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# Trans Feminist Virtue Ethics: An Infrapolitical Queer Theology

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The number of reported murders of transgender people in the United States has increased in the last few years. Human Rights Campaign, one of the largest LGBT activist organizations, declared “A National Epidemic” of anti-trans murders in 2019.<sup>1</sup> This annual increase of fatal anti-trans violence has occurred again in 2020.<sup>2</sup> Given this hostile anti-trans context, many transgender people choose not to be out everywhere all the time for the sake of their own safety. The current context of the entanglement of visibility and violence demands an ethics of disguised resistance, also called infrapolitics.

Infrapolitics is a term developed by James C. Scott. Infrapolitics is a portmanteau with two meanings. Infrapolitics signifies both infrared (“under the radar”<sup>3</sup>) politics and infrastructural politics (“the cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible political action on which our attention has generally been focused.”<sup>4</sup>) Scott explains that “each realm of open resistance to domination is shadowed by an infrapolitical twin sister who aims at the same strategic goals but whose low profile is better adapted to resisting an opponent who could probably win any open confrontation.”<sup>5</sup> This article starts with the assumption that it is a commonsense ethical choice for a transgender person to not come out in certain spaces or for a certain amount of time due to concerns of safety, and that such a choice is not inherently antithetical to queer politics. The purpose of this article is to create an infrapolitical queer theology by constructing a trans feminist virtue ethics that is not centered on visibility.

The current context of the entanglement of visibility and violence demands that queer theology expand into the ethics of disguised resistance, also called infrapolitics. Thus, for an infrapolitical queer theology, this article will start with a queer

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theology/ethics of visibility that will be critiqued, expanded, and complemented, specifically: the Out Christ model constructed by queer theologian Patrick Cheng. In *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, Cheng constructs multiple Christ models based on a sin-grace continuum where Christ is the embodiment of grace and sin is that which opposes Christ.<sup>6</sup> In the Out Christ Model, the closet is posited as sin and coming out is posited as grace.<sup>7</sup>

On the surface, this model is antithetical to the ethical claim centered by this article: That choosing to not be out in some circumstances is sometimes an ethical choice. In contrast, Cheng is writing that coming out is an ethical imperative to transgender people. The possibility of a complementary infrapolitical ethics arises from the detail that Cheng limits the audience to whom one must come out, specifying: “one’s families, friends, co-workers, and other loved ones.”<sup>8</sup> Cheng never explicitly states whether there is also an imperative to come out to those beyond this list. It is to this silence that the present article speaks and presents a complementary ethics of infrapolitics.

The complementary infrapolitical ethics proposed by this article is a trans feminist virtue ethics. Virtue ethics seek to answer the question of “What is the right thing to do?” by looking at how various choices grow or diminish specific virtues, which are understood to define moral character. The model that will be used for constructing a virtue ethics was created by Katie Geneva Cannon and summarized by Melanie L. Harris, both womanist

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1. “A National Epidemic: Fatal Anti-Transgender Violence in America,” *HRC*, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/a-national-epidemic-fatal-anti-transgender-violence-in-america-in-2018>.

2. Elinor Aspegren, “An ‘Epidemic of Violence’: HRC Counts Record Number of Violent Transgender Deaths in 2020,” *USA TODAY*, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/10/14/transgender-murders-reach-least-32-year-surpassing-record/3639313001/>.

3. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 183.

4. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 184.

5. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 184.

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6. Patrick S. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York: Seabury Books, 2012), 53-68.

7. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 81-90.

8. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 85.

theologians. Cannon's methodology for a virtue ethics is a three-step process: the starting point is experiential themes of a particular community, from which are drawn communal values, and finally individual virtues are distilled as the ethical implications of these values within a situational context.<sup>9</sup>

Cannon and Harris are both drawn to virtue ethics due to its contextual nature according to the writings of Aristotle: "Aristotle's sense of virtue made allowances for difference and paid attention to context. Cannon's thought builds on Aristotle in that she... examines cultural circumstance when determining what is good and bad and right and wrong."<sup>10</sup> The contextual nature of virtue ethics can be seen in Harris' outline of Cannon's methodology in that the experiences of a particular community are the starting step, thus ensuring that all values and virtues are also of that particular community. Constructing an ethics that is contextual instead of universal helps to highlight and avoid the pitfalls of the ethics of dominant society. One example that is particularly relevant is that Cannon critiques dominant Christian ethics for claiming that "Moral actions induced by respect for authority, or that come from unreal apprehended danger, are considered to be utterly worthless, cowardly proceedings."<sup>11</sup> The contextual nature of virtue ethics is key for making sure that the current anti-trans national context is given its proper weight. This is ensured by the centering of the voices and experiences of transgender people, the very individuals whose lives and well-being are at risk.

Having a highly contextual ethics is also helpful for taking into account the various other communities and identities that influence one's experience as a transgender person. Susan Stryker, a founding scholar of trans studies, describes "trans\*-ness as an accelerator or multiplier or intensifier of already existing positions."<sup>12</sup> So a trans feminist ethics must also be able to take into account the differences and power dynamics created by factors such as race.

This article proposes a trans feminist virtue ethics consisting of the values of survival, an affirming community, and autonomy; and the virtue of mutual care. These three values and one virtue come from the writings of transgender theologians and transgender activists, as well as from the editors of works that center transgender voices.

In their book *Transgender Journeys*, Mollenkott and Sheridan dedicate a chapter to the topic of coming out. They claim that coming out is a "responsibility or obligation for a Christian who is gender-variant."<sup>13</sup> Like Cheng, they are quick to follow this

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up by limiting the obligatory audiences: we are to come out "to our churches and faith communities, to our friends and loved ones, to ourselves, and to God."<sup>14</sup> Most of that chapter discusses both the dangers and benefits of coming out. The chapter ends with guidelines to coming out which begins with: "Please don't jeopardize yourself or others unnecessarily or unintelligently. Be smart about this. Come out only when it's right and safe for you to do so. Do it when you're ready, but don't wait forever. Life's too short."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the first value proposed is Survival.

Survival as a value affirms that both coming out and not coming out can be ethical choices. Starting with this value ensures that an implicit ethics of martyrdom is not created by this virtue ethics. Being misgendered constantly and hiding parts of one's self from others are both causes of great psychological suffering. Such suffering can become a threat to survival for many. Thus, in some cases coming out is a way to avoid such suffering. Because survival is a value, it can also be explicitly stated that the choice to not come out in a space or situation for the sake of survival is also an ethical choice.

In *Transgendering Faith*, Tigert and Tirabassi also dedicate space to acknowledging the dangers of being transgender and coming out including: violence, social embarrassment, job loss, and family rejection. Like Mollenkott and Sheridan, Tigert and Tirabassi make coming out an ethical demand: "We must come out. We must "be" or cease to "be"."<sup>16</sup> However, their follow-up is not a limiting of the audience but rather the creation of a list of potential supporters: "Good thing there is back-up--support groups, counselors, transgender friends, doctors, the chat room online...So we plan. We carefully plan with our seasoned transgendered [*sic*] friends from support groups, and those online."<sup>17</sup> This list highlights the reasoning behind such ethical demands: A support network is not truly supporting one if no one

9. Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 60.

10. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue*, 55.

11. Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 144.

12. Susan Stryker, in Elizabeth Stephens and Karin Sellberg, "The Somatechnics of Breath: Trans\* Life at This Moment in History: An Interview with Susan Stryker," *Australian Feminist Studies* 34, no. 99 (January 2, 2019): 107-119, 110.

13. Virginia R. Mollenkott and Vanessa Sheridan, *Transgender Journeys* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 123.

14. Mollenkott and Sheridan, *Transgender Journeys*, 123.

15. Mollenkott and Sheridan, *Transgender Journeys*, 133.

16. Leanne McCall Tigert and Maren C. Tirabassi, eds., *Transgendering Faith: Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 9-10.

17. Tigert and Tirabassi, *Transgendering Faith*, 9-10.

in the support network affirms one's gender identity. This article remains in tension with Cheng's claim that one must come out to all of one's support network, even as this claim is supported by Mollenkott, Sheridan, Tigert, and Tirabassi. However, a much watered-down version of this ethical demand can be made: One must come out to someone in their support network, or expand their support network to include a person who affirms one's gender identity. It should be clear that this is no longer meant as an ethical demand, but rather is a statement of the conditions necessary for survival.

