a member of this cultural group, they negotiated enough safety that she was invited in by the group to provide a mindful structure and create therapeutic space. The Lesbian Culture Group then edited the tape and chose pieces to offer the Witnesses for reflection on the day of the Cultural Witnessing Group meeting. The Lesbian Culture Group invited two extended members of their culture to participate: Jenn, a gay rights activist whose group, Gab, had spoken recently at Peak House; and Jaime, Wendy's heterosexual daughter. Colin provided therapeutic structure for the Witnessing Group, which included Maggie and Jake, two residents who identified themselves as heterosexual, and Rose and Sandra, two heterosexual youth counsellors. (The names of Peak House youth have been changed as a practice of safety in relationship with ethics.)

Structurally, this Cultural Witnessing Group work is composed of three distinct groups: the Lesbian Culture Group, the Extended Lesbian Culture

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sation begins with the therapist interviewing the Extended Lesbian Culture
Group while the Lesbian Culture Group and the Witnessing Group both
witness. The therapist then interviews the Lesbian Culture Group, which
reflects on the conversation of the Extended Lesbian Culture Group, and then
engages in its own conversation. The Witnessing Group, which includes an-
other therapist as a member, then reflects on the conversations of both the
Extended Lesbian Culture Group and the Lesbian Culture Group. The Les-
bian Culture Group and the Extended Lesbian Culture Group then reflect
upon the Witnessing Group's reflections. Finally all three groups and the
therapists engage in an unstructured dialogue about the experience.

*In the first conversation Vikki interviews the Extended Lesbian Culture Group,
and the Lesbian Culture Group and the Witnessing Group are positioned as wit-
nesses.*

Extended Lesbian Culture Group: Jaime and Jenn (therapist = Vikki)

Vikki: We talked a little before this meeting. Remember, if I ask
anything that's not OK, you don't have to answer. A good response
would be to ask me why I asked that question. That would help
me catch myself if I get in with disrespect and ask questions that I
shouldn't.

Safety and permission are attended to in a continuous negotiation of per-
mission (Bird, 2000), which is a thread of our ethical praxis, woven through-
out the conversation. These practices allow for a co-creation of
"enough-safety," a negotiated and nurtured relationship with safety posi-
tioned outside of the binary constructions of complete safety and a complete
lack of unsafety (Bird, 1999).

Vikki: Jaime, what did that mean for you, that people would judge
your sexuality based on your mother being a lesbian?

Jaime: It was tough, knowing that I'm not. It was hard to say I'm
not (a lesbian) without getting defensive, without feeling that
you're saying you're not because you don't want them to think
you are ... It was difficult in high school, not feeling safe, I really
had to choose who to tell, who to trust. I wasn't ashamed of her
lifestyle, I just wasn't ready to deal with the ignorance people
would feel towards me if they knew.

Vikki: Jaime, you and I were talking beforehand about being con-
nected as straight women who love a lot of lesbian women. Do
you think it has brought anything into your life to have a Mom
who's a lesbian, and to have so many loving lesbians in your life?

Jaime: A lot. Living in this kind of lifestyle, I feel I'm more open-
minded, more compassionate, I don't judge, I accept a lot more ...
I've been brought up in a culture that's made me educated about
a lot of things. I feel OK about speaking out about a lot of things.

And a lot of acceptance. I can either be straight or gay. Like a year from now, if I was gay, I would not feel ashamed to say that to my Mom, or anyone in my life. I would feel OK to tell my brother, that he wouldn't judge me.

This inclusive connecting is mindful and expansive in terms of membership in the culture. Jaime was invited to this conversation at Vikki's suggestion, but the Lesbian Culture Group had the power and place to decide if Jaime belonged in this position in the conversation. These practices are centred in an ethic of cultural accountability. Being witnessed in this way, in threads picked up throughout the group by various folks, gives Jaime a place to stand that doesn't position her as an outsider: her heterosexuality does not disqualify her; her belongingness with lesbian culture is witnessed as a connection of family and love.

Jenn: Part of my job is to go into the schools to do anti-homophobia talks. I haven't been thinking about the kids of gay parents who hear those talks, and I forget about that all the time.

Vikki: What kind of difference will it make for you to remember Jaime's position in this culture?

