

## ACTIVIST NOTEBOOK: An Open Letter on Media Coverage of Teen Suicides

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*The following letter originally circulated in October 2010 as part of Adelina Anthony's online newsletter, Xicana Xisme, and was crafted in response to the media's national spotlight on teen suicide. This included a celebrity campaign, with such personalities as Tim Gunn, encouraging queer youth in crisis to seek help by promising that, "it does get better."*

I wanted to write days ago, because I do appreciate when some of you respond to this e-blast, *Xicana Xisme*, with, "LOL, Ade." But, like many of you, I found my heart heavy with the media avalanche or report upon report of teen suicides within our communities. As much as I love and use critical humor to alleviate and to celebrate our experiences, I also know humor has its place. Sometimes, we need the gravity of the moment to make us pause, to assess, to question, and to re-envision.

So, yes, I did question why we only heard about these suicides on a national scale a few weeks before National Coming Out Day. When the stark and triste truth is that teen suicides happen year round (LGBT or otherwise, because the "queer" component cannot or will not always be recognized in these kinds of deaths). We only need to examine the statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to see that from the ages of fifteen to twenty-four, the number of suicides actually increases. In fact, over the last few years, teen suicides have tragically been on the rise.

My concern, aside from the obvious work we must continue to do with and for our youth, is how we remain conscious of the shaping of public discourse.

Not only by what is said, but how the mainstream media chooses to cover our communities. We should diligently ask ourselves—why now? What does the media gain from sensationalizing us at this moment? Arundhati Roy explicates brilliantly in many of her essays how we should be wary and critical of a “crisis driven” media—a machine that does not sustain meaningful, balanced, and in-depth coverage. I suspect, a few days from now, the media will move on to another crisis.

So, if by creating the perception of a wave of teen suicides the media actually intended to show the dangers of coming out too early, I thank them for showing that reality. It is dangerous to come out. And, if some of our youth continue to stay in the closet because of the very real and historically grounded fears of taunting and persecution, I am just as proud of them for surviving as best as they can. As adults, our job—our responsibility—is to create safety nets so that youth can clearly identify and access support. It’s hard enough being a teenager. And while they mean well, I’m tired of hearing celebrities who stayed in the closet for years, for the sake of their careers, now talking to our youth about how it gets better. It’s a mixed message. The talking needs to take place early and remain over time, not just during times of crisis and not just by celebrities.

The prevalent and ongoing problem of our teen suicides and bullying should remind us of the fragility of our societal security blanket and how its bare threads do not provide comfort and warmth for all of us. Ancestral memory pulls at my senses and reminds me that I know many in my pueblos who have never trusted just any old blanket tossed our way. Our society is plenty disease-ridden with homophobia, xenophobia, and mujerphobia.

For those of us who survive and build tolerance against these ills, like our ancestors, let us remember that our survival means we pass on our strengths

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and resilience. Our survival then is not in vain...and neither is our duty to stay adamantly awake and to thrive...even if our thriving rarely makes national headlines.

Working in memory of those who've gone before us,

Adelina