

# Revolutionary Suicide

## Risking Everything to Transform Society and Live Fully

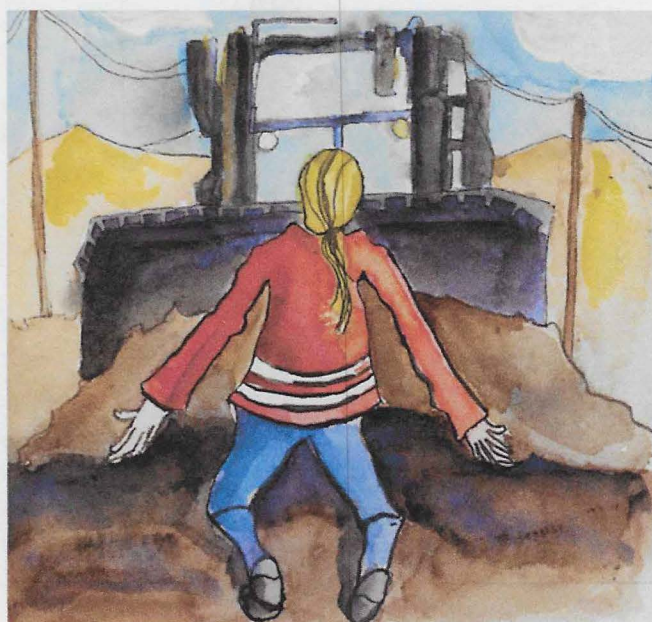
BY LYNICE PINKARD

**G**LOBAL CAPITALISM is a system, or rather, an interlocking *network* of systems. Permeating every area of our lives, it operates much like the Catholic Church operated in Europe before the Reformation. It transcends nationhood but is immersed in politics. Its faults and hypocrisies can easily be pointed to, but that does little to sway the hearts and minds of the vast majority of people who have faith in its ideals or power. Its influence permeates every aspect of our daily lives. It forms a universe that controls our entire life cycle and rituals that guide the cycles of our days. It shapes what we have come to expect and to view as “normal.” Indeed, it is more powerful than the church ever was; Marx nailed his theses on the door, and capitalism has only grown in power, crushing its reformation in a way the Catholic Church never could.

It is, of course, ludicrous to believe that identity politics as it is conventionally understood could do much at all to halt the voracious appetite of a force this powerful. **But it is similarly ludicrous to believe that all we need to do is to “give up identity politics” and do “real” and “important” work on capitalism, or to believe that if we address the economic system, racism will be resolved because it is secondary to economic oppression.** White supremacy constantly works against our efforts to build principled coalitions to confront global capitalism.

The problem with narrow forms of identity politics is that they assume that groups of people organized around identity can achieve liberation from oppression in silos—in other words, as separate, individual identity groups. But the truth is that we are not individually salvageable.

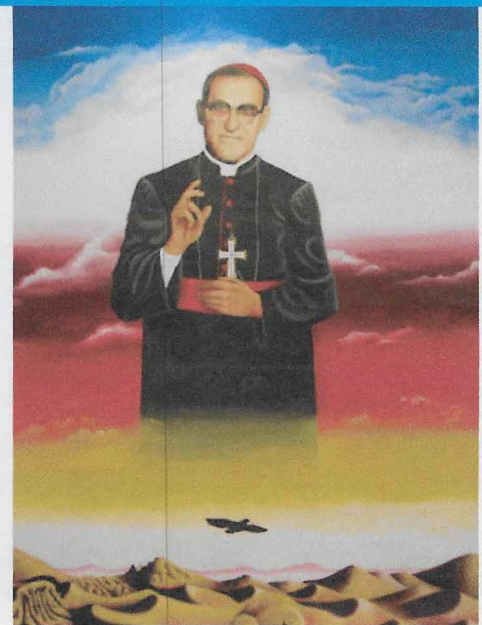
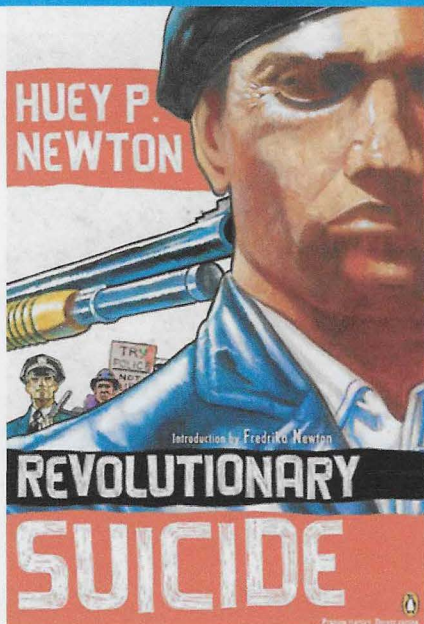
I’d like to present an alternative to conventional identity politics, one that requires that we understand the way that capitalism itself has grown out of a very particular kind of identity politics—white supremacy—aimed at securing “special benefits” for one group of people. It is not sufficient to speak only of identities of race, class, and gender. I believe



“The cost of revolutionary change is people’s willingness to pay with their own lives,” Pinkard writes. “This is what Rachel Corrie knew when she . . . refused to move and was killed by an Israeli army bulldozer in the Gaza Strip.”

we must also speak of *identities in relation to domination*. To what extent does any one of us identify with the forces of domination and participate in relations that reinforce that domination and the exploitation that goes with it? In what ways and to what extent are we wedded to our own upward mobility, financial security, good reputation, and ability to “win friends and influence people” in positions of power? Or conversely, do we identify (not wish to identify or pretend to identify but actually identify by putting our lives on the line) with efforts to reverse patterns of domination, empower people on the margins (even when we are not on the margins ourselves), and seek healthy, sustainable relations?