In *Trans-Gender*, Justin Tanis provides the model of gender as calling. Tanis includes that "Callings are usually affirmed by a community and sometimes come from the community."<sup>18</sup> Gender, like callings, are social as well as internal. Thus, the second value proposed is An Affirming Community. While one does not have to be out everywhere and to everyone in word or presentation, community is an invaluable resource for survival. Many find an affirming community within the transgender community itself, either through a local organization or through global online organizations. However, because forms of discrimination such as racism and ableism exist in the transgender community, many have found that a more specific identity-based community is needed for affirmation and/or multiple communities that affirm them in different ways. The value of an affirming community also means that transgender people not only receive affirmation in community, but also provide affirmation.

In discussions of anti-trans violence, transgender people can be turned into moral objects: individuals who are merely acted upon. In other words, the moral agency and the moral actions of transgender people can be overlooked in discussions of anti-trans violence. For instance, transgender people might be portrayed as suffering victims waiting to be saved or who must suffer in exactly the right ways and amounts to justify access to a biotechnology helpless demographic with a target on their back, waiting to be saved by others. This problem has been avoided in this article because a trans feminist virtue ethics is inherently descriptive of the moral actions of transgender people. In "Toward a Queer Theology of Flourishing," Jakob Hero emphasizes the necessity of trans subjectivity in trans discourse. A transgender person is not just a moral *object*, but also a moral *subject* who makes their own decisions about their bodies.<sup>19</sup> Phrased otherwise, transgender people have moral autonomy, meaning they possess the agency to make moral decisions.

While this point seems obvious due to the fact that transgender individuals are people, the moral agency of transgender people is often limited and overlooked by the medical standards required

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Bodily autonomy is the second primary principle in "The Transfeminist Manifesto" by Emi Koyama:

Second, we hold that we have the sole right to make decisions regarding our bodies, and that no political, medical, or religious authority shall violate the integrity of our bodies against our will or impede our decisions regarding what we do with them.<sup>20</sup>

Koyama goes on to note how one's environment can limit one's bodily autonomy, as transgender women often have to present as conventionally feminine to those around them for the sake of safety. Koyama emphasizes that instead of policing women's choices about their own bodies, we should focus on the systems in place that limit women's bodily autonomy:

It is unnecessary--in fact *oppressive*--to require women to abandon their freedom to make personal choices, in order to be considered true feminist. ... Transfeminism believes in fostering an environment in which women's individual choices are honored, and in scrutinizing and challenging institutions that limit the range of choices available to them.<sup>21</sup>

18. Justin Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 154.

19. Jakob Hero, "Toward a Queer Theology of Flourishing: Transsexual Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency," in *Queer Religion: LGBT Movements and Queering Religion*, Jay Emerson Johnson and Donald L. Boisvert, eds., vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2012), 147.

20. Koyama Emi, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 245.

21. Emi, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," 245.

The virtue ethics presented in this article is dubbed “trans feminist” precisely due to this last quoted definition of trans feminism.

The third value proposed is Autonomy, which includes both moral autonomy and bodily autonomy. Autonomy as a value affirms that transgender people have the right to present as whatever gender they want, including their assigned gender even though it does not match with their gender identity.

Tying these three values together, I am proposing Mutual Care as a virtue. Mutual Care as a virtue ties in with several traits more commonly considered virtue. Mutual Care requires the courage to seek out support, humility about being in need, honesty about what one needs, as well as compassion in hearing the needs of others, and finally generosity in helping to address the needs of others. Mutual care can take many forms, from providing clothing, to housing, to cooking for someone (especially in times of physical and/or emotional recovery), to listening empathetically, to political activism. Mutual care requires learning and addressing the material needs of that transgender people have for survival. Mutual care builds community and provides interactions for affirmation. Thus, even if one feels it is not safe enough to be out in all situations, there is still affirmation to provide the psychological nourishment to survive, recover, and build resiliency to being misgendered in a hostile anti-trans environment.

Mutual care grows the value of autonomy in two ways. Mutual care starts with listening and ends with transgender people providing support to each other. Bodily autonomy is respected in not assuming what the needs of the other are or how they are to be met. Moral autonomy is enacted through the choice to provide support. Mutual care also grows the value of autonomy through its overlaps with politics. Hilary Malatino writes of an infrapolitics ethics of care and “explicitly position[s] care ethics—the embodied, person-to-person practices of assistance and support that foster capacities for personal and communal flourishing—as integral to political movement.”<sup>22</sup> Malatino discusses how trans rage often functions as a demand that an unlivable anti-trans environment be improved, and within this discussion defines infrapolitical ethics of care as “a reliance on a community of friends to protect and defend one from violence, to witness and mirror one another’s rage, in empathy, and to support one another during and after the breaking that accompanies rage.”<sup>23</sup> This is the definition of mutual care in this article: a community of friends addressing the survival needs of each other. These needs include a) safety and defense from violence, b) witnessing and empathy to honesty about when one’s circumstances are unlivable as is, and c) support to survive, recover, and build resiliency against those unlivable circumstances, as well as efforts to change those circumstances.

