I'm going to tell you a story about the number 20 bus. In East Van, the 20 goes through the Downtown East Side, the poorest part of Vancouver, and the poorest off-reserve part of Canada. I live on Commercial Drive so I'm on the 20 a lot. I tell all my counselling students, “Go sit on that bus, you'll learn everything you need to know. Figure out how to respond. This is where you are going to get your education”.

I get on the 20 bus late at night, and like most women, I can tell you exactly how many drunk men are on the bus. But there is one guy that requires all of my attention because he's loud, he's standing up and he's shouting racist things at an elder Chinese woman. I freeze, I'm paralyzed and I think, what am I going to do? The first thing I think about is, I can't take on a great big, drunk man. I've tried this in my life, it hasn't worked for me and I'm scared of great big drunk men. I'm not required as an ally to take on that guy unless I have the power to do it. I am required to be an ally to this woman.

I looked at the Chinese elder woman and I kind of threw my love at her. I wanted her to know I was there, I'm with her. I'm going to try to figure out what I'm going to do. She's got her head down, she's got her groceries on her seat next to her and she's tucked in tight. She's not looking at my love that I'm throwing at her. This is a good tactic, but it's not working. While I'm trying to figure out how the heck I'm going to respond, a young sweet lovely person who I could not tell the gender of slips by me, Aikido style, and picks up the groceries, puts them on their lap and sits next to her. What I saw as a full seat, this person saw as a seat without a person in it. Beautiful, what a beautiful thing. So now, there is a body between this elder Chinese woman and this man who is attacking her with racism. The Chinese woman doesn't thank this person. I can tell this person is looking to say, “Should I put my arm around you? Should I talk to you?” And the Chinese woman is letting them know she's not engaging with them either.

There's a whole bunch of us on the bus that are thinking, “OK. What's the next thing we should do?”. This guy is still going. Now I'm rooting for this young person, and I'm worried for them. My read is that they are possibly trans, or gender variant and maybe they are queer, so they could be next to be attacked. Why should they be in front of this big angry guy? This is not good.

There's a really large First Nations guy on the bus. I can't tell whether or not he's had a few beers or he's doing performance art because he's by the window, and he slips by the person on the aisle
seat, puts his hand on the bar and swings around, you know, takes all the room on the bus. In my head I'm thinking, "Oh man! Big guy stuff, there's big guy and big guy; this is going to be bad". But no, I totally mistrusted this guy. He's being an accountable man, what he's saying is bring it on, bring it over here. One of the nasty things the white guy had said to the Chinese woman was "Get back on the boat. Go back to China". And the big First Nations guy says to the white guy, with humour, "Hey man, you are the original boat person. Christopher Columbus was your captain. Get back on you own damn boat" and he's laughing as he says this.

Everyone on the bus exhales because we know we are going to be OK - enough, and then everybody leans in, and the guy looks at me, and though I do seem inept, I am available to be an ally. He looks at me and he says, "What the hell boat did you come from?" I timidly say, "Ireland, Newfy, a little bit of England". He says "You can stay, you know your boats". He starts holding court, inviting other folks into the fray.

As all this is going down I notice the elder Chinese woman picks up her groceries and slips out the door at the next stop. I go out with her. The bus goes on. I don't get to see the rest of this lesson in 500 years of resistance to colonization, but I envision it: It makes me happy. But I'm left on the sidewalk with the Chinese woman, and I'm wondering if she wanted me to accompany her, does she feel safe-enough to go to her home. She puts her head down and she kind of runs, dragging her groceries behind her. She's probably not new to this. She probably has really good reasons to not trust me either. I'm not a perfect ally to her, she doesn't love me, she doesn't thank me: She takes off.

I realize I cannot follow her. A big white person following her would be scary, so I try to let go of what I want to do. I want to be the perfect ally, but she's saying, "No". This is what no looks like. I work at WAVAW (Women Against Violence Against Violence) a rape crisis centre. We work really hard to hear no and listen to no. So I'm thinking "Vikki, you've got to hear no too". So I know this is going to be imperfect, she's probably OK-enough, and she's probably lived with this her whole life.

I turn around, there are three other women at the bus stop and we are a real multiplicity of women. And one of them looks at me, looks at everyone else, and says "This is nobody's stop is it?" and we say "No". "We're all going to wait for the next bus?". We all chuckle and respond, "Yeah".

And that was my moment of the social divine, that four different women would get off at the wrong stop to accompany this woman who didn't need us to walk her home, and didn't thank us. This is a beautiful moment. When people do the right thing. And there I was saying "Oh man. What am I doing alone at night at an unfamiliar bus stop? This isn't the best scene for you Vik". But I have these other women in solidarity on this street, and I know there are accountable men on that bus. This changes things for me, it matters for me. I hold this moment of the social divine alongside the terror of the racism this Chinese woman experienced. That's the real story, and that's a heart breaking story.

Vikki Reynolds is the Clinical Supervisor at WAVAW. To learn more about Vikki please visit her personal page www.vikkireynolds.ca. To learn more about Clinical Supervision at WAVAW, please view page 2 of the “First Newsletter of 2012".