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What makes a person strong enough to risk his or her life for the sake of social justice, peace, and an end to racism? We have much to learn from Fannie Lou Hamer, Oscar Romero, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the many others who chose this path.

When we consider our identities in relation to domination, we realize the manifold ways in which we have structured our lives and desires in support of the very economic and social system that is dominating us. To shake free of this cycle, we need to embrace a radical break from business as usual. We need to commit revolutionary suicide. By this I mean not the killing of our bodies but the destruction of our attachments to security, status, wealth, and power. These attachments prevent us from becoming spiritually and politically alive. They prevent us from changing the violent structure of the society in which we live. Revolutionary suicide means living out our commitments, even when that means risking death.

When Huey Percy Newton, the cofounder of the Black Panther Party, called us to “revolutionary suicide,” it appears that he was making the same appeal as Jesus of Nazareth, who admonished, “Those who seek to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for the sake of [the planet] will save them.” Essentially, both movement founders are saying the same thing. Salvation is not an individual matter. It entails saving, delivering, rescuing an entire civilization. This cannot be just another day at the bargain counter. The salvation of an entire planet requires a total risk of everything—of you, of me, of unyielding people everywhere, for all time. This is what revolutionary suicide is. The cost of revolutionary change is people’s willingness to pay with their own lives.

This is what Rachel Corrie knew when she, determined to prevent a Palestinian home in Rafah from being demolished, refused to move and was killed by an Israeli army bulldozer in the Gaza Strip. This is what Daniel Ellsberg knew when he made public the Pentagon Papers. It’s what Oscar Schindler knew when he rescued over 1,100 Jews from Nazi concentration camps, what subversive Hutus knew when they risked their lives to rescue Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide.

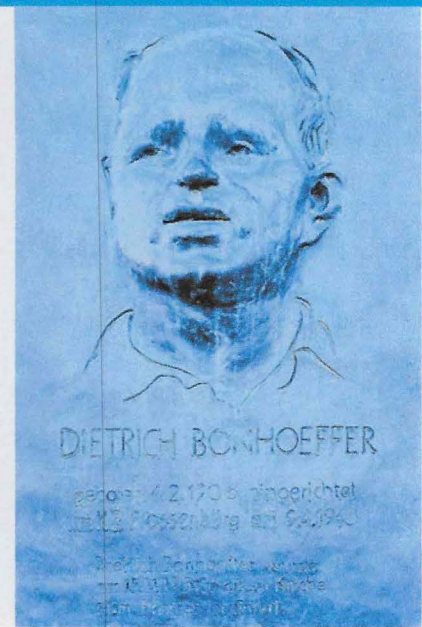
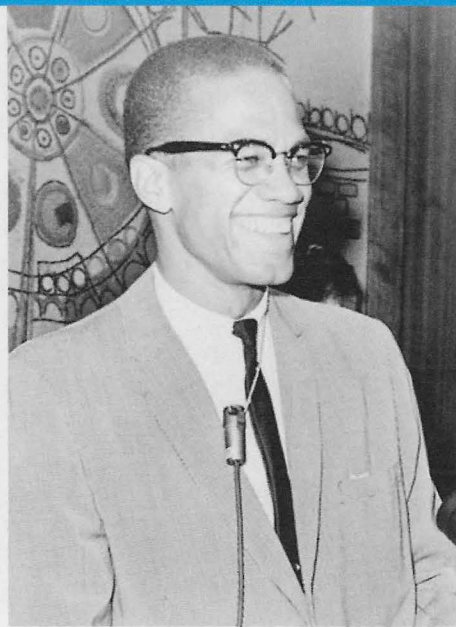
This call may sound extreme at first, but an unflinching look at the structure of our society reveals why nothing less is enough. Before returning to the question of revolutionary suicide and what it might mean in each of our lives, let’s look at what we’re up against.

### The System of Global Capitalism

The latest and arguably the most effective in a 5,000-year series of human methodologies for dominating others and the planet, global capitalism binds the majority of the earth’s population in poverty, substitutes consumption for humanity and the love of life, and fosters wanton depletion of the earth’s resources while stuffing the wallets and stock portfolios of a very few people at the top of the system, while at the same time creating and propagating fantasies about upward mobility among the rest of us and distributing paltry but desperately needed benefits that inspire our loyalty to the very system that is brutalizing us. It’s a situation expressed succinctly by Morpheus in *The Matrix*:

The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you are inside and look around, what do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters—the very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are still part of that system, and that makes them our enemy. You have to understand, most of these people are not ready to be unplugged and many of them are so injured, so hopelessly dependent on the system, they will fight to protect it.