There are multiple examples of trans feminist infrapolitics throughout United States history. In the late 1960s, Black femme performer Sir Lady Java rose to national and international fame.

22. Hilary Malatino, “Tough Breaks: Trans Rage and the Cultivation of Resilience,” *Hypatia* 34, no. 1 (2019): 10, doi:10.1111/hypa.12446.

23. Malatino, “Tough Breaks.”

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She “worked to create an undercommons for Black femme labor and expression...[including] rent[ing] out ballrooms in downtown Los Angeles to host balls that featured only Black femme performers.”<sup>24</sup> In the early 1970s the STAR House was founded by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, transgender women of color who were both at the Stonewall Riot. STAR House provided housing, food, and clothing to transgender folks experiencing homelessness, especially transgender feminine youth. STAR House was part of the larger organization Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), whose work included conventional visible politics as well as projects such as keeping in contact with incarcerated LGBT folks who often voiced their needs through letters to STAR.<sup>25</sup> In her memoir *Redefining Realness*, Janet Mock details the important role that the transgender community of the Merchant Street area had for her, as it was a place for “sharing knowledge about ways to pursue gender-confirming bodily changes outside of a medical model. The young women are all interested in each other’s strategies.”<sup>26</sup> A more recent example is Micha Cárdenas’ #stronger, which builds community online through the sharing of images and stories of transgender people increasing their own fitness and strength. Cárdenas explains:

#stronger asks, “Can I become #HarderToKill [a popular CrossFit hashtag] by improving my physical and mental health?”...instead of focusing only on individual experience, #stronger uses the algorithms of social media to distribute images of strength and health for trans people, in the hope of encouraging more trans

24. Treva Ellison, “The Labor of Werqing It: The Performance and Protest Strategies of Sir Lady Java,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 14-15.

25. Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 264–267.

26. Heaney, *The New Woman*, 281.

people to prioritize practices that increase their own fitness and wellness.<sup>27</sup>

In this conclusion I will turn to two questions. First, to follow up on the earlier claim, how do trans feminist virtue ethics presented take into account factors such as race? Factors such as race, class, and ability affect one's experience and understanding of one's gender. Addressing the value of an affirming community, one thus cannot entirely affirm another's gender while perpetuating injustices such as racism and ableism. On a broader level, the value of autonomy notes that transgender people are moral subjects, meaning they can and do take moral actions, including immoral actions that perpetuate oppression. The virtue of mutual care presents interdependence as a survival strategy: we meet each other's needs. Strategies that result in further marginalizing parts of our community are inherently antithetical to mutual care, because they increase and ignore the needs of others. Maintaining any systemic injustice will inevitably harm some members of the transgender community. On a more practical level, differences such as race are crucial when factoring in how to provide mutual care. More specifically, mutual care includes the leveraging of privilege in ways that support those without such privilege.

Second, with all this talk of transgender people helping each other, what do trans feminist virtue ethics have to say to cisgender allies? The value of survival emphasizes that trans advocacy should include addressing the immediate material needs of transgender individuals and the conditions necessary for their physical and psychological safety, in addition to fighting for trans rights. The value of an affirming community emphasizes not only that cisgender allies do the work to make their communities safer and more affirming for transgender people, but also that cisgender allies learn about and support local existing transgender organizations. Finally, the value of autonomy emphasizes that trans advocacy be understood not as saving a powerless group of people from oppression but rather as joining an ongoing struggle of a community to dismantle societal limitations on their bodily autonomy. This paradigm shift is captured well in the popular phrase (within trans activism) of: "Give Us Our Roses While We're Still Here." The phrase is especially popular to use for Transgender Day of Resiliency, which is a complimentary counterpart to Transgender Day of Remembrance. Transgender Day of Resiliency seeks to lift up trans life instead of trans death. The phrase "Give Us Our Roses While We're Still Here" points to how the vocal support for trans rights following the murder of a transgender person should (but often does not) translate into material support for living transgender individuals.

