How We Handle Harm

Contextualizing Harmful Behavior Understanding Accountability & Exploring Community Response to Interpersonal Violence

Punch Up * Kick Down Distro

2025

Contents

Content Warning:

The following text discusses the topics of harm and abuse, including sexual violence. It does NOT include graphic descriptions or explicit detail of sexual violence or abuse.

> Shame and judgment are the twin faces of trauma
> and we are trained to see ourselves and others through their eyes
> ...I have to believe that another way of seeing, of speaking,
> of being with one another is possible
> that compassion and forgiveness and generosity
> might join justice and accountability and survival
> as the core values of our movement,
> that we might learn to develop tools for reconciliation
> even as we hone our tools for battle.
> — **Kai Cheng Thom**

Preface to the 3rd Edition

What follows is the **third** edition of the zine *How We Handle Harm.* This writing discusses how leftist, DIY, punk, queer & activist groups respond to harmful behavior in their communities, particularly sexual assault and interpersonal abuse.

This version is actually quite different from the original. I revisited this work about four years after its original writing, and found it sort of clumsy, inconsistent, and "all over the place." The first edition was attempting to do too much; its ambition was greater than its capacity. So, I put together a second edition. I made sweeping editorial changes, removed what felt off-topic, restructured the format to present the ideas more coherently, and added some meaningful updates to the discussion. Then I read some more books and felt the need to update it a third time.

It's worth noting this work is a *leftist* analysis of community response to harmful behavior. Surrounded, as we are, by incessant talking heads crying "cancel culture" anytime they are dethroned from power because of sexual misconduct or their "anti-woke" comedy special gets bad reviews, the distinction is important to make. There is a stark difference between a *reactionary* criticism of "cancel culture," which seeks to uphold the dominating power structures, and an *abolitionist* critique which recognizes that our personal relationships, local communities, and broader political projects are fractured and weakened by dehumanization and social exile. The discourse around "cancel culture" is often volatile and exhausting, and some readers immersed in lefty discourse might be jaded on the subject. However, the ways our communities and movements respond to harm continues to be a detriment. This issue deserves attention, care, and thoughtful analysis in the interest of both the wellbeing of the people in our lives, and a broader collective struggle towards liberation.

I'd also like to recognize just how pervasive interpersonal violence and sexual assault are in our culture (writing from the USA), as well as around the world. Many people who perpetrate acts of sexual violence do not even interpret it as such and are unwilling to engage in any manner of self-reflection regarding their behavior. Addressing sexual violence on this endemic scale is beyond this zine's capacity. Nor is this an explicit guide to community accountability processes, conflict resolution, or direct intervention with abuse. (See the back of this zine for some resources

of that sort) Rather, this is a container in which to grapple with difficult subject matter, explore potential alternatives, and engage in principled critique through an abolitionist analysis in the interest of building more resilient communities and more trusting relationships.

The following pages attempt to speak to and for folks who are acting in good faith to explore alternatives for addressing harm which do not rely on carceral structures or punitive model — including the state sponsored violence of policing and mass incarceration – but recognize the ineffectuality of *social* punishments like online shaming, excommunication, and dehumanization. If you are holding this zine, there's a good chance I am writing to you. When I say "we" I am referring to **us**, hopefully.

Terms

Rape Culture is sociocultural environment in which sexual violence is normalized, perpetuated, or trivialized through social expectations and behavioral patterns.

> "**Transformative Justice** is a way of responding to violence and harm without creating more violence and harm. It is a response done on a community level and doesn't rely on violent and state and oppressive systems (police, prisons, criminal legal system). It helps to create and cultivate the very things that we know help to prevent violence."
> – Mia Mingus

> "**Transformative Justice** is about addressing harm but also understanding why the harm happened, addressing the underlying dynamics that created conditions for this harm to happen in the first place." — Stas Schmiedt

> "By **community**, we mean the networks of people with whom we may live, play, work, learn, organize, worship, and connect to each other." — Creative Interventions Toolkit

> "**Abolition** is the ending of our reliance on prisons, policing, and surveillance as solutions to political, economic, and social problems."
> — Alec Karakatsanis

* *A note on vocabulary:*

Language surrounding this discourse is sometimes contested. First of all, there can be a flattening tendency to refer to anything from normal interpersonal conflict to sexual violence as "harm." For clarification, when I use the term "harm" herein, I am explicitly referring to acts of abuse like sexual assault, *not* the kinds of conflict, disagreement, or discomfort that is an inevitable part of human relationships.

When discussing interpersonal violence, the use of terminology like "perpetrator" and "victim" – rooted in the language of the prison industrial complex – can be weaponized to enforce moral binaries and obscure the complexities of abusive behavior. Herein, when referring to a person who has **been** harmed, I use the term "survivor" or "person who has been harmed." When referring to someone who has **caused** harm, I say "harm-doer" or "person who has caused harm."

Introduction

We are all capable of harm. We have all done things that hurt people – things we regret. Inevitably, we encounter people who have caused harm as we move through all our lives, even people we are close with. The ways our scenes, subcultural communities, social movements – even just groups of friends — respond to that harm matters. How we handle harmful or abusive behavior, and how we treat the people who have cause harm, is a reflection of our larger social values and political goals. The impulse to dispose of people who cause harm ignores the conditions from which harm originates and perpetuates the dehumanization we should fundamentally resist. Reacting to harm by punishing individuals fails to productively address the matter at its root, and has the potential to tear apart relationships, communities, and movements. We cannot meaningfully confront harm in its various forms — all of which are pervasive in our society and in our scenes – if we continue to rely on punitive models and carceral logic.

