

Glorifying Suicide? Radical Encounters with Difficult Texts, Radical Approaches to Youth Care

Cameron Greensmith and Jocelyn Sakal Froese

Dedication

This piece is dedicated to all of the youth who have strayed away, and to those youth who have expressed concern about the ways structures of violence have made life extremely difficult to live in.

“It [13 Reasons Why] has graphic content related to suicide, glamorization of suicidal behaviour and negative portrayals of helping professionals, which may prevent youth from seeking help. We have recommended that our teachers not use this as a teaching aid”

Hamilton Wentworth District School Board – May 29, 2017

13 Reasons Why has taken the world by storm; Jay Asher’s 2007 novel has been adapted into a *Netflix* television show, which is currently in its second season (Asher, 2017; Yorkey, 2017). *13 Reasons Why* has brought difficult conversations regarding everyday gendered violence, rape, and its repercussions in girls’ lives, as well as the somewhat forbidden topic of suicide out of our dusty closets and into our schools, homes, and mobile devices. The reader (and viewer) follows Hannah Baker, a white “conventionally unconventional” girl who shares a series of thirteen “tapes” with some of her peers: “I’m about to tell you the story of my life. More



CYC-Online September 2018

ISSN 1605-7406

58

specifically, how my life ended. And, if you're listening to this tape, you're one of the reasons why" (Yorkey, 2017, Tape I, Side A). The "tapes" publicly call out the community of youth at Hannah's school who inflict seeming everyday gendered violence on her and illustrate the reasons for which she decides to take her own life. The reasons are complicated, and highlight the complexities girls are required to deal with everyday, such as (hetero)sexism and misogyny. Additionally, the "tapes" provide a powerful venue through which the reader (or viewer) can opt to interrogate how their own mundane practices with others may indeed cause harm, and may even contribute to unlivable conditions that effectively bring suicide onto the horizon for some youth.

As readers of the novel, and consumers of the television show, we appreciate the ways *13 Reasons Why* tries to address the difficult and oftentimes erased experiences young people (girls) face; high school is not an easy thing to survive, despite mantras of *It Gets Better* (Greensmith & Davies, 2017). Our writing makes sense of the ways young adult texts that youth engage can offer a radical critique of institutions and the adults who run them. However, within this short piece, we offer an opportunity for youth workers specifically to think *with* youth through the texts that they consume. As noted in the epigraph above from the HWDSB, we want to push against the dismissal of suicide texts as a place to begin fostering and maintaining relationships with youth. This dismissal is locked into ever-increasing demands placed upon youth of which adults routinely ignore and connected to neoliberalism's meritocratic promise.

Neoliberalism, it seems, *requires* young people and adults alike to understand themselves as *individuals*. And, this understanding of subjectivity negates the interlocking effects of being in and connected to communities. As Vikki Reynolds (2012) notes, neoliberalism slips into our understandings of suicide; as a word it is insufficient as it does injustice to the ways "we" are all complicit in the structural violence that makes life increasingly unlivable. As such, texts that trouble flat positivist interpretations of suicide should be taken seriously and engaged within the context of youth work/care, since they opt to interrogate neoliberalism and



implicate communities in suicide. To echo Scott Kouri and Jennifer White (2012) who posit that suicide and intervention can be engaged with in playful and creative ways, we pose that youth workers address suicide *lovingly* – as a radical divestment from top-down adultism and neoliberal understandings of youth as innocent and therefore in need of protection. To invest in love, is to divest in the normate and normative interpretations of suicide that rest within the epoch of biology and psychology (Kouri & White, 2012; Marsh & White, 2016). *13 Reasons Why*, as a text, offers a critical intervention to conventional conversations of youth suicide and shifts the conversation away from normative and neoliberal frameworks for understanding violence youth encounter. And, we, as youth workers, must take this intervention seriously as we attempt to work with youth – despite all popularized suicide dialogue that suggests the contrary.