Hero offers a theological version of this paradigm shift using the work of feminist theologian Grace Jantzen. Hero proposes a

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shift "From Salvation to Flourishing,"<sup>28</sup> where salvation means saving transgender people from oppression, to flourishing, as affirming and expanding transgender people's moral agency, embodied integrity, and human dignity. In concluding I would like to turn to a christological example of the trans flourishing paradigm that highlights the trans feminist virtues proposed in this paper.

The closest Cheng gets to addressing scenarios of coming out to a wider public is when looking at the life of Jesus:

in a number of passages in the gospels—such as the messianic secret passages in Mark—Jesus instructs others not to say anything about who he is. Self-revelation for Jesus was dangerous and, in fact, it ultimately led to his execution by the religious and political authorities of his day.<sup>29</sup>

But instead of making explicit the ethical implications of the messianic secret theme in Mark, Cheng simply goes on to say: "At other times, however, Jesus engages in self-disclosure about his true self."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Jesus keeping his identity secret is simply deemed as part of having "the problem of coming out."<sup>31</sup> This elision highlights that the Out Christ is a model of open resistance, where visibility remains the central lens, which prevents his ethical model from considering queer infrapolitics.

This article has been written with the intention of avoiding an ethics of transgender martyrdom, where Jesus crucified on the cross at the pinnacle of both visibility and violence is the best or only model for transgender Christians to follow. Infrapolitical queer theology asks us to look more closely to those moments of disguised resistance in the life of Jesus. One such moment, which Cheng touches upon and then backs away from, is the messianic secret theme.

In the Gospel of Mark, the messianic secret theme has five strains. First, when Jesus is casting out demons, he often silences them and forbids them from proclaiming that he is the Messiah. Second, after multiple miracles Jesus tells those healed and those

27. Mícha Cárdenas, "Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 175.

28. Hero, "Toward a Queer Theology of Flourishing," 148.

29. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 83.

30. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 83.

31. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 83.

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community members who witnessed the healing to not mention the incident to anyone. Third, Jesus tells the Apostles not to mention that he is the Messiah after Peter's confession and tells Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone about the Transfiguration. There are also two verses where Jesus wishes to keep his presence entirely secret, and one verse where people other than Jesus tell someone to be quiet about proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>32</sup>

As in the lives of transgender women, visibility and violence are entwined in the life of Jesus. In the messianic secret theme, Jesus is upholding the value of survival by hiding his messianic identity for the sake of his own survival, as is clearest in Mark 9:30-31:

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

The value of an affirming community is seen in that even as Jesus is limiting those he is out to as the Messiah, there is the core community of the Apostles to whom his messianic identity is known. The virtue of mutual care is present in the messianic secret theme in the instances of Jesus providing healing miracles as care. While Jesus does not receive direct care or healing, he does voice a need for those healed to support his safety by not telling others of the event. Thus, the messianic secret theme is a valuable christological model of infrapolitical ethics.

As the example of Jesus shows, choosing not to come out can arise from a place of affirming one's own value and not out of resignation. This is picked up in Scott's discussion of infrapolitical politics. Scott uses the term "hidden transcripts" to describe infrapolitical tactics. Scott explains: "the hidden transcript is continually pressing against the limit of what is permitted on stage, much as a body of water might press against a dam."<sup>33</sup> Infrapolitics is reconnaissance. This is highlighted by feminist theologian Sharon Welch. In *A Feminist Ethic of RISK*, Welch notes, "The extent to which an action is an appropriate response to the needs

of others is constituted as much by the possibilities it creates as by its immediate results."<sup>34</sup> Choosing not to come out in some situations, especially for reasons of safety and accessing resources, is an ethical option when and because it increases one's ability to survive and to come out or otherwise affirm one's gender in other places and times.

"[I]t should be said that for resilient subjects to be ethical subjects requires not self-efficacy as a posturing of inviolability, even though the term resiliency often comes to mean this. ...It is possible to be resilient, indeed, through embracing the precarity of life itself rather than through claims or performances of inviolability."<sup>35</sup>

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32. William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, J. C. G. Greig, trans., (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1971), 35–36.

33. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 196.

34. Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of RISK* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 75.

35. Rob Cover, *Queer Youth Suicide, Culture and Identity: Unlivable Lives?* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2012), 148.