Global capitalism has enabled the United States to become the largest and most powerful empire ever created. The secret of its success is economic imperialism without national expansion. The American capitalist empire is basically a feudal one. Nations are the vassals of America. They keep their populations in line, tithe resources, and keep their markets



open to the United States. The price to the United States of international aid (itself a farce), a large military budget, and occasional conflict is more than offset by not having to actively suppress and manage the population of each country. Further, the United States benefits from the conflict between the poor and elite within each country, regional conflicts that keep countries from focusing solely on the United States, and American nationalism that reduces internal conflict within its home base. Its interwoven tensions make it almost impossible to effectively resist.

No policy, program, charity, or reform effort will seriously alleviate the oppression perpetrated by global capitalism. We can ease pain and help individuals, but we will not change the basic distribution of wealth, status, or power unless we address the economic system that frames our lives. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, capitalism abhors the equitable distribution of wealth. As new groups of people gain more skills and degrees, they end up merely exchanging places with the people above them as they rise up the economic ladder. Even if they produce wealth as they do so, the law of concentration dictates that the middle class is then further squeezed, ensuring that the net population of poor people is the same if not greater. Unfortunately, conservatives are correct that the only way of increasing the lot of the poor in the United States within the current system is to produce growth by further exploiting the poor in other countries—exactly the trajectory we are now on. While the rich get richer faster, the poor in America have some chance of sharing the crumbs.

Those of us who are concerned with justice on a global scale should clearly understand that an increase in social programs—albeit necessary as “aspirin practices” to remediate day-to-day suffering—will never achieve the goals of social justice, no matter how well funded those programs are. Individuals can change their position, and the quality of life

for those at the bottom may be slightly improved, but justice will remain elusive. Only a change in the economic structure will accomplish justice. For those of us concerned with global justice, confronting global capitalism is central.

To understand what will be required of us in that confrontation, we must first take an unsentimental look at the “state” of affairs.

### Capitalism Is Protected by the State

Throughout history, the U.S. government has served as an immune system for capitalism, one that not only protects it from outside threats (worker uprisings, for example, or Communism), but from internal ones as well. In fact, one of the government’s primary jobs is to protect capitalism from its own excesses.

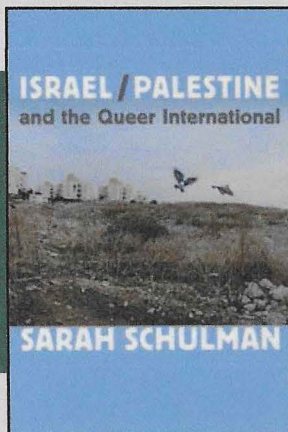
In order for the proper balance to be established, capitalism must first be defined as an integral aspect of the nation, which has been the case for the United States since its founding. All patriotic fairy tales aside, the United States was founded to serve the economic interests of wealthy European and European-descended landowners. The Revolutionary War was organized and financed because wealthy business and plantation owners were tired of being taxed. We are led to believe that the real issue was “taxation without representation,” but are we to believe that they would have enjoyed taxation with representation? At the core, the organizers and financiers of the American Revolution felt that their nation should help them accrue wealth. The nation should serve the wealthy, not vice versa. The fact that women, slaves, and poor people had no voting rights was not a historical oversight. The entire purpose of the new nation was to protect the property rights of wealthy, white men.

However, because the United States was a struggling, fledgling nation, national identification was not with the

ruling or owning class, but with the worker turned entrepreneur. This is vital: the United States tapped into the true passion of the worker by developing and glorifying the concept of the entrepreneur. Even Marx waxed rhapsodic regarding the heroic nature of the individual struggling to cast off the determination of feudal classes through the gathering of wealth.

The United States has understood for centuries that this identification is crucial to its success. This “identity” as an entrepreneurial nation has remained intact through substantial internal transformation and the repositioning of America in the global power struggle. It is, perhaps, the magic ingredient that has allowed capitalism to survive the weaknesses Marx saw at its core. The lure of becoming an entrepreneur, and the endless anecdotal evidence that suggests that anyone (at least in America) can rise from “rags to riches,” have provided the primary safeguard against capitalism’s destruction through worker rebellion. It is true that some European and East Asian immigrant men (and hence their families) were generally able to increase their economic standing over three generations. However, this success was economically possible because of the oppression of women, blacks, Native Americans, Latinos, and others. It was also funded by the exploitation of people in other countries whose stolen labor and resources were used to offset the rising cost of labor in the United States.

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However, there are times, especially when there is an economic downturn, that the fable of opportunity becomes less comforting. At these times more people begin to notice the extreme concentration of wealth and “the disappearance of the middle class.” It is important to note that the disparities have always been present, even though the extreme wealth of the United States still allows many Americans to purchase considerable comfort. The fact is that this country has the largest percentage of poverty of any industrialized, Western nation. When a critical percentage of the bottom 90 percent begins to become truly discontented, an interesting transition occurs. The government, which during times of growth is seen as a bureaucratic parasite inhibiting the potential and freedom of the individual, now becomes the protector. The government must send a message that the economic system is just fine (early 2008), but that evildoers have been at work. Sometimes Americans are told that the problems result from certain politicians and businesses that have been taking advantage of the freedom offered by capitalism. Other times we’re told that the problem lies with those who have sought to lead the nation away from capitalism. Then the government promotes itself as a “safety net” for those who have “fallen through the cracks” of the system. Programs are established to help the unfortunate. Of course, this is not about bad luck or fortune. The poor are both a required element and a natural byproduct of capitalism. The programs do not have the power or resources required to truly lift people out of poverty and only cause the system to seem benign and resentment to be directed at those who are exploited.

All of this goes to show that the United States has effectively established capitalism as essential to the nation’s identity. The United States has repeatedly proved its willingness to protect capitalism above all other things. In exchange for this defense from internal and external enemies, capitalism supposedly tolerates the “restrictions” that government puts in place to guard capitalism from itself—to guard capitalism against monopolies, extreme economic cycles, and exploitation.

### The Complicity of Civic Institutions

We have seen how government and law have been made to serve the perpetuation of global capitalism, and we have also noted how the state—the organizations of the military, the police, and the criminal justice system—will discipline our bodies through force and coercion if we challenge capitalism too directly. But equally powerful are the fortresses of civil society that sit next to the state: all of the religious, legal, educational, and cultural institutions that discipline our minds and emotions and mediate supremacist hegemonies through socialization and consent.

One of the most dangerous and intractable challenges posed by a hegemonic society is that hegemony is mediated and reinforced through the material practices of everyday



“White supremacy is the handmaiden of capitalism, serving to fuel, justify, and strengthen it at every turn,” Pinkard writes. Artist Michael D’Antuono created this painting, *A Tale of Two Hoodies*, following the shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teen, in 2012.

life. Often people are not consciously aware that their consent is being manufactured and that they are being socialized to accept, legitimate, indeed, prop up their own oppression. This is the process of institutionalizing “common sense” so that people take the status quo for granted and assume that it is vital to the maintenance of economic and political “stability.”

Take, for example, religion, one of the powerful fortresses of civil society. There is an equivocal nature to religion: it can either mediate hegemony as an opiate or counter hegemony as a revolutionary force. Throughout history we see religion serving imperial hegemony (church support for California’s Proposition 8) and working against it (the Civil Rights Movement). Sadly, the contemporary American church—part of the religious industrial complex and a vassal of the American empire—overwhelmingly serves the interests of the state, which in turn serves the wealthy.

My criticism of “the church” does not mean to imply that there are no revolutionary acts of resistance by individual churches, church members, or church leaders. In fact, I am writing as a Christian pastor. Christianity is my home, and because I love the best that this tradition has to offer, I feel compelled to plumb the ruins, identifying and rooting out the distortions that impede the life-giving potential of the gospel. It is important to interrogate the American church as a whole as one of the ideological state apparatuses.

### The Co-opted American Church

In reality, the American church, since its inception, has been feeding on the toxic waste of the American nation-state. Walter Brueggemann, in *Mandate to Difference*, describes

our society as consumerist (“more” equals “safer and happier”), therapeutic (the goal is to live a pain-free, stress-free, undisturbed life of convenience), militaristic (we must protect our entitled advantage and unsustainable lifestyle with force), and technological (visionary alternatives are screened out and eliminated as impractical in favor of small technocratic fixes to the existing systems). The American church, by and large, offers no substantive critique of these assumptions. Inured to the reality of global corporate empire-building and its parasitical processes, it simply has no reason to revolt. Instead, the church, like the consumer-capitalist culture shot all through it, is fixated on “good marketing strategies” and “unlimited growth.”

As such, the church cannot foster the Gospel of revolutionary, death-defying self-annihilation in the service of love but can only propagate a glut of Christian material (whether books, plays, movies, or sermons) by entrepreneurial preachers and entertainers, the net effect of which is to keep people at a safe remove from the radically transformative experience of the Gospel. “Christian material” is designed not to trouble and agitate but to reassure. Consequently, our “religion” cannot possibly fulfill its original function of disturbing the peace.

The American church cannot bear the truth that, having been utterly co-opted by the economic empire, we now spend much of our time lost in fanciful forms of piety. Week after week, we sit unconscious, consuming sermons that, like dentists’ needles, anesthetize us, lulling us into a pain-suppressing sleep before they defang us, rendering us docile and innocuous. Without teeth, the church, infantilized, is ever ready for its pacifier. Pacifiers come in all shapes and sizes—they don’t ever touch the root of our anguished hunger, but they do at least plug our holes.

As it turns out, for generations, the people selling the church and the people consuming it have really been in the same boat. We continue to embrace things that we do not really respect, believe, or love in order to continue buying things that we do not really want or need. If we were dealing *only* with expensive houses, cars, and clothing, the situation would not be so grave. The trouble is that serious things are bought—war and repression as “peace,” self-interest as “generosity,” greed as “opportunity,” brutality as “national interest,” and exploitation as “the free market”—with the same essential lack of consciousness. The entire culture is consumed in lies, and the Christian church, having fully absorbed this culture, serves to prop up this whole Barnum & Bailey charade.

The church has not defected from this systematic mendacity but has instead helped to foster it. The other institutions of civil society—education, media, law, etc.—serve in similar ways to support the existing exploitative system and manufacture our consent to our own exploitation and oppression.

## White Supremacy and the Limitations of Identity Politics

Also mediated through the institutions of civil society is a deeply embedded assumption of the superiority of white people to people of color, an assumption that both shapes and is continually reinforced by our institutions. White supremacy is the handmaiden of capitalism, serving to fuel, justify, and strengthen it at every turn. It is not by any means a coincidence that the poorest places, both in this country and around the world, are populated primarily by people of color.