In an attempt to work against individualist logics used to constrain our imaginings of youth suicide, we post that love be taken seriously within youth work. Love, defined by bell hooks (2000) always works in opposition to hate. As hooks notes: “Society’s collective fear of love must be faced if we are to lay claim to a love ethic that can inspire us and give us the courage to make necessary changes” (p. 91). This courage, we argue, comes to manifest in many different ways – however, we will be focusing on developing this courage or “taking a leap of faith” into critical conversations of youth suicide. Such an evocation of love does not rest within the lexicon of the heteronormative – it is not about monogamy, procreation, or marriage; rather, hooks suggests that love can be imagined as having multiple dimensions: “care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge” (p. 94). Think for a moment, what would it mean to *truly* love youth? What would youth care look like if love was centered in our everyday practices? And, to echo Kouri and White (2012) as they ask lovingly: “What spaces might we open up by placing the tools of critical analysis in the hands of young people and what might young people do with that space?” (p. 190). We contend that a loving approach to youth care would engage, rather than dismiss, the debates, topics, and



CYC-Online September 2018

ISSN 1605-7406

60

texts with which youth are already engaged, rather than enacting a protectionist stance, or cowing behind the language of moral panic.

Within the context of adult-youth relations, amplified in the epigraph from the HWDSB, it is clear that helping professionals, at least in that context, do not love youth in the way hooks imagines. To love youth would mean to trust in them in their engagements with difficult topics, and in their experiences of multiple forms of pain. The criticism directed at *13 Reasons Why* works to call out the show for “glorifying suicide” is hateful; it works to sustain existing hierarchies and power structures that we know are not serving youth well, and further stigmatizes the topic of suicide (including suicide prevention), illegitimizing a topic in which youth are increasingly invested (Kouri & White, 2012; Marsh & White, 2016). We are concerned that this adultist and neoliberal critique of *13 Reasons Why* may be harmful to youth. Encouraging youth workers to disengage with suicide texts’ pedagogical possibilities does a disservice to youth and the on-going violence they encounter. Banning and vilifying suicide texts that address youth head on may actually prevent meaningful engagement with youth where they are at, for example, by foreclosing the possibility of conversations with youth looking to better understand the process or discourse of help seeking. Interestingly, it is not all texts that depict suicide that are deemed to be inappropriate. We note that William Shakespeare’s (1913) *Romeo and Juliet*, which remains a staple in many high school English classrooms, ends with two youth taking their own lives and frames those deaths broadly as the result of an “ancient grudge” (Prologue, 3) that has caused “civil blood [to] make civil hands unclean” (Prologue, 4) throughout the whole of the community – a phrase that suggests the burden of loss is widely shared, just like in *13 Reasons Why*. To us, there appears to be a contradiction within what some youth workers (want to?) engage.

Following hooks’ theorization of love, Hans Skott-Myhre and Kathy Skott-Myhre (2007) note that the praxis of love can allow for youth workers to “build community without using tactics of exclusion or domination/discipline” (p. 55). That is, a praxis of love would indeed challenge contemporary neoliberal



articulations of suicide by doing away with notions that adults know what youth need and instead actively address difficult conversations as a community – even suicide – that youth want to engage (Kouri & White, 2012; Marsh & White, 2016). A praxis of love would not suggest the problems youth encounter are developmental; rather, love as praxis, within the context of youth work, would allow for possibility, nuance, and multiplicity. It would allow for youth workers to engage with their own practice, the institutions in which they work, and so on, countering or mitigating some of the problems youth face. Indeed, to engage with love would mean that youth workers respond to the ways they may be complicit in youth suicidation, rape culture, homophobia, and fat phobia. A praxis of love would allow for a radical unlearning of conventional and mainstream suicide prevention; for example, at the end of each episode there is a public service announcement prompting viewers of *13 Reasons Why* to visit <https://13reasonswhy.info> if they are feeling triggered by the content of the show – with a list of resources (e.g., American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Talk Saves Lives VIDEO), and links and phone numbers (e.g., National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) prompting people to text or call if one is in crisis (Thirteen Reasons Why, n.d.). If we can engage in a praxis of love, then we can imagine that love be radical, and in doing so, allow us, as youth workers, to challenge normalized suicide intervention frameworks, work toward creating new conditions for living that address the *reasons* why youth consider suicide, catch youth before they are in crisis, and mobilize the knowledge that being in and experiencing crisis is okay.

Ironically, we find that a refusal to engage with *13 Reasons Why* is also a negation of one model of what a praxis of love, albeit a flawed one, might look like in the character of Mrs. Bradley, Hannah’s Communications teacher. Mrs. Bradley runs her classroom in an open and inviting way, one that is intended to draw out deep and meaningful discussion of important topics without censoring anyone. She facilitates open debates, tempers extreme viewpoints carefully and without silencing those that hold them and orchestrates opportunities for communication across barriers such as discomfort or shyness by providing “complement bags,”



which facilitate anonymous communication between youth. Though the conversations that happen in her classroom are not always politically correct, the show strongly implies that they are useful tools for dialogue, and generally positively received by the youth; Hannah's description of Mrs. Bradley's class figures it as the one place where Hannah is able to find human contact, and where she does not feel as soul-crushingly lonely as she does in the rest of her life. Later, we see Mrs. Bradley handle an anonymous letter (written by Hannah) that alludes to suicide. Mrs. Bradley's way of dealing with the letter is as open and warm as her classroom seems to be to Hannah – she allows the class to respond and reflect, and then closes off the discussion with an important note, though one that Hannah does not fully hear because she is already too intensely involved in the negative interpersonal relationships that will eventually make her life unlivable: "This is serious. This is someone who is in a great deal of pain. ... I think it was very brave of this person to tell us how they are feeling, and I want them to know that they are not alone. There are lots of excellent resources" (Yorkey, 2017, Tape 4, Side A).

While *13 Reasons Why* responds to some of the criticism of the show and provides resources to its viewers in an effort to support youth in crisis, it, unfortunately, cannot replace the power of what love can bring to youth work. We see Mrs. Bradley offering us a model for a praxis of love; the onus is now on youth care workers to engage and employ that model by loving youth and their (differing) engagements with these and other suicide texts. *13 Reasons Why* provides an opportunity for youth workers to take seriously the realities of youth experience – they deal with parental neglect, experience sexual violence, are slut and fat shamed, bullied, experience the trials and tribulations of being queer and/or trans, and so on. The violence youth encounter *must* be addressed, not on an individual level (which adopts positivist suicide prevention models located within a neoliberal lexicon), but instead at the level of the collective or the community in a manner that recognizes the brokenness of the current approaches adults are equipped with.



To engage in love as praxis would require youth workers to understand the impact of prohibiting suicide dialogue. This dialogue is especially important, since not *all* youth are responding or relating to *13 Reasons Why* in the same way; youth responses to the show may be shaped by their history of trauma, religious background, race, class, size, disability, and so on. In the YouTube episode *Teens React to 13 Reasons Why*, Leyla, a 17-year old racialized fat girl, says: “I’ve seen the show. I’m not a big fan” (Fine Brothers Entertainment, 2017). When watching some of the scenes where Hannah experiences gendered violence and is slut shamed, Leyla recoils, looks away, and is visibly upset. As youth workers, it is our responsibility to inquire as to why Leyla might say something as apparently neutral as she is “not a big fan” and simultaneously have a strong embodied negative response. Other youth note that the show is important, but it negatively depicts youth who are struggling with mental health issues – an argument we contend neglects an engagement with everyday forms of sexism girls encounter that would make them *mad* and locates the critiques the text makes as sufficient only if it connects suicide to pathology.