Jenn: It helps. We try to convince people that they have a vested interest in learning about this stuff, in challenging homophobia, and this is another aspect, that someone they love or care about might be gay or lesbian. I forget that there are straight kids that are part of this, too.

In witnessing Jaime's positioning in relationship to lesbian culture, Jenn expands her own understandings and practices of inclusiveness. This learning could make Jenn's future activism more helpful to, and more inviting of, the extended members of lesbian culture (and other homosexual cultures) who may also identify themselves as heterosexual. This praxis, a weaving of theory and practice in relationship with ethics (Reynolds, 2000), hopes to make a multiplicity of sites of cultural belonging available to people, from which they can mindfully develop preferred connections.

Vikki: When we were checking in, I said, "I don't want this conversation to just be about surviving homophobia," and you said "Thank God, I am so tired of this being just about homophobia."

Jenn: Yeah.

Vikki: So, what are the parts of the culture that are most meaningful, that are outside of ideas of homophobia?

The therapist is transparent about her intentions, collaborating with Jenn prior to the public conversation. This line of questioning is mindful of centring cultural belonging in terms of preferred meanings of the culture, and situating the oppression that could easily dictate the conversation (bringing forth responses to oppression as central to the culture) at the margins. This

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community's responses to oppression, which Wade (1996) refers to as resist-
ance knowledges and Burstow (1992) eloquently names resistance repertoire,
will be witnessed and are culturally meaningful. Resisting homophobia is
not, however, Jenn's preferred practice of belongingness with lesbian cul-
ture, and without this purposeful inquiry, homophobia could easily be posi-
tioned at the centre of the witnessing.

Vikki: Where do you find your belonging in this culture? What's
the meaning of this culture for your life?

Jenn: There's a really great sense of humour and celebration about
being part of this culture, because when you come from a history of
oppression you learn to take advantage and celebrate the moments
that are good as well ... I've noticed what you noticed [Jaime], that
if people have an awareness of one oppression they have a better
capacity to be aware of other oppression ... people can make those
links more easily if they've faced homophobia, they can understand
what it's like to face other forms of oppression.

Vikki: Thinking about the culture as a whole, how has this broader
community been able to hold onto celebration when there's been
so much hate?

Jenn: That's how you survive, like I think if you don't appreciate
and celebrate those moments it would kill you.

Vikki: There are real ceremonies and rituals of celebration in this
culture, we're calling this meeting a Cultural Witnessing Group
and it's not a stretch, this really is a culture, there are things that
identify this community.

Jenn: Totally.

Vikki: You don't leave it to chance, this is not going to be forgot-
ten or lost. What is your experience of that?

Jenn: Yeah. So much is shared, shared experience about having to
come out that's not the same as growing up when your orienta-
tion is validated, like a rite of passage in terms of coming out, and
sometimes it feels like second puberty, ... first kiss-again, first time
you have sex-again ...

The conscious purpose of this questioning is to position the acts of cul-
tural belonging at the centre (White, 1998) and to create space for and hon-
our the practices and know-how of this community to continually re-create
and celebrate. Survival of oppression is honoured in the conversation, but
does not become the centre or overshadow the culture. Lesbian culture is
witnessed and more richly described for its inclusive practices and as more
than the culture's capacity to survive oppression.

Jenn has articulated that this cultural group has "rites of passage," which
invites an anthropological understanding of culture into the conversation.

Jenn describes one such rite of passage as "first kiss-again," which gives a naming to this detailed and particular belongingness practice.

Vikki: How is this conversation going with us? OK? I'm just trying to ask questions to open space and allow thoughts to come out. Is there anything else you want to say? Did you feel respected in the conversation, all the things we talked about were OK?

Following the Extended Lesbian Culture Group's conversation, Vikki engages the Lesbian Culture Group in a therapeutic conversation.

Lesbian Culture Group: Wendy, Gail, and Lorraine (therapist = Vikki)

Vikki: Is there anything we need to be mindful of in order to keep this conversation safe? We've had lots of conversations about how we're going to be safe in this conversation, right?

Concomitant with an ongoing negotiation of permission, the therapist acknowledges that these are risky conversations, and attends to safety by being open to the myriad of ways people have of saying no, including non-verbal small acts of resistance (Wade, 1997) against unsafe questions/conversations.

Vikki: How is the idea of Jaime having to come out a whole new way to think?