Some of the most radical criticisms of global capitalism and its hegemonic hold on an increasing proportion of the world's population have arisen from those most impacted by its effects—indigenous peoples, New World Africans, and queer people of color, many of whom have no illusions that the glittering promises of capitalism will ever deliver for them. **So long as these criticisms remain on the margins and do not gain popular credence beyond communities of people who lack the wealth and power to translate them into action, capitalism does not need to worry about them.** When these groups begin to organize around the criticisms, however, those criticisms must be domesticated. They must be labeled “special interests” or “identity politics” and must then be subjected to the pressure to find technocratic, “practical” solutions to problems far too deeply embedded in daily life under white supremacist capitalism to be solvable in that way.

Campaigns thus come to focus on concrete “rights and privileges,” an attempt to gain something, to acquire something—some consolation prize—from the existing system. Under capitalism, identity politics becomes an effort to move from the margin to the center and so cannot have the goal of dismantling the locations of margin and center. **The aim of identity politics is mostly to gain from the dominant culture some sort of recognition of oppressed peoples’ humanity and rights.** Identity politics thus appears to accept the dominant culture as the standard, and it wants in.

In order to understand why identity politics cannot maintain a radical position vis-à-vis capitalism, we must reckon with the ways in which identity groups have been created by and for the establishment and perpetuation of privileges for a group that is declared to be normative—in our context, **wealthy European-descended men.** Black identity emerged from the defensive posture that was forced on New World Africans by the hegemonic structure of white supremacy in the American context. (Note: I focus here on the creation of black identity, since I am a black woman, but similar dynamics have played out in the formation of other oppressed and demeaned identity groups.) Thus, black identity is primarily constituted through and organized around the construction

of “race” or “blackness” in relation to “whiteness.” It has always been positioned within the socio-discursive field of the dominant culture, which determines, at least in part, both black people’s identity and the ways in which white people maximize the hegemonic mechanisms of white supremacy to support and defend the overall production and maintenance of the status quo.

The racialization of human populations (by white men) permits the annihilation of chosen group identities; the degradation of human beings on the basis of arbitrarily identified traits such as skin color, hair texture, and the size and shape of certain features; and the consequent weakening of potential resistance among groups that might otherwise be aligned in opposition to the dominant group. For example, Africans were kidnapped to America with a rich array of cultural difference. Africans had no concept of blackness; there was simply no such thing. Whiteness sought to actively destroy the native cultures of enslaved people, seeing these cultures as a potential power source for discord and resistance. It sought to replace these ethnicities with a uniform “black” slave culture that was based on dependence. Thus the first construction of whiteness was a blackness that was tied to the degradation of African cultures and bodies. When we speak about the limitations of identity politics, therefore, it is important to understand that black identity was framed within the socio-discursive field of white domination; black identity was constructed in the first instance under severely restrictive and repressive conditions.

## How White Supremacy Rationalizes Economic Exploitation

Because blackness was manufactured in the service of white supremacy—the creation and maintenance of power, wealth, and privilege for white people—it is frustrating when white men dismiss identity politics without first interrogating the most successful and destructive identity politics ever practiced (white male supremacy) from which they continue to benefit whether they care to or not, and whether or not they care to admit it. White supremacy has been and continues to be essential to justifying economic exploitation, providing a rationalization for the seizure of both land (e.g., the colonization of the United States and removal of native peoples) and labor (e.g., slavery).

To talk about resisting the hegemonic structural injustice produced by capitalism without talking about our differing relationships to capitalism—in essence decontextualizing and depoliticizing the creation, maintenance, and intractability of capitalism—is to ignore the fact that capitalism, from **start to finish**, serves the interest of wealthy white men and their beneficiaries (families). Although a few “exceptional” individuals of color may manage to gain some limited access

to the spoils of capitalism (conditional upon their willingness to remain silent about white supremacy and to accept the tenets of global capitalism), no one has a greater interest in preserving capitalism inviolate than wealthy white men, many of whom represent the American government and work with other wealthy white men in corporations to ensure that capitalism rules. Thus, we cannot talk about identity politics without talking about the identities of wealthy white men whose identity politics has throughout history consisted in “class warfare.” We must talk about whiteness as the vehicle of capitalism, and yet everything in the culture seeks to keep whiteness invisible, shrouded in a veil of secrecy so that the spoils of white supremacy can continue to be enjoyed by white people, and mostly by wealthy white men.

The racialization of human populations (by white men with recourse to the “science” of race put forth in 1684 by Francois Bernier as a means of classifying human bodies) is the power play that permits the dehumanization of social groups, the annihilation of group identity, and the consequent depoliticization of group oppression. Group identity becomes “political” in a visible way (as opposed to the invisible politics of white supremacy) when the social space that culture creates is violated. The pervasive, persistent, intractable racism that black people suffer in America solidifies a primary group identity based in a shared sense of collective assault. Black people’s bodies, wherever they go, are constantly signifying; white supremacy begins with the degradation of the African body, which is marked out as different and disgusting and thus subject to economic and political oppression as well as violence and every form of molestation, whereas white bodies are the unmarked marker, the stand-in for normalcy and rightness. In this cauldron of suffering is black identity politics born. It gains its power by connecting oppressed groups to a tradition of struggle, faith, and hope in resisting just this structure of totalizing oppression.

### White Male Identity Politics

It is not just inadequate but offensive, given the success of white male identity politics in amassing wealth, power, and status for wealthy white men, to say that identity politics doesn’t matter or isn’t effective: white identity politics has been the most effective means in history of ruling the world and has done so by attempting to sever people of color from their histories of struggle, faith, and hope. It is not true that all we need to do is turn away from identity politics and prioritize the struggle against capitalism, nor is it true that if we address the economic system, racism will no longer be a problem—both sentiments heard more frequently since the 2008 economic crash, when many ordinary white men and women who had invested (materially and/or psychologically) in capitalism found that it didn’t work out. Their disillusionment is real and important—they *have* been duped—but the

con artist is not just capitalism but also its secret, invisible **conjoined twin**, whiteness. Together, these two literally rule the world.

Although there is almost no support for those who wish to acknowledge it, white people, too, have been destroyed by “whiteness”—the unmarked marker—which has enabled vastly diverse European and European-descended people to trade their cultures (the social space that creates positive group identity based on uniqueness from other groups) for power and privilege. Much of the discontent among white people over the last five years comes from the ways in which whiteness has only delivered its promised wealth and power to the elite. The majority of white people find themselves without much access and also, now, without the enlivening cultures that might have sustained them in its absence. Many of them then blame their suffering not on the faulty notion of whiteness—a fiction invented to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few wealthy landowners—but on a broken economic system, or worse, on “racial minorities” who have managed to eke out some tiny fraction of the American pie through “identity politics” or “special interests.”

When so maligned, people of color rightly point out that it is white group identity that makes white people as a group believe they are entitled to more than they are getting. “White people,” they might say, “step into a world that they already own by virtue of the ways their bodies (do not) signify, and your primary complaint, white man, is that some white people have a greater portion of the world than you do.” And then these groups, for pointing out the unspeakable truth of white supremacy, are accused of practicing “identity politics.” It is misguided in the extreme.

### We Are Not Individually Salvageable

White supremacy in all its forms, including the Left’s tendency to want to dismiss identity politics in favor of the work of dismantling capitalism, **works against any ability to build principled coalitions to alleviate suffering**, much less to confront global capitalism.

It is true that identity politics as it is currently practiced under capitalism cannot help us dismantle capitalism. Not only has it too bought into **achieving benefits from the existing system**, but it also assumes that separate identity groups can achieve liberation from oppression in silos. Salvation does not consist merely in saving more than 40 million Americans who are black, more than 8 million Americans who are self-avowedly gay or lesbian, groups of children, those who are differently abled, immigrants, and those who are illiterate or poor. It consists in saving an entire civilization.

Particularly in America, we love this language of oppressor and oppressed. Yet, what Americans through history have failed to grasp is that although constructs of race, class, gender, the body, and sexuality have been oppressive to people

of color, the impoverished, women, and queer folks, when any group participates in the dehumanization of “others,” that group destroys its own humanity. I have grown tired of people saying, “What can we do for you—you poor, you blacks, you women, you gays and lesbians?” There is nothing you can do for me. There is nothing you can do for us; it must be done for you! It must be done for the salvation of an entire civilization, of an entire planet. And that—saving an entire planet—is going to require all of us, working together and risking everything—you, me, everything that we have worked for—and continuing to do that forever.

## Transforming our Relation to Domination

Capitalism is ubiquitous and hegemonic: it uses the middle class and the poor to bolster its capacity to accumulate and generate wealth through parasitic growth processes, co-optation, and manipulation. For this reason, I believe that no frontal assault can effectively dismantle the capitalist system.

Therefore, it is futile to mount a resistance to 5,000 years of organizing human societies on models of domination by means of identity politics (equal rights for people of color, equal rights for women, equal rights for working people, equal rights for gays and lesbians, and justice for this one and that one). **The problem is that no number of “rights” takes us outside the imperial framework. We can call formal equality progress if we want to, but substantive equality is more difficult when we are still in the same structure of domination that by its very nature demands that people be pitted against each other for survival on one side and for power on the other. And ultimately we create and recreate a self-fulfilling prophecy of ever more devastating individualism, greed, and violence.**

As such, it is necessary to speak of identities of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality; we must understand that we are not starting from a level playing field. We do not all have the same relationship to capitalism. And we cannot begin to understand, much less undermine, the workings of global capitalism without also recognizing its often-overlooked conjoined twin, kyriarchy **(the set of interconnected social systems built around domination)**, which is replicated continually in our organizing efforts and which can only ever undermine them. **We Americans of goodwill are very cruelly trapped between what we say we would like to be (free, loving, generous, and peaceful), and what we refuse to say we actually are (parasites, dominators, supremacists, consumers of more than our share of every kind of resource).** And we cannot possibly become what we would like to be until we are willing to articulate who and where we are.

However, it is not sufficient to articulate our identities

through the categories of race, class, and gender. We must also discuss the extent to which we identify with the forces of domination and participate in relations that maintain their power.

## Interculturalism

I call this radical process interculturalism, a relational practice that, in my experience, leads to principled coalitions across various power-laden lines. Interculturalism means that we move beyond multiculturalism. Multiculturalism as it is generally implemented both accepts whiteness as the standard and affirms whiteness by mimicking inclusion, while truly forcing sameness. Within most forms of multiculturalism, only bite-sized elements of culture are presented. They are ripped from their political, philosophical, and historical contexts to be easily consumed. This inability to root culture in real circumstances or to discuss injustice in a meaningful way reinforces the lie that “everything is just fine.” It makes white people feel that the dismembered parts of the cultures that they are allowed to consume—these culture McNuggets—are complete, wholesome, and normal. In effect, multiculturalism merely places cultures side by side without seriously interrogating the obstacles (power and dominance) that prevent authentic community.

Interculturalism demands that we interrogate cultures of power and privilege that work against our common life, while simultaneously working to overcome internalized forms of oppression. In other words, interculturalism requires that people on the upper sides and undersides of history interrogate our own cultural identities and lay down whatever cultural forms inhibit our full aliveness. Through deep, full-on, honest engagement with each other across traditional divides, we seek transformation into something new. We engage a gestational process that involves being born again and growing up again in a way that sheds the ignorance, defensiveness, self-congratulation, elitism, and paternalism that are evidenced in so much “social justice” and “diversity” work.

At a group level, this means that we have to transition from civil rights agitation per se through identity politics (campaigns for marriage equality, racial justice, equal rights for women, recognition of people with disabilities) to a revolutionary cause demanding nothing less than a comprehensive restructuring of American life—everything from its institutions and laws to its basic economic system. We have to be a threat to the establishment by producing a generation of intrepid revolutionaries relentlessly committed to modeling a way of life that begins to pull capitalism apart, brings about revolutionary change, and makes revolution go viral.

## Impractical Solutions

I want to make clear from the outset that I do not have a practical solution to the horrors of global capitalism because



there is no such solution. Practical solutions would seek to avoid posing a threat to the current system, to preserve our lives, as we know them, and to ensure our temporal success. So, my reflections and suggestions are not practical. On the other hand, a prophetic, radical, indeed feral life of resistance that leads to liberation presupposes both sacrifice and suffering. Neither stability nor success, as they are defined in the society, can be part of our criteria for a revolutionary “religious” or ethical life.

We are in a nosedive toward death, and to interrupt the death throes, we must of necessity buy out of the collective death systems of our culture. We cannot even contemplate real resistance without a commitment to extricating ourselves from these death systems, because these systems, by definition, are killing us physically and mentally and decimating the planet. Even if *we* continue to exist, our revolutionary inclinations are dissipated and our commitments thwarted, and we become catatonic zombie consumers joining in lockstep obedience to the existing death march.

Although many Americans criticize capitalist systems and bemoan their negative effects, we do not often focus on the degree to which our own lives as we have known them rely upon these systems. To the degree that we want to maintain our lives intact, we are going to balk at any course of action that truly threatens the status quo, because a confrontation with a system so entrenched is going to cost us our lives, either our physical lives or our reputation as “being someone” in the world. This means that any revolt against capitalism will need to be inextricably linked to a unifying (not unanimous) set of spiritual beliefs and practices that give us the resilience to withstand the death-dealing assault of the imperial powers and all their sustaining institutions and ideologies.

### Revolutionary Suicide

I call this set of spiritual beliefs and practices “revolutionary suicide.” This is resistance with meaning: creation and action emerging out of the struggle for life. It is not the supplication of protest, the futile hope for a better day, the search for love and self in the faces of children, the self-indulgent staking out of a political position, or the reckless descent into disorder. It is self-determination with integrity. It is the assertion of life without apology. It is the creation that is disturbing by its nature. It is the willingness to defend what we love—life itself—with our lives.

Mikhail Bakunin, in his *Revolutionary Catechism*, reminds us that “the first lesson a revolutionary must learn is that [she] is a doomed [woman].” Until a revolutionary understands this, she does not grasp the essential meaning of her life. Once a revolutionary has reckoned with the fact that she is a dead person, she can get on with the business of asking who she is going to be now and how she will live

out her new life. In effect, this recognition, acceptance, and engagement of death enables us collectively to move away from personal suicide—the taking of our own lives in reaction to social, political, and economic conditions that leech the meaning from life, devastate relationships, and lead us to despair. We move away from apathy, fear, despair, and inertia, and we move away from their resultant practices of addiction, consumption, violence, greed, and self-murder to *revolutionary suicide*.

When we have truly reckoned with the cost of being fully alive—deciding to love life no matter what—and we are willing to pay that cost, then and only then can we, intrepid and relentless, refuse to be props for the systems of exploitation, refuse to live extravagantly on the backs of poor people everywhere, refuse to be employed by death-dealing institutions, refuse to be “good insurance risks,” refuse to be saddled with credit worthiness that enables us to accumulate debt that fuels an economic death system, and refuse to pay war taxes. Then we will refuse a living death, even if this means being killed by the forces we are opposing because we deem it better to oppose deathly forces than to endure them. And then, even if we must die, in Alice Walker’s words, we will be “qualified to live among [our] dead.”

### Costly Grace

I do not have a death wish. I am not defeatist or fatalistic. I must point out, though, that it is way past time for us, all of us who are long on criticism but short on commitment, to ante up and kick in. The Good News is that this work is not new. We are part of a long tradition of revolutionary struggle that is often paid for with one’s own life. This is the essence of revolutionary suicide. Any people who struggle against a brutal and powerful force risk death in order to reach for a more liberated life.

“Revolutionary suicide” is what Jesus meant when he said, “No one takes my life; I lay it down.” This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when he decided to resist the Nazis, confront the state church with its hypocrisy, complicity, and complacency, establish an underground resistance movement, and plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer made those choices even though he knew they would cost him his life, and even though he believed that any violence against another person is a sin. He was plotting about revolutionary suicide when he became willing to lose even his own “identity” as a righteous man. He was talking about revolutionary suicide when he coined the term “costly grace.”

This is what Fannie Lou Hamer meant when she pushed past fire hoses, attack dogs, kidnappings, beatings, and jail sentences to demand a social revolution at the cost of her own life. This is what Oscar Romero meant when he said, “You may take my life, but I will rise again in my people.” This is what Mamie Bradley meant when she said, “They killed my

son [Emmett Till], but I don't have a minute to hate; I will work for justice for the rest of my life." This is what Martin Luther King meant when he spoke out boldly against the three evils of American society, "racism, economic exploitation, and militarism," and then, fully counting the cost, said:

I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't really matter to me now. . . . I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live—a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I'm not fearing any man. I just want to do God's will. . . . I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I know that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.

This is what Malcolm X meant when he said, "If you're not ready to die for freedom, take the word 'freedom' out of your vocabulary." This is what he meant when he returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca and embraced a universal humanism, renouncing separatist theology even though he knew that in the Nation of Islam that made him "a marked man." This is the courage, the integrity of revolutionary suicide.

### So What Do We Do?

We stand on the shoulders of those living and dead who committed revolutionary suicide, and the late June Jordan calls *us* to action, saying, "Some of us have not died; what will we do, those of us who remain?" There are no blueprints. And there is no space of purity from which to act. We must begin imperfectly from within the messiness, in ways that respond to and engage with our concrete and particular contexts and circumstances. So I cannot offer prescriptions, but I can offer a reflection on how I have been attempting to grapple with some of these issues in my own life.

I engage in a spiritual/pedagogical practice and community of accountability and support called Recovery from the Dominant Culture, which is based on a twelve-step model. This practice helps me and other participants recognize our addictions to the dominant culture and dominant ways of being and work on getting free from them. Crucially, Recovery from the Dominant Culture emphasizes the recursive relationship between our individual lives and the institutions that structure them. Hence, the work is not only about personal transformation but also about the transformation of society, i.e., healing the culture that makes us sick by contributing our efforts to projects that embody an alternative to the addictive processes of the dominant culture.

My Recovery from the Dominant Culture program has enabled me to understand more fully how I, like all of us, have been shaped by the values, beliefs, habits, and desires that make up the culture in which we live. I recognize that I have paid a high price for the privileges that I enjoy as a citizen of this superpower. That price is my full capacity for aliveness and humanity. I am no longer willing to pay that price.

I am staking my life on the promise that more aliveness is possible.

As a result of my recovery work, I have had to accept and come to appreciate the fact that I am an outsider within my own home, in conflict with the institutional church and, indeed, the society at large. I have had to release many of the benefits and protections that come with "playing by the rules" and remaining non-threatening. This is not something I just willed one morning. Rather this has been an ongoing process connected to a search for meaning, connection, and freedom that insists on an unflinching commitment to integrity, i.e., radical attempts to align my life and my actions with what I value and believe.

For example, I left my job as a senior pastor of a mainline church and, along with that, I left a secure salary, health benefits, public recognition and acclaim, and a respected platform from which to speak. My role as a "professional holy person" was in conflict with my soul—indeed, my yearning for an authentic, prophetic, transgressive, and free life. My search for deeper spiritual liberation has led me, over and over, through what Jesus calls finding life, losing life, and finding life again. This has not been easy. Some days it feels like I am breaking. The challenge is to remember that I am being broken into newness and freedom. This recovery process actually brings relief. I do not have to secure sufficient income or property; in fact, the acquisition of property and money restrict my freedom and mobility and disturb my peace of mind. I do not have to secure status, influence, and control over my life or over others' lives. I do not have to secure my own self-interests through personal power and lack of vulnerability. In reality, recovery reveals that autonomy, though prized by the dominant culture, often forces me to bow down before the idol of my own will, keeping me enslaved to the human tendency to dominate others in order to get my own way.

Healthy, sustainable relationships rooted in a shared commitment to grappling with our identities in relation to domination are the bedrock of principled coalitions and mass solidarity movements. These coalitions and movements enable us to cultivate an alternative consciousness, and that new consciousness leads to a radically alternative world community: No more *us* and *them*. No more save *us* by abandoning *them*. No more heal *us* by injuring *them*. No more free *us* by binding *them*. No more enliven *us* by killing *them*. No more!

Human life lived in God's image, lived fully, is found in the crossing over from ourselves to the well-being of others—that is what love is. When we cross over from power to weakness, from strength to vulnerability, from inside to outside, from up to down, we rise above ourselves, we transcend ourselves. In other words, the descent into death of our own self-interest—this revolutionary suicide—is actually a rising, a resurrection.

If we are truly to embody revolutionary suicide, we must recognize and embrace the fact that there is more than one way to “lose our lives.” While it is radical to die for the cause of freedom, it is also radical to live for the cause of freedom—to live in such a way that we die to the destructive lives we have

been living; we die to our lives as we know them. Whether one feels this tearing and release—a crucifixion and resurrection of the self—as the work of demons or of angels depends on one’s openness and commitment to transformation and revolution. ■