Other youth, at Oxford high school in Michigan, created the project *13 Reasons Why Not*, which used the medium of “tapes” (like Hannah did) through which youth share stories of why they chose *not* to commit suicide (Morgan & Siddiq, 2017). In an attempt to pay homage to the Oxford youth, in the last episode of season two, Hannah created her own 13 Reasons Why Not list highlighting the complexities that arise amongst youth as they contemplate suicide. Importantly, the project out of Oxford pays respect to youth as youth who are struggling with daily violence, who may have attempted suicide, or had a close family member commit suicide. Indeed, as one youth notes: “Hi, I’m Morgan Abbott, younger sister of Megan Abbott. I know a lot of you didn’t know my sister, but you know of my sister. My sister ended her life on May 31, 2013, while she was a freshman [first-year student] here at Oxford High school” (Morgan & Siddiq, 2017, n.p.). Instead of banning the conversation, youth at Oxford sought to address suicide from a standpoint of *love* – the love they evoke implicates the school community, youth workers themselves,



and the struggles youth face in an effort to start a dialogue with regards to why youth contemplate suicide.

In a world plagued by the realities of neoliberalism, we invite youth workers to consider how both their action and inaction have reverberating consequences. In light of the critical insight of difficult suicide texts, we want to invite dialogue around suicide in all its iterations. We hope that the call to ignore texts youth engage prompts important conversations between generations – where adults and youth can learn from and love one another (Kouri & White, 2012; Marsh & White, 2016; Skott-Myhre & Skott-Myhre, 2007). To evoke love once more, we hope that the love for youth be built into our relationships with them; a love that works to address much needed structural inequalities youth continue to face, and a love that, if taken seriously, can transform the work we do, our relationships, and the communities we are part of. We, then, suggest that texts like *13 Reasons Why* be considered valuable within the context of youth work for their criticisms of contemporary youth cultures and the everyday violence youth experience, but also worthwhile as primary opportunities to challenge contemporary power structures and neoliberal regimes we are all implicated in reproducing and resisting simultaneously.

References

- Asher, J. (2017). *13 Reasons Why*. Penguin.
- Fine Brothers Entertainment. (May 2, 2017). *Teens React to 13 Reasons Why*. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk25CDyMZoE>
- Greensmith, C., & Davies, A. (2017). Queer and Trans at School: Gay–Straight Alliances and the Politics of Inclusion. In Chen, X., Raby, R., & Albanese, P (Eds.), *The Sociology of Childhood and Youth Studies in Canada: Categories, Inequalities, Engagement*. (pp. 314 – 331). Canadian Scholars Press.
- Morgan, D., & Siddiq, A. (May 21, 2017). “*13 Reasons Why Not: Takes positive spin on controversial Netflix show*.” Retrieved from: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/13-reasons-why-not-oxford-high-school/>
- Hamilton Wentworth School Board. (May 29, 2017). *13 Reasons Why – Suggestions for Families*. Retrieved from: <http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/blog/13-reasons-why-suggestions-for-families/>
- hooks, b. (2000). Values: Living by a Love of Ethics. In *All About Love: New Visions* (pp. 85–103). New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.



- Kouri, S., & White, J. (2014). Thinking the other side of youth suicide: Engagements with life. *International Journal of Child, Youth & Family Studies*, 5(1), 180–203.
- Marsh, I., & White, J. (2016). Boundaries, thresholds, and the liminal in youth suicide prevention practice. In Skott-Myhre, H. A., Pacini-Ketchaba, V., & Skott-Myhre, K. S (Eds.), *Youth Work, Early Education, and Psychology* (pp. 69-89). Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Reynolds, V. (2012). *Hate Kills*. Retrieved from <http://discoursesofprevention.com/post-symposium-activities/>
- Skott-Myhre, H. A., & Skott-Myhre, K. S. (2007). Radical youth work: Love and community. *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*, 20(3), 48.
- Shakespeare, W. (1913). *Romeo and Juliet* (Vol. 1). Lippincott.
- Thirteen Reasons Why*. Retrieved from: <https://13reasonswhy.info>.
- Yorkey, B. (2017). *13 Reasons Why*. Netflix.

CAMERON GREENSMITH is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work and Human Services at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, USA. Cameron can be reached at cgreensm@kennesaw.edu

JOCELYN SAKAL FROESE, Ph.D. is an instructor in the Brantford Foundations Program at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, Canada. Jocelyn researches comics and visual texts and can be reached at jfroese@wlu.ca

SAVE THE DATE



CYC-Online September 2018

ISSN 1605-7406

66