Wendy: I never really thought about it but, we've talked about it here, about me having to constantly come out, and she's [Jaime] experiencing the same thing, over, and over, and over. That even though she's heterosexual, everytime someone makes a comment, "Where's your Dad? Does your Mom have a boyfriend?" "No, she has a girlfriend." She's constantly having to come out, I never looked at that.

Jaime's acts of coming out, inclusive of her heterosexuality, are witnessed by her lesbian mother. This recursive witnessing weaves thicker and richer strands of Jaime's belongingness to the fabric of lesbian culture.

Vikki: What did it mean for you, Wendy, to hear your daughter talk about what having a lesbian mother has brought to her life?

Wendy: Well, I kind of never thought about that either.

Vikki: Isn't that interesting?

Wendy: Yeah. I always think about what was taken from her, what I didn't give her, or that she didn't have a father, always looking at allowing what society has tried to oppress, but that's what I have done instead of celebrating and looking at what she has got.

Vikki: Do you think when you say "her not having a father," do you think that's about you being a lesbian, or him not being a father, or a father choosing to be absent? Is that about your sexual preference?

Wendy: Sometimes, I mean I guess being here has led me to believe differently about things ... for years I've thought it was my fault — it was something about me. But when I look at it now, it's like their choice to be absent, not mine.

This question creates space for Wendy to respond differently in relationship to society's power to oppress and to examine oppressive meanings that have been dictated by homophobia, dominant cultures' prescriptions and practices of mother-blaming, and male privilege. Wendy's new thinking is honoured, and this renegotiation allows for Wendy's preferred meanings of her identity to be at the centre: not just "what was taken" but a richer description of what Wendy, as a lesbian mother, has given.

At this point in the group the Lesbian Culture Group shows edited clips from their prior videotaped conversation to the Extended Lesbian Culture Group and the Witnessing Group. The young lesbian women spent great energy editing the tape and were mindful of what was shared and what they held in their own counsel. Because of attention to safety and accountability to the sacredness of the Lesbian Culture Group's conversation, none of the edited video is transcribed, although the Witnessing Group does reflect on this conversation.

The next part of the conversation is the Witnessing Group's reflections. Their witnessing practices are structured to bring forward the cultural belonging and subjugated knowledges (Foucault, 1980) that the Lesbian Culture Group has performed.
Witnessing Group: Rose, Sandra, Greg, Maggie, and Jake (therapist = Colin)

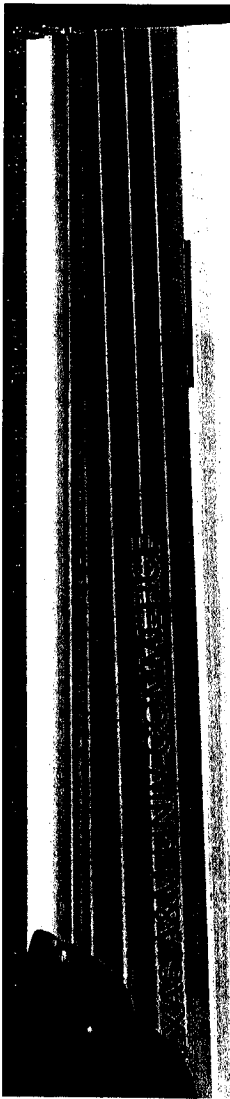
Colin: Maggie, do you have any reflections on the parts of the Lesbian Culture Group Video they chose to show, knowing that they made a purposeful decision to show us those parts of the conversation Gail and Lorraine did a lot of work to edit ...

Maggie: It got me thinking, my aunt is a lesbian and she's a teacher. It's the same thing if some student asks if she's married. I feel different now. I think my aunt assumes she's the only gay one in the family, like she can't come out. But I'd support her.

Through her position as witness to the Lesbian Culture Group's experiences, Maggie is moved to reflect on her relationship with this culture, and she brings forward her preferred way of being: wanting to support her aunt. Maggie is not only providing witness to others, she is moving more in line with her preferred ways of being.

Jake: There's a lot of stuff I never thought about 'cause it never comes up ... Like homophobia not just affecting one person, but everybody they know and you might not even know if it's someone that you know, if that makes sense. I learned a lot of new stuff I didn't know before.

Later on, in the Lesbian Culture Group's reflections that follow this dialogue, Lorraine will highlight Jake's witnessing as meaningful. The reflec-



tions of young persons are often of greater meaning for their fellow residents than are the reflections of therapists. Continuously witnessing this has educated us in the ethics of youth wisdom (Radke, Kitchen, & Reynolds, 2000; Saville, 1998).

The critiques of collaborative and narrative therapies from feminist teachings have contributed profoundly to the relationship of these practices with ethics (Burstow, 1992; Goldner, 1991; Hare-Mustin, 1987; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1986, 1990; Myers Avis, 1992) and have influenced this work with Jake and Lorraine by placing men's practices of accountable listening at the centre, as opposed to striving for the amplification of women's voices (Elliott, 1995, 1997). The therapeutic focus of this witnessing, in relation to gender accountability, is in the extension of Jake's listening practices, not in the promotion of more assertive or eloquent speech acts by Lorraine.

Sandra: I just really realized how much Wendy has to offer Lorraine and Gail, just in the experience of being forty and going through a lot of the things, and as a woman being close to Wendy's age I don't have those same experiences. It made me feel how important that conversation was.

The cultural witnessing gives voice to and defines Wendy's cultural knowing as a qualification for this work, in resistance to academic discourses of judging, defining, and teaching "qualified" counsellors.

Sandra: I noticed there was a lot of understanding in the conversation without them having to explain it, Lorraine had shared experiences without having to go into details, that connection. The idea that it is called a 'cultural' witnessing group makes more sense to me now.

Sandra's witnessing act amplifies the unsaid: the understandings that aren't explained because cultural knowing is being performed (Tamasese, 1998). This speaking pays attention to the practices of cultural connection that could easily be left unnoticed and unwitnessed. Sandra's own relationship to ideas of what constitutes culture are also broadened in preferred ways from her participation as a witness.

Rose: In the video they were relaxed, comfortable with one another, I wondered if that was a new experience for them, how often they have a chance to talk about issues they face in their culture without fears?

Colin: That's what struck me, too, just the relative comfort, which I imagine was about safety, and a sense of trustworthiness that was happening there. I was wondering for Vikki, as a heterosexual, what it was like to be within that conversation, and that it was just flowing?

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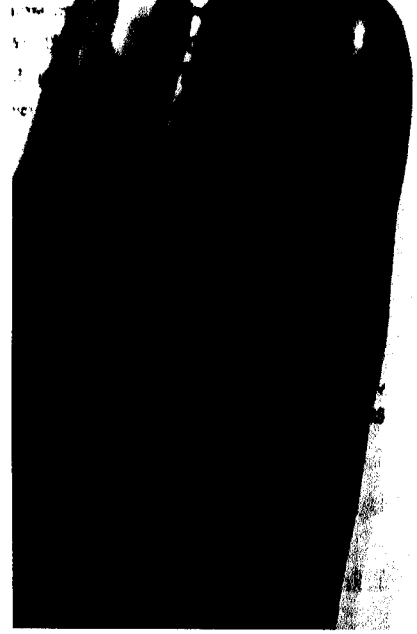
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The unsaid is named in this witnessing, giving voice to the presence of "relative comfort" and to the absence of fear. The conversations being witnessed were pieces of videotape from the Lesbian Culture Group's previous conversation. The naming of that conversation's relationship with safety and comfort throws into relief the therapist's later naming of this wider conversation, with heterosexual people, as "risky."

Sandra: Jaime was sitting in a place of wanting to talk, almost like she's an educator, like I got an education from Jaime there. I love that the conversation spoke to celebration and what they get from the culture.

Colin: It was celebratory, wasn't it? That is what I would amplify, highlight is the celebratory feeling in the whole conversation.

Witnessing practices relate consciously with Bateson's (1972) ideas of what gets paid attention to. Here the Witnessing Group is attending to the connections of culture that are liberatory and preferred. The amplification of celebration within lesbian culture is a practice of this ethical engagement with witnessing.

Rose: It was new for me to look at Jaime's position, in-between, and I never ever thought about that.

Colin: I was wondering what Wendy was thinking about, experiencing, and feeling as she listened to her daughter be so articulate about what she's suffered through, and what she's experienced. She's come to resist so much about heterosexual taken-for-grantedness in the world. And how Jaime takes positions in certain places and certain environments that are relatively safe, and takes a stand for who her mother is and who Jaime has become based on her being brought up by her mother.

Witnessing honours the telling, without applauding the actions taken. What is not paid attention to in this conversation is also pivotal in terms of avoiding acts of applause (White, 1999a), evaluation, or which position the cultural group on a pedestal, which is a position outside. Rose and Colin's mindful reflections attend to a balance of ethical witnessing.

Colin: The other thing I would point out for me is Vikki's question, when Wendy said Jaime didn't have a father and I thought it was a good distinction, "Was that about Jaime's father being absent or was that about being a lesbian?" Wendy's reply was that "It wasn't about me being a lesbian, it was about Jaime's father not being there," and I think that was important, to hear that distinction.

A therapy of discernment (Radke et al., 2000) amplifies distinctions through questioning which provides for an examination of ideas, allowing for more options as well as new, preferred, and liberatory negotiations of

meaning. Through the questioning, Wendy renegotiates the meanings that have been given to her position as a lesbian mother and differentiates her identity as a lesbian from Jaime's father's responsibility to be present in his child's life. It is Wendy's new and liberatory positioning that is meaningful, and here the therapist collaborates by providing a structure of differentiating questions, not by taking her own position on the meanings (White, 1995b).

Colin: The word love, I wrote it down three times here, that's how it felt for me. There was a lot of love in the conversation, well, I wonder if it had special meanings for Vikki, just to be there for Wendy and for Jaime and for Jenn.

This therapeutic work is incredibly evocative of emotion (Bird, 1999), and much of the witnessing attends to this unworded dialogue, which has been richly experienced in the wider group. The witnessing of love enriches the experience by offering an emotional language to the dialogue (Epston, 1995). This invitation to reflect on love was picked up enthusiastically in the reverberating conversations, many of which occurred in the therapeutic conversations, and cups of tea, shared in the days following this Cultural Witnessing Group.

The Witnessing Group highlights and amplifies the points of belonging and connection to the culture that they have witnessed. The therapist provides structure to the conversation by directing his questions to elicit respectful responses, and to decline any disrespect, applause, or evaluation from the conversation. The structure provided by the therapist is part of the ethic necessary to provide enough-safety for these risky conversations.

The Lesbian Culture Group and the Extended Lesbian Culture Group then reflect on the Witnessing Group's conversations. The therapist asks questions informed by the Witnessing conversation, and creates space for the Lesbian Culture Group members to connect their experiences with what is witnessed, acknowledge new and wider audiences (Myerhoff, 1982), create or renegotiate liberatory meanings, and celebrate cultural sites of belonging.

Lesbian Culture Group and Extended Lesbian Culture Group's reflections on the Witnessing Group's reflections: Wendy, Gail, and Lorraine; Jaime and Jenn (therapist = Vikki)

Gail: I thought people really observed what we were talking about. I would say this experiment, if you will, was quite successful.

Practices of accountability, which support the praxis of this witnessing, situate the experience of the cultural group, here of a young lesbian woman, at the centre in terms of who is accountable to whom (Tamasese, 1998; Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1993).

Lorraine: When Jake said he's thinking about things differently now, that's what we wanted, right? Like they're not really with our culture, right, they're still taking everything into account that we're saying, that was cool.

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The teachings of Johnella Bird (1999) expand on this practice of lived respect, which Lorraine has witnessed in Jake's reflections, and which hold meaning for her in terms of hope for change. Jake, initially positioned in the Witnessing Group, is reflexively witnessed here by Lorraine. What might this account of Jake, as a more open-minded heterosexual young man, mean in terms of how he may be other than who he was (White, 1999a)? What might this reflection of a more open-minded young heterosexual man by a young lesbian woman mean in terms of her ideas and hopes for the possibility of enough-safety with some young men in the community?

Culture, race,² gender, sexual preference/identity, and class are inextricably linked, and although culture and cultural belonging are at the centre of the Cultural Witnessing Groups, we do not consider culture in isolation (Amit-Talai & Knowles, 1996; Bannerji, 1995; Calliste & Dei, 2000; hooks, 1990, 1994, 2000; Spelman, 1988; Tamasese, 1998, 2001). A multiplicity of relations, practices, and theories are ever-present in these conversations, and are given voice and attended to accountably. Centring the therapeutic inquiry in relationship to cultural belonging does not negate the ethical necessity of accountability to relations of race, gender, sexual orientation/identity, class, and additional sites of differential access to resources and power.

Vikki: People asked what the conversation has been like for me; it's just very honouring, and in some moments it was one of my most uncomfortable conversations here. In some parts of the conversation I felt acknowledged, that I could be there, that it could be safe-enough even though I am heterosexual.

Reflexive witnessing practices include the experiences of the therapists, whose participation is more complex than merely the role of interviewer. The heterosexual therapist acknowledges the experience of honour that she has been given in relation to the sacred trust of the Lesbian Culture Group. This is a practice of accountability and helps position the conversation outside of the culture of psychotherapy's practices of cultural appropriation. These colonizing practices would invite the therapist, a member of dominant heterosexual culture, to be credited with the honour and sacredness of the conversation.

Lorraine: I was thinking of Jaime, too, it must be hard, because I have other gay friends I can relate to, but how many of your [Jaime's] friends have gay parents, right? That must be hard, my heart went out to her.

Wendy: What I picked up on was just how proud I am of her, of Jaime. And stuff that Sandra, and Rose, and Colin said about acknowledging the fact of how hard it's been for me to be the only lesbian on the team.

Bearing witness to pain is an ethic which resists re-framing while honouring and acknowledging pain. The act of witnessing positions the witnesses

in solidarity with the person in her/his experience of the devastating isolation of oppression. Wendy is still the "only lesbian," but her relationship to this singular status is different for having been acknowledged in a public and sacred space.

Lorraine: When the Witnessing Group said that Wendy can offer me and Gail so much, she does. Like I wasn't proud to be who I am this morning, and Wendy gives me hope that I can get through.

Wendy's ways of being are witnessed as a connection to hope, and she is acknowledged for the supportive position she is uniquely qualified to hold. This thread of hope has been woven throughout the conversation and witnessed reflexively, thickening its meaning and honouring the connections to which it speaks.

Vikki: Colin and I met beforehand and talked about what we were going to be mindful of, careful of, we really didn't want to end up in a big pile of homophobia, and I was so pleased that there was a celebration of lesbian culture. The Lesbian Culture Group and I talked and talked about how we'd talk, and what we wouldn't talk about, and these two (Jenn and Jaime) just walked in and trusted us enough. I didn't think about it when we were talking, I thought about it when Colin reflected on it.

From the position of a listening place, Vikki experiences the conversation differently, more richly. Colin's reflections of the relationships with trust bring this relationship to mindfulness for Vikki, which outlines the theory behind the practice; listening from a position outside of the talking can invite a different and richer knowledge than can listening while talking (Anderson, 1991).

Jenn: It struck me too when Colin reflected on it, because what I hear from people outside of these lesbian/gay/bi-sexual/transgendered communities are questions about pain, and suffering, or questions about sex, right? And it's never about love and camaraderie and community, so this was neat.

Jenn's reflection witnesses the lived respect of the Witnessing Group, and a questioning in relationship with ethics that brings forward more than pain, more than exploitation. These are risky conversations, and Jenn's reflection acknowledges the conversation's attention to belonging and celebration. The therapist engages with an ethic that attends to what and how questions will be asked, but also, and more importantly in relationships of safety, what questions and lines of inquiry will be declined, not attended to, not asked (Jenkins, 1996).

The entire community of concern — the Lesbian Culture Group, Extended Lesbian Culture Group, and Witnessing Group — connect and are invited into an unstructured dialogue of the experience.

Open Conversation with members of Lesbian Culture Group and Witnesses:

Maggie: This was emotional in a good way. This conversation has totally changed the energy in this program today, there is way better energy now.

Jenn: That's nice to hear, because so often we hear we can't talk about this because it's too dangerous because there are bad experiences.

Colin: Jaime, thanks for being here today, and Lorraine, Gail, Jake, and Maggie, in terms of being young persons who've taken positions in your lives against substance misuse, and against oppressions, I constantly find it amazing and enchanting and it gives me energy to keep on doing this kind of stuff here. It's so hope inspiring.

The therapist engages with Michael White's (1995a, 1997) "giving it back" practices, and the hope of the therapist is made transparent, while witnessing the youths' positions against oppressions as the site of hope. The therapist is de-centred in this work (White, 1998, 1999c) but reflexively witnessed, and certainly Colin's words were meaningful for the youth in ways that join with their preferred selves, and connect the group members as witnesses of a hope-filled conversation.

Gail: I feel now, like this group, we're so close, I can visualize all our energy floating to the centre of the room and joining together.

In this Cultural Witnessing Group homophobia has not been overthrown, isolation and fear have not been vanquished, but connection, belonging, love, pain, resistance, and courage have been witnessed in honourable, rich, and meaningful ways. This witnessing gives people a place to stand together, a place to belong, and a position from which to continue both celebrating and resisting. Much has been honoured for the first time, and although therapy is not the transformative experience (A. Wade, personal communication, 2001), this witnessing work fosters new and renewed connections, renegotiations of oppressive meanings, and the possibility of change.

Witnessing has a rich cultural, spiritual, and religious heritage. The therapists come to witnessing work from various positions and traditions. Vikki Reynolds is from an Irish Catholic family, and she also identifies with the culture of political activism and the ethics of human rights. The teachings of Paulo Freire (1970) and the liberatory psychologist Ignatio Martin-Baro (1994) have contributed much to the ethics of this work in terms of moving beyond individual pain into social and collective responsibility for oppression and the duty of the witness to work for change and justice. Therapy is understood and constructed as political, and as a site of resistance, liberation, solidarity, and justice. In activist culture, the presence of the witness is a

resistance against human rights violations and political repression of voices of dissent. Witnessing is a performance of solidarity with the intent to hold governments and corporate powers accountable for abuses of power. Where activists have been murdered (as Ignatio Martin-Baro, a Jesuit priest, was executed by a Salvadoran death squad in 1989), witnesses have refused to accept "disappearances," and call for justice, accountability, and reconciliation. The presence of an international activist community of concern is a profound act of faith in the power of witnessing. These teachings of solidarity from activist culture have informed the therapeutic praxis of the Cultural Witnessing Group.

Tonya Gomes, who is an Indigenous therapist, is Peuye, and her people come from a section of the Rio Nigra rainforest in Northern Brazil. Her partner is a Lil'wat'ool of the Stl'alt'imx Nation of British Columbia. It is from these connections that Tonya draws her understanding of what it means to bear witness:

In Indigenous oral traditions, witnesses are crucial in holding political, ethical, and sacred positions wherein they act not only as keepers of history (ensuring accountability in legal and sacred social structures) but also to hold in memory (Stl'alt'imx & Peuye Nations) the presentations of the honourable selves of the ones being witnessed. A witness holds the collective memory of a culture and is responsible in remembering, in not-forgetting, that which must not be lost, thereby creating the space for acts of collaborative justice, celebration, and restoration. Witnesses are also required to call forth the cultures' collective memory of positions of pride, strength, hope, and sacredness in times of ceremony; the building and passing on of cultural ways of being. Threads of these Indigenous knowledges are woven throughout our therapeutic community of concern. We choose to witness, remember, call forth, and build on the sites of hope, pride, pain, love, and courage that may serve to keep people conscious of preferred actions and responses and create more liberatory foundations on which to stand. (T. Gomes, personal communication, 2001)

As therapists, we have begun to create a partnership across the locations of privilege that disconnect us. We have purposefully chosen to connect and begin to build belongingness with each other by weaving these threads of meaning in relation to witnessing. Our cultural partnership is a structure of safety, trust, and accountability on which the Cultural Witnessing Group is built. Our praxis is one of solidarity with these various cultural roots of witnessing, both as practices of belonging and as sacred responsibilities.

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- 1 Tonya Gomes, my therapeutic partner, has mindfully declined an invitation to co-author this article, yet the moving of these cultural witnessing group theories into practice accountably could not have transpired without the authentic cultural partnership we are engaging in. Our partnership has engendered many gifts, not least of which has been Tonya's compassionate insistence that we "wait" for the co-creation of enough-safety to begin this work. These conversations have borrowed from the integrity, know-how, and trustworthiness of an extended network of Peak House folks, including Wendy Wittmack, Todd Ware, Sandra Taylor, Colin Sanders, Allison Rice, Rick Pelan, Dwayne Howard, Sacha van Eeten, Christine Dennstedt, Rose Casella, and Guy Bowe, and from the 'teachers', thinkers, and activists of our communities of concern (Madigan & Epston, 1995; Madigan, 1997).
- 2 *Race* is italicized here to acknowledge the existence of racism while problematizing the construction of *race* as truth claim.

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