Readers ingratiated in leftist scenes or DIY subcultures, or queer communities might justifiably exhale an exhausted sigh at yet another treatise on "cancel culture" – a term which is so oversaturated with misuse from all over the political spectrum as to become almost meaningless. Yet our willingness to disavow friends, our tendency to be quick to punishment, and our aversion to engaging with the conflict still seem to have a fatal grip on our relationships and communities. "Indeed, some people in social justice communities seem to prefer an endless bombardment of online callouts to the restoration of conflict."[1] Wherever you land on "cancel culture" as a phenomenon, it remains a detriment to our collective power and our individual wellbeing. Ben Burgis asks the hypothetical questions on the minds of folks jaded on this subject.

Why worry about cancel culture? Don't you have higher political priorities? The answer is yes, and that's the point... I'm not interested in simply venting about those on the left whose behavior strike me as an impediment to achieving goals. I want to try to figure out why we're making these mistakes and how we might try to do better.[2]

If it is true that our relationships are the foundation of resilient communities, and resilient communities are the terrain for meaningful struggle, then our ability to productively confront harmful behavior is highly important to our aspirations for liberation. If we keep destroying one another as individuals, any chance we have at making it through the impending crises with any shred of collective dignity is jeopardized.

It is often said "the left" has a misogyny problem, or some particular scene is rife with "abusers." But it is the society we live in which has a misogyny problem; rape culture normalizes sexual assault and abuse. Our discrete scenes exist within this toxic context, and to frame the issue as particular to our own communities renders us constantly suspicious of the people in our lives – people who are potential friends and comrades.[3] Sexual violence is so rampant in our culture that we must acknowledge it is not an individual phenomenon, but a social one. As abolitionist scholar Miriam Kaba states,

[Sexual violence and rape culture] are systems that live within us that manifest outside of us. If we don't take that seriously we're not going to make a dent in this problem. The fact that

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[1] *I Hope We Choose Love* – Kai Cheng Thom
[2] *Canceling Comedians While the World Burns* – Ben Burgis
[3] The Last Farm

sexual violence is so pervasive should tell us that it is not a story of individual monsters. We have to think about this in a more complex way if we are going to uproot sexual violence.[4]

People who commit sexual assault are not uniquely sinister figures lurking around in the shadows. They are our friends, neighbors, and loved ones. To label individual "abusers" as the predominant problem suggests that their behavior deviates from the norm, "but under rape culture, sexual violence is normal – not crazy, evil, or deviant."[5] When people who act abusively are "othered" as exceptionally malicious, or their character is essentialized to the some terrible thing they've done, we fail to grapple with the complex conditions which perpetuate abusive behavior.

Reducing sexual violence and preventing harm requires an understanding of broad political and social issues. Confronting the historical, material, social, political, cultural, and psychological factors that shape people – that make them behave the way they do, including the harm they may cause – cannot be simplified to a dichotomy of good guys and bad guys. Critical analysis of harm is complex and challenging, but "an analysis that ignores real complexity is a bad analysis."[6]

Applying a basic abolitionist framework – recognition that the police, the carceral state, the prison industrial complex are all institutions of violence whose fundamental goal is to uphold and protect economic and social structures of exploitation and domination. Not only must we reject these institutions, we must also reject their *logics*. We cannot mirror these systems in our attempts to confront harm but must instead take a radically different approach. If our aim is to create social relationships free from domination, we cannot reproduce the dominator model in pursuit of that goal. We have to stop recreating the forms of oppression we seek to make obsolete.

At the same time, we must recognize just how damaging interpersonal violence is and be sure not to invalidate or belittle the pain and trauma caused by sexual assault or abuse. The desire for punishment is an understandable reaction to violent or abusive behavior. As friends and members of communities we have a responsibility to provide support, in whatever ways we are capable of, for survivors of sexual violence. While this piece argues that we should keep the humanity of people who have caused harm intact, it also fully recognizes the validity of reacting to these painful, traumatic transgressions with outrage and distrust. I write under the assumption that if you are reading this you understand the **foundational necessity of supporting people who have been harmed**. There are resources and literature (some of which are listed in the back of this zine) for how best to provide that support.

This piece primarily deals with circumstances under which an act of abuse or sexual assault has occurred, is acknowledged in some capacity by a community and the individuals involved, and there is a desire for amends to be made in so much as amends are possible. I think it is worthwhile to pause here, however, to discuss how the term "abuse" itself can be misappropriated – a topic explored thoroughly in Sarah Schulman's *Conflict is Not Abuse*. As Schulman explains,

the word abuse has become overused. People may feel angry, frustrated, upset, but this does not mean they are being abused. They could instead be in conflict.[7]

While topics like "overstatement of harm," or the weaponization of "false accusations" and the pervasive distrust and cultural neurosis these produce is beyond the scope of this zine, the social dynamics of conflict in our subcultures and scenes deeply effect how our communities handle harmful behavior, and are therefore worthy of attention. There is, first of all, a noticeable

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[4] Mirame Kaba

[5] *Becoming Abolitionists* – Derecka Purnell

[6] *Communism of Love* – Richard Gilman-Opalsky

[7] *Conflict is Not Abuse* – Sarah Schulman

aversion to conflict so severe that even marginal pushback on certain discourse — challenging, questioning, or refining rhetoric — can be incendiary. When conflict feels like a personal attack, simple disagreements can escalate to the point that they are labeled as "harm" or even "abuse." Schulman refers to the normal and expected tension and clashes which come along with any human relationship as "normative conflict." Conflating conflict with abuse incentivizes one to claim a victim status and therefore gain the deference of the community. Schulman explains,

if I recite those few words, "I was abused" or "it was an abusive relationship" it is immediately understood that I am right and I am violated and I am in danger and therefore deserving of Group acclaim while the other is wrong, a harasser.[8]

To clarify, pointing out this tendency is not an attempt to "silence survivors" or sweep abuse under the rug. To the contrary, distinguishing between conflict and abuse, harm and violence is the only way to actually confront any of these meaningfully. If everything is abuse, then nothing is abuse and that is a dead end. As Emi Kane & Hyejin Shim write:

Abuse means something. It's not just a word that could mean whatever you want it to mean in the moment ... We've sort of muddied the waters in this way that actually doesn't serve survivors of abuse and rape and violence, or of interpersonal partner violence. It's gotten away from itself in a way that is actually creating a lot of confusion and increasing violence and harm.[9]

This writing will mainly focus on how our communities respond to abusive behavior, treat the people who cause harm, how punitive models end up dismantling and weakening our communities, and how the ideologies of the carceral state inform those reactions, even if they claim labels such as "transformative justice" or "abolitionist."

Not only is abuse deeply painful and traumatizing to the survivor, it also causes huge divisions in communities. People feel betrayed. Trust is damaged. Scenes break apart. Organizations divide. Movements burn out. Long term and deeply rooted relationships end. The trauma and surrounding abuse can cause ripples which widely effect people communally and individually. My argument is not that we should ignore or reject anger or downplay the very real damage that harm may do, but that we decouple dysregulated emotional responses to our strategies for dealing with harm. Kim Diehl asks of people engaging with abolitionist strategies,

Are you fueled by anger and emotions? Because abolition is not about, 'I'm pissed off and I want to see justice these ways.' It's a politics ... It's a long-term rebuilding of society that isn't about individual emotion, but about really looking at and imagining ways that we could start to identify the behaviors in folks early and figure out how to manage them.[10]

The only way people will take responsibility for harm they've caused is if it is safe to do so. If recognizing and attempting to take responsibility for harm is a guarantee of social death, people will continue to hide away or attempt to justify their behavior. The opportunity for people who have caused harm to be open, honest, and vulnerable without threat of exile, or fear of dehumanization is crucial for genuinely reckoning with their harmful behavior in an attempt to change it. Addressing harm can only be accomplished through trusting personal and social relationships which are not conditional on purity and can withstand conflict. Offering people who have caused harm patience, compassion, and support through that process can be challenging, but any authentic attempt a taking responsibility for harmful behavior cannot happen without

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[8] *Conflict is Not Abuse* – Sarah Schulman
[9] *After Accountability* – Emi Kane & Hyejin Shim
[10] *After Accountability* – Kim Diehl

this support. That transformation will not be seamless or linear – it will be messy. Mistakes will be made, but we can meet those mistakes with a reinforcement of boundaries, guidance towards adjustment, and a reshoring of support. Otherwise, the cycle of public punishment, performative apology, and private shame continue without any real change, individually or collectively.

By no means do I claim to have the answers. In fact, I reject the idea that there is one "correct" way of confronting harm. This work is an open invitation to engage with a challenging but crucial subject matter. How we build communities, show up in personal relationships, and treat the people who occupy our lives – this is where put our ideas into practice, how we embody our values. Our approach conflict or confronting harm must be grounded in the fundamental shared conviction that nobody is disposable. We must turn away from punitive models of addressing harm and instead assert, maintain, and *set the example* that a radically different way of navigating harm is possible. We must hold faith that given the proper support, dignity, and care, people are capable of transformation. We must *believe* that people can change for the better, and *act* according to that belief. We must see everyone as fully human, even if they have acted in ways that we find reprehensible. We must reject dehumanization unconditionally. The zine *Loving Accountability* concludes that,

We are all longing for something more than survival. We propose this longing as a place of connection, one where we can learn to break cycles of harm by building stronger relationships through vulnerability, reimagining care as a collective responsibility, and moving towards accountability as a practice of love and understanding...[11]

We can support the healing of survivors *as well as* the growth of people who have caused harm. Let's refrain from casting blame, internalizing shame, or pointing fingers and instead focus on how we can do better for our own personal wellbeing and for each other, collectively. Let us replace self-righteousness with compassion, moral judgement with critical analysis, and punishment with support. These ethical principles are crucial if we are to maintain resilient communities and build liberatory movements. Living dignified, fulfilling lives and surviving through the current political, social, and ecological turmoil are both contingent on our ability to build and strengthen these communities and movements. We all have the capacity to harm; we also have the capacity to transform our behavior, shape our social worlds, and determine how our communities respond.

Why Do People Cause Harm?

An analysis of the conditions that shape people and their behavior might provide a better understanding of the root causes of harm, and how to best respond to abuse in our communities. "Sexual violence and resistance to it does not happen in a vacuum. It is swept up in all of the other oppressive systems of exploitation, extraction, and exclusion that have to be undermined and abolished."[12] This is not to obfuscate responsibility for harm, as if someone who has caused violence is off the hook because of "the system" or whatever. But we have to reckon with the underlying causes of violence and harm in our world if we are to take meaningful steps in preventing it interpersonally. Bringing to light the root causes of harmful behavior is necessary

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[11] *Loving Accountability* – The Good Guise
[12] *Becoming Abolitionists* – Derecka Purnell

for creating safer communities and building social relationships which are not maintained by violence.

Capitalist society is founded on colonial genocide and slavery and perpetuates exploitation, alienation, and mass surveillance. Modern structures of social coercion and domination are detrimental to people's physical, mental, emotional and social health, all factors which contribute to harmful behavior; people who are immiserated, afraid, or threatened are more likely to inflict pain on others. Capitalist alienation – a feeling of total disconnection – effects how we communicate and relate to each other. Even in ostensibly "radical" subcultures, our ideas of communality, justice, and responsibility are shaped by the cultural conditioning of dominant ideologies. By no means do these conditions excuse abuse, but a productive confrontation with harmful behavior requires an understanding of the conditions which shape people, both personally and socially.

In a society built on structural racism, native genocide, and patriarchal oppression — in which poverty is criminalized and maintained by state sanctioned violence and mass incarceration — we've got a lot to go up against as small communities exploring new ways of addressing harm! The zine *The Broken Teapot* asserts that our efforts should keep the following question at the forefront: "what would have been necessary to prevent this from happening?"[13] Attempting to answer this collectively requires confronting the social conditions which most shape the kind harmful behavior we are addressing. Those factors are numerous, both in the hegemonic culture and our subcultures, but most apparent in our particular communities seem to be power dynamics and substance use.

Patriarchy & Power

While structural conditions shape people, the effects of those conditions are not universal. The playing field is unequal, and the intersections of various forms of oppression and domination are fundamental to how behavior is shaped — to why people hurt each other, and how. Of course, neither gender nor gender violence exist on a binary – it is not as if only "men" are harming "women." Both gender expression and the nuances of harmful or abusive behavior are more complex than that. The popular booklet *What About the Rapists?* makes sure to clarify,

Sexual assault and abuse are neither gender specific nor gender neutral. We must understand the gendered patterns of assault and abuse as an expression of patriarchal domination without making invisible experiences that fall outside of that gendered framework.[14]

That being said, it is clear that sexual assault and gender violence is *most pervasive* according to a patriarchal power dynamic – of "men" abusing "women." We would be remiss not to take up the subject of patriarchy as a structure of domination and control over women's bodies, and a factor worth careful consideration in discussing sexual violence.

When we are thinking critically about confronting harm, it is integral to consider power dynamics. Our society is founded on a patriarchal gender hierarchy. Reigning economic, political, and social structures exist to maintain the domination of men over women. Historical processes of colonialism, slavery, and genocide weaponized sexual violence as a tool of domination – a brutal legacy that continues into the present day. The transfer of wealth along patrilineal lines has shaped our economic and social foundations. The gender inequality and exploitation so preva-

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[13] *The Broken Teapot* Zine, Second Edition
[14] *What About the Rapists?* – Dysophia

lent under modern capitalism often renders people in abusive relationships, particularly women, unable to escape vulnerable or dangerous situations.

A patriarchal culture benefits men every day in ways that are largely invisible to them. Women's subjugation – the expectation of their obedience, the oversexualization of their bodies, their unequal representation in positions of power – is a power dynamic which favors people socialized as men or who present as masculine. The oppression of women is normalized in our culture. This power imbalance creates a social environment where women are often hesitant or fearful of coming forward about their experiences of being abused or sexually assaulted, particularly when both going to the cops and the ostensible "alternative" models for addressing harm appear ineffectual.

Further, the way that young people generally – and young men in particular – are "educated" about sex perpetuates rape culture. Hollywood has portrayed sexual coercion as normal and even funny to generations of young people. While sexual education varies generationally and geographically, teaching consent has, until recently, been totally woefully inadequate in public education curriculums. Personally, I only started to actually understand healthy consent after reading zines at punk shows in my early 20s!

Regardless of what conversations young people might be having about consent — in school, with their parents and friends, or online — most of them are equipped with endless access to any and all types of pornography. It's a fair assumption that most youth learn about and build their expectations about sexual encounters through the distorted lens of online porn, the vast majority of which depicts sex as existing entirely for male pleasure and frames women as subservient objects of male desire. Porn also very rarely portrays any discussion whatsoever about consent or sexual health. There are psycho-social ramifications to infinite, instantaneous access to images of sexual exploitation on a generational scale.

That being said, patriarchy and rape culture are *structures* of domination, a *system of social relationships*. Therefore, while men undoubtably benefit from this structure, it would be a gross oversimplification to cast the blame for patriarchy onto *individual men*. A critical analysis of abuse and productive responses to harm must go deeper than this surface level understanding of how power functions. While men *as a social category* benefit from patriarchal institutions, *most of the men* in our society are disempowered by other intersecting structures of domination, oppression, and coercion in the material reality of modern capitalism. Furthermore, Patriarchy is a corrosive and harmful force in men's lives as well. Patriarchy teaches men that the way to be worthy and desirable is to be emotionless, domineering, violent, and competitive. As bell hooks offers,

Men cannot change if there are no blueprints for change... Patriarchy keeps them from knowing themselves, from being in touch with their feelings, from loving. To love, men must be able to let go of their will to dominate.[15]

To assign either guilt *or* pride – superiority *or* indignation — to a male identity seems confused and ineffectual. However, a basic understanding of historical context and cultural conditioning calls for thoughtful engagement with how patriarchy and rape culture show up in our lives. It is crucial that men think critically about the power dynamics that play out in their relationships, especially in romantic or sexual interactions.

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[15] *The Will to Change* – bell hooks

Substances & Consent

Healthy consent in a sexual encounter is something that requires good communication, attention to subtle signals, emotional presence with a partner, and levelheaded control over primal desires. When substances are involved, capacity for all of these are greatly diminished. While any substance can contribute to breaches of consent, the most commonly abused and culturally accepted is alcohol, so it is the focus of this section.

Booze plays such a big part in the perpetuation of sexual violence that to go on discussing harm without thinking critically about drinking would be a misstep. Alcohol is a defining part of social life, even within social justice or activist spaces. For people who are hyper-aware of the overwhelming levels of injustice that defines our times, or are intimately involved in political struggle, drinking can be a way to numb the pain of that awareness, and neutralize the anxiety of feeling helpless to the suffering that surrounds us. Combine the social expectations of particular subcultures with the mass indoctrination we have all experienced at the hands of advertisers and cultural norms and we have a thoroughly engrained normalization of getting fucked up.

From a chemical, neurological perspective, alcohol effects the parts of your brain responsible for sound decision making, as well as inhibiting your ability to resist temptations regarding pleasure seeking. Combining a culture of excessive drinking, patriarchal indoctrination which sexualizes the female body, and a lack of education about consent is a formula for rampant sexual abuse. We are not immune to these dynamics in queer or radical leftist scenes.

Weekend after weekend, we create highly sexualized spaces with strong pressure to get intoxicated, resulting in groups of people too drunk or high to give or receive solid consent. Then in the aftermath of the harm caused in those situations, we expect individuals to deal with the consequences of their choices on their own, rather than all of us taking responsibility for the collective context that normalizes this behavior.[16]

Of course, being fucked up is not an excuse to hurt someone, much less commit sexual assault. Noone is absolved of abusive behavior because substances played a part in that abuse. Let's acknowledge, though, how the use of substances plays out in our shared spaces and is a factor in abusive behavior. More often than not, when someone commits sexual assault, substances were involved. While the use of substances does not excuse violence or harm, the complexities of substance use must be taken into consideration in confronting that behavior. The substance use and the harmful act are often inextricably linked.

Furthermore, when someone is using substances, the capacity of that person take responsibility for their actions – to seek or accept support – may be limited. During bouts of substance or alcohol abuse, people who commit violent acts are in less control of their thoughts and behaviors. If we abandon or ostracize someone in the throes of addiction as a form of social punishment we can expect them to spiral further into substance abuse. People thrown out of the community without opportunities for reflection and a chance to change will undoubtedly return to the conditions that lead them to be abusive in the first place. Feeling abandoned and fundamentally bad, people continue to lash out at themselves and others, even if it is in a different city or scene. This is why exile and ostracization do not make our communities healthier or safer.

Coming out of active addiction requires consistent and reliable support from people who are invested in the wellbeing of the person struggling with substances. Transformation of behavior does not come overnight and does not come easily, particularly for those in the throes of addiction,

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[16] *Accounting for Ourselves* – Crimthinc.

and especially when substance use is socially encouraged and widely accepted. This process often involves ups and downs, progress and regression. It is messy and challenging, but ultimately necessary if we are to create safer communities and healthier cultures. It is a fact that alcohol and other substances increase the risk of harmful behavior or sexual violence significantly, and we have to acknowledge that moving forward. We must look at the reality of how alcohol affects our brains neurochemically, how it shapes our scenes, our relationships, and the spaces we share, as well as its influence in the perpetuation of harm.

Responding to Harm

Support

It should go without saying that supporting the person who has been harmed should be the central priority in communal confrontation with harm.[(1)] We cannot take for granted that we know what a survivor needs and have to stay open to the shifting dynamics of what support looks like for any particular person. We should also be willing to distinguish between providing support for someone who has been harmed, and seeking punishment for the person who may have harmed them. Anger, fury, and the desire for intense and immediate punishment is understandable when someone has been hurt, violated, or traumatized. However, we cannot hope for legitimate forms of healing or reconciliation to come from a trauma response. The people most capable and most willing to support survivors are likely survivors themselves, "making it important to disentangle their feelings about their own past from the incident in front of them and what the survivor is requesting."[17]

It's also worth noting that support for a survivor is a markedly different, separate process from one concerning a person who caused harm. The healing and growth of the person who has been harmed and the person who caused harm happen on different timelines with different approaches according to the situation, the individuals, and their personal circumstances. We must advocate for the healing of survivors and those who cause harm on their own terms, at their own pace. Clementine Morgan recalls,

What helped me as a survivor was to realize that I am truly separate and sovereign. I am not attached to the people who abused me ... They are not my responsibility. My healing is not in any way dependent on them.[18]

People who have been harmed should not be responsible for the growth of the person who caused them harm. The healing of a survivor is their own and cannot depend on the actions of another. That is not to say the survivor *shouldn't* be involved in a process regarding the person who caused them harm taking responsibility and transforming their behavior. If it is possible for both parties to be included in a mediated resolution which is mutually beneficial to transformation and healing, that's ideal – just recognize if this isn't realistic or might require a lot of time and space before it can happen.

Someone who has been harmed may have certain expectations of the person who harmed them, but the harm-doer should take an active role in their own growth, rather than passively

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[17] *After Accountability* – Pinko Collective
[18] Clementine Morgan

[(1)] See the reading list in the back of this zine for resources

doing as their told. Being presented with demands under threat of ostracization or punishment is coercion. If access to support or dignity is conditional to adhering to a "process" imposed by others, it is not a transformative or radical model, but a continuation of punitive carceral systems dressed in progressive language.

Being an ally can be defined as doing what the survivor wants, no matter what, but we believe that no liberation can result from suspending our autonomy and uncritically following demands, no matter whose.[19]

Of course, attempts at addressing harm will involve disagreements, mistakes, discussion, adjustment – it will sometimes be difficult and uncomfortable. But the person who has caused harm must understand their decision to make a change as their own choice in order for the deep transformation that is necessary to take place.

"Accountability"

When someone causes harm, particularly in subcultural spaces attempting to adhere to an abolitionist framework, the word that generally gets bandied about is *accountability.* Questions arise like "What does accountability look like for this person?" "How do we hold members of our community accountable?" or "What models can we use as alternatives to social or carceral punishment?" These are no simple questions and "accountability" is so fraught in use and varied in definition that its meaning becomes muddied. Emi Kane & Hyejin Shim see accountability as,

carrying a number of contradictory meanings. It has an abstract aspirational meaning, like taking serious responsibility for harm, considering the impact on others, and changing behavior. [It also has] been stripped of meaning in the organizing communities they're in, misapplied, or endowed with significance it cannot provide …They note that people who aren't the survivor often project their own desires or values onto the term, turning accountability into a vehicle for their own internalized carceral or punitive logic.[20]

Before we explore what accountability **is**, we might point out the ways the term used performatively or is weaponized.

Shame is not accountability. Internalized shame can act as a real barrier to authentic accountability. Wallowing in self-hatred because of a bad decision or problematic pattern of behavior does not foster growth, nor does it facilitate the healing of any people who have been harmed. Shame calls attention to our flaws rather than building on our strengths – it lets people who have caused harm off the hook for being inherently bad, essentializing that behavior and rendering them incapable of ever doing better. Quoting Clementine Morgan again:

Shame and remorse are not the same thing – shame is a deep belief that there is something inherently wrong with me, stemming from an overwhelming fear of loss of connection… It does not help people come into alignment with their integrity.[21]

In contrast to shame, regret comes as a healthy response of knowing one has behaved out of alignment with their values. You may have taken a regrettable action, but it is not a fundamental part of who you are.

Accountability has to come from a place of authenticity – grounded in genuine reflection, understanding, and transformation – or else it slips into the all too common trap of performa-

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[19] *Accounting for Ourselves* – Crimthinc.
[20] *After Accountability* – Emi Kane & Hyejin Shim
[21] *Fuck the Police Means We Don't Act Like Cops to Each Other* – Clementine Morgan

tivity. Readers familiar with accountability discourse over the last decade will be keenly aware of how moral dichotomies of abuser/victim, perpetrator/survivor, good/bad quickly arise. Even good faith attempts to support survivors and confront harm in our communities are tragically informed by the dominating ideologies of puritanism and punishment — a tendency to individualize behavior and define people by their worst acts. Efforts to resist the values of a violent, patriarchal, carceral society end up reflecting those very systems. *The Broken Teapot asserts that* by taking a self righteous, tough on crime stance, everyone else can make themselves seem like the good guys. But there can't be good guys without bad guys. This is the same patriarchal narrative of villain, victim, and savior. Though, in the latter role, instead of the boyfriend of police officer, we now have the "community."[22]

Punishment is not accountability. Punishment is not effective in changing behavior and offers no incentive to take responsibility for harm one may have been caused. The systematic failures and injustices of policing and prisons prove this point better than any zine can. By perpetuating the carceral logics of these institutions, we reproduce them in our own communities. A thirst for revenge or retribution against someone who has been violent, behaved abusively, or harmed someone is understandable. Sexual violence can cause profound, debilitating, life altering trauma, which "dictates that justice must be punitive in order for us to feel safe."[23] The desire to inflict pain on someone who has caused harm might be justified, but it also is not a viable path towards making our communities safer or reducing sexual violence. Friends and members of community play an important role in distinguishing between "supporting survivors" and seeking vengeance. Friends and allies of someone who has been harmed have a responsibility not to escalate the trauma response of a survivor, but help them to regulate and heal however possible. Providing comfort and validation to someone who has been harmed is a totally different process from seeking accountability to the person who harmed them.

As the zine *Against the Logic of the Guillotine* explains, we cannot confuse a desire for revenge with a social proposal for liberation. If our ultimate goal is the collective creation of social conditions free from domination and coercion, we must refuse to exert power over others in the pursuit of that goal – we mustn't confuse vengeance for justice.

We are most dangerous when we feel most wronged because we feel most entitled to pass judgment, to be cruel. The more justified we feel, the more careful we ought to be not to replicate the patterns of the justice industry, the assumptions of the carceral state.[24]

We often see "abusers" labeled as such, only for the response to be a mob of people hurling abusive language or carrying out abusive behavior back at them. No matter how justified we may feel, further traumatizing people through public call outs, personal threats, or social exile is both ineffectual and perpetuates the dehumanization and disposability of the prison industrial complex. Unfortunately, people derive a perverse sense of enjoyment from ruining people, particularly if doing so is socially rewarded and experienced as morally righteous. "You can enjoy your sadistic pleasure with a clean conscience if you truly believe that the victim had it coming."[25]

To make matters worse: questioning these tactics is perceived as "not caring" about abuse, assault, or harm; a betrayal of the community, apologia for "abusers," and a disregard for the needs of survivors. However, I'd argue that abusing an "abuser" is not a path to a safer, more

[22] *The Broken Teapot* Zine, Second Edition
[23] *I Hope We Choose Love* – Kai Cheng Thom
[24] *Against the Logic of the Guillotine* — Crimethinc
[25] *Canceling Comedians While the World Burns* – Ben Burgis

just world, it is a continuation of an abusive cycle. This is not a healthy response to any kind of harmful behavior, nor is it a meaningful way to stop harm in the future.

Cancelation is not accountability. When someone in our community commits an act of harm or abuse, and we react to that behavior with what is commonly referred to as "canceling", attempting to have them exiled, socially punished, or denied access to community, we are attempting to weed out violence in our circles, one "bad person" at a time. Public takedowns and call outs assume that massive structural problems (patriarchy, racism, addiction, etc.) are determined on an individual level. However, destroying an individual does not destroy the systems that are the root causes of abuse.

By engaging in public attacks, we engage in the same disposability politics of capitalism and prisons that we claim to resist, while feeding state surveillance tactics.[26]

Cancellation, particularly when it takes place on social media for all to see, can be dangerous and harmful for everyone involved. The way harm or abuse is exposed, discussed, and confronted, online creates public spectacles that invoke outrage and provide a way to *feel* as though one is on the "right side" of a grand moral narrative. Gruesome descriptions of abuse or campaigns to "expose creeps" activate people's personal experience with harm and establish an individual target for the endemic problem of sexual violence. The characters in these narratives generally fit easily into moral dichotomies, and the spectators or participants in the call out campaign are rarely encouraged to think critically about what may have occurred or look beyond punishment towards solutions.

People who've been harmed usually do not wish for their trauma to become the subject of public spectacle, and those accused of causing harm rarely have a chance to examine what they're being accused of reflect on their behavior before demands are being made by an angry online mob.[27] Regardless of the accuracy of accusations, they ultimately become blurred, mixed up, and compounded through the pervasive and distorting game of "telephone" that is social media. Opportunities for repair, healing, or growth get buried by demands for punishment, prioritized by the algorithm's bias for moral outrage.

Confronting harm requires the engagement and participation of people who truly care about survivors *and* the alleged harm-doers – people with real investment in the wellbeing of individuals in conflict and the community at large. Social media is the worst imaginable space for these conversations to take place. Individuals who have caused harm become a pariah, someone to blame for systemic phenomena – an outlet for collective rage. One person becomes a symbol within a community or online space for systematic injustice, even if it is not based in the reality of their actions.

Again, a consideration of power dynamics in each situation is important to bear in mind, and power is relative. We should hesitate to make a false equivalency between the harmful or abusive actions of socially powerful figures and the regular people who occupy our lives. Wealthy celebrities and politicians are capable of far graver exploitation than members of a local activist group, simply because they hold much more power.

Public perception has real psychological and social implications, as well as material consequences. Being labelled an "abuser" makes it difficult to maintain or establish the healthy relationships necessary for growth and healing. Cancellation can affect one's ability to secure housing or

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[26] *We Will Not Cancel Us* – adrienne maree brown
[27] Clementine Morgan

make an income. In certain circles, offering support to someone who is in desperate need of that support in order to come out of their harmful behavior can earn one the label of an "apologist." In this way, cancellation becomes contagious, it is a constant looming threat. When that threat is understood throughout the subculture, people who have behaved abusively feel unable to come to terms with their behavior, be transparent with their community, and address it directly.

Social ostracization is not accountability. Our goal should be to reduce abusive behavior, not just push it out of the sight of our social bubbles. When someone has been "canceled" or "called-out", they often lose friends, support networks, and are barred from community spaces and events. Of course, if someone in the community is an active threat, or is putting people in communal spaces in legitimate danger, their removal from that space is necessary. Likewise, if someone doesn't want to share space with the person who traumatized them, the impetus should fall on the person who caused harm to adjust their social expectations; this is an understandable consequence. However, we should ask ourselves, when facing these issues in the real world: does this person pose a legitimate threat to safety, or does being around them cause a discomfort rooted in social shame and fear of guilt by association? Is this person workin' on their shit, or still stuck in a cycle of abuse and actively hurting people?

Sometimes people refuse to take any semblance of accountability – they keep hurting people and are a real threat to people's safety. That happens, and we can't view these issues with rose tinted glasses. However, we also shouldn't assume the worst of people, generally speaking. Dehumanization begins when someone's status as a public threat is set in stone, when the possibility for their growth is denied, when their label as being unsafe follows them around, even after they've taken tangible steps towards changing their harmful behavior.

A social paradigm in which owning up to harm guarantees being cut off entirely from community and marked for life as a "bad person" provides no incentive for transparency. In this context, taking responsibility for harm is nothing but an existential threat. Public humiliation, a fear of showing face in a social setting, and a lack of personal support is not a formula for transforming behavior, but an invitation to disappear into depression, substance abuse, and self-hatred.

Consequences

While we should avoid dehumanizing people who have caused harm, we should also recognize that, for someone who has caused harm, facing consequences is not equivalent to punishment. Punishment, ostracization, and shame are not adequate ways to facilitate transformation, but there are certainly consequences to causing harm. Consequences are to be expected and are not synonymous with punishment. Harmful behavior can result in negative social outcomes; someone who has caused harm must accept this fact. People who have caused harm lose social standing and relationships as a result of their actions. Even if all the steps and goals towards accountability are met, the trust and respect of some members of the community might never be regained. Breaking ties with people in your life who have caused harm to you directly or within your community is contextual, personal, and nuanced.

Similarly, reminding people that they are expected to make the changes to their behavior and encouraging them to do so does not require punishment and humiliation. It's important to check people who have caused harm if they are straying from their commitments, or showing signs of slipping back into harmful behavior, as long their autonomy is respected and their humanity maintained. "A good friend is one who can question your behavior in a difficult time without ever

withdrawing their support for you."[28] Having the courage and capacity to own up to our worst behaviors requires friends showing up for us in meaningful ways, which included challenging us when we're falling out of line with our values and calling us on our bullshit if need be. This compassion or support does not mean making excuses, but

in this context, I think it means not letting someone make excuses, not letting them escape their responsibility and their history, and making sure they own up to the consequences that have come from the actions they've taken. It also means listening to them, sincerely, while doing this and seeking understanding. And I believe it means making sure that [people who have caused harm] do feel consequences for their actions, but not punishments.[29]

Consequences are part of change. However, consequences can *become* punishments, particularly when someone who may have caused harm in the past has made significant changes, worked towards taking responsibility, and is still excluded from community, denied their humanity, or assigned a label such as "abuser." For example, exclusion may be necessary if someone is an active threat under a particular substance. If that person sobers up, takes responsibility for their harm, and the exclusion continues based only on a tainted reputation, that consequence has turned into a punishment. Behaving abusively in the past, or within a certain context does not make someone an active threat to safety in every space all the time. We can oppose the harmful behavior of a person without erasing their personhood or denying them social lives and community.

It is worth emphasizing here: the psychological wellbeing, physical safety, and emotional security of a person who was harmed should be the top priority. Someone who has caused harm must accept the social ramifications of those actions and diligently respect the needs of the survivor. "Being supported and feeling safe are key to healing and rebuilding trust for the person who was hurt."[30] The person who has caused harm should be allowed to be honest if what is being asked of them doesn't feel realistic or beyond their capability but should also be willing to make sacrifices to make survivors feel safe, comfortable, and supported. These are justifiable consequences of harmful behavior, not needlessly cruel punishments or denial of personhood, and it is important not to confuse the two.

Accountability Processes

When acts of abuse or harm come to light, the idea of engaging in an "accountability process" is often presented as a potential alternative to cancelation or carceral punishment. People who are called out often experience a state of moral panic, shame, and guilt, as well as paranoia of wholesale abandonment by friends and community. Accountability processes can feel like an answer to these crises, a tangible way to make amends or reconcile, in so much as those are possible. Desperately searching for a path of redemption in the eyes of the community and their own perception of themselves, accountability processes can be appealing as an alternative model for community response to harm – a means by which one can take responsibility, accept support, and make steps towards transformation.

The people who participate in these processes — whether they are a person who caused harm, facilitators, mediators, or community members offering guidance in that process — are usually coming from a place of good intention, attempting to explore alternatives to the prison indus-

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[28] *The Broken Teapot* Zine, Second Edition
[29] *Accounting for Ourselves* – Crimthinc.
[30] *We Are All Survivors, We Are All Perpetrators* – Rolling Thunder

trial complex and apply transformative justice models to the conflicts in their world. These well-meaning participants invest considerable time, effort, and thoughtful, difficult work into exploring new ways for communities to deal with harm. Participation in an accountability process takes great faith in our community's capacity to engage in complexity, offering support to someone who has caused harm rather than simply erasing them from your world.

However, anyone who has been a part of these processes or witnessed them from afar probably has an experience that, for a variety of reasons, accountability processes rarely seem to "work." They tend to leave everyone feeling frustrated and disappointed, especially if they lack face-to-face communication, insist on strict timelines, and fail to articulate any achievable goals. There is a tendency for accountability processes to be flawed in their set up simply because the work of "accountability" has no tangible finish line to cross and can be so hard to define. As Joe Biel and Faith Harper write in their book *How to Be Accountable*, "every process we've seen was like a car that slowly ran out of gas on the side of a highway – it comes to a stop at some unhelpful point."[31] Honest attempts at accountability processes are not enough overcome a flawed structure, particularly when they becomes just another way to shame, humiliate, punish, or control a person who has caused harm.

We find ourselves so entrenched in carceral, punitive ideologies that our "alternