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Lived Experience

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Studying is above all thinking about experience, and thinking about experience is the best way to think accurately.¹

You have just thanked Claudia Rankine for her mesmerising book *Citizen*, which has catalysed your interrogations of oppression, power and agency with and through a critical as well as lyrical passion for multiple ways of knowing. The power of her work has untethered your belongings and unbelongings, brought active present renewal to the compelling nature of lived experience as both a noun and as a verb.² You tell her you were born in Aotearoa and that you have Maori and Pakeha heritage, that her poetry/prose has given you oxygen. She writes: ‘Thank you. Lovely way to begin my Saturday!’

Life is precious and complex. And it often gives you *a mouth full of blood*.³ No-one embodied this more than your mother. Although she brought you into life and loves you, when you are seventeen and she discovers you having sex with your best friend (of the same sex) she tells you, through her biblical horror of sin, to think about taking your life. She says this as if it is normal. You think about that now as you listen to the rugby icon and star athlete on television say that gay people will go to hell. Your mother said that too, you recall, in 1976. She had the weight of the whole world and god upon her shoulders, and we lived in the suburbs.

Suicide has, in a very profound way, become a key marker of your lived experience. In your teenage years you are helping your sister out of the shower with her bloodied cut wrists; you are sitting in the backyard in the early evening holding your completely drunk father in your arms as he performs a death rattle as you wait for the ambulance; you are yourself so impacted by your sexuality, your family’s racial, social and cultural dysfunction, that you too attempt to end your life with pills. Countless family rehearsals of suicide take place against a back-drop of apparently, ordinary, everyday life. In the years following you find out that there was also serious sexual abuse by your father, and that your younger brother too had become victim to your father’s alcoholic violence.

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After several dramatic rehearsals, your father ends his life just as you turn nineteen. Your brother ends his life on New Year's Eve some thirty years later. Annual reminders are hard to avoid.⁴

She was a larger-than-life American woman from San Francisco and had arrived in Australia in 1977 for the inaugural Festival of Sydney. She had even stepped off the plane with bare-feet! Imagine. We sat in an old country-like kitchen in an old worker's cottage in Balmain having breakfast. She had been brought to the festival to initiate something called 'New Games' – non-competitive and community based activities, with things like earth balls and disused parachutes. She was part of a new government and community campaign called 'Life. Be In It.' You met her not long after your suicide attempt between the end of a nervous breakdown, the end of high school, and the possibility of university on the horizon. She was an out-of-suburban experience. Without fuss she made you eggs and toast. You talked. She hugged you completely. And accepted you without any judgement. Trauma bonds us, and creates us.

The Kurdish writer, activist and human rights defender Behrouz Boochani is speaking at the Ubud Writers Festival by live video-link in October 2019. You are familiar with his work, particularly his poignant journalism that often appears in *The Guardian*, and his genre bending, literary earthquake, *No Friend But the Mountains*. After six years of being terrorised by the Australian Government, held captive in various forms of imprisonment, he smiles when he is asked about his mental health and how we will take care of himself once he has his freedom. He says, 'No one has asked me that question before at these kind of events.' But he makes a point to say that he would not be seeking assistance through mental health services, but through friends. You consider this perspective. It resonates with your own experience of systemic institutional failure and its pathological reliance on management-speak, as though it was a replacement for relationship and connection. Your own survival of a family template of suicide did not come through mental health institutional care nor mental health services, but through friendships and connections, and understanding the value of that lived experience.

There is always a context to the lived experience of suicide. And importantly, you find a language of expression through understanding the fullness of that context. You find out, for example, that your own context is marked particularly by race and sexuality, and immense ignorance. Your family are migrants to Australia in the early 1960s and homosexuality is a criminal offence. Your Maori heritage is completely excised by your mother and father to fit in to White Australia. You are not permitted to have a tan. Your first experience of discrimination is at school when a fellow student calls you 'blackie' in every class. You only really learn about being Maori when you read your father's death certificate. But it's only when you are at university years later and learning about colonisation, epistemic violence, power, agency and intergenerational trauma, that the context of your lived experience has immense value and begins to make sense. You find a language for lived experience that exists in the space where cultural studies and human rights meet.

You finally speak publicly about these things as an invited speaker to the Suicide Prevention Australia Conference in 2015. You shake visibly as you speak. In a visceral sense, there is blood in your mouth, to paraphrase Toni Morrison's words. You are talking about your very existence

as a human being and the vulnerability and mutuality that goes with being human. You are exposing your context, your story, your lived experience of suicide, but not simply to relate its content, but to make a principled exposure of that life marked by racism and homophobia, which you know have been produced through dominant social, cultural, medical, political, theological and psychological discourses in cahoots with each other.

Understanding the relationship between lived experience and its context offers us a crucial frame for our times; the best way to think accurately finds its self-reflexive energies in the ground of everyday life.

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Endnotes

1. Paulo Freire. *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*. New York: Bergin and Garvey 1985. 3.
2. Judy Atkinson. *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press. 2002.
3. Toni Morrison. *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations*. London: Chatto and Windus. 2019.
4. Baden Offord. 'Becoming human: lived experience, suicide and the complexities of being,' *Overland*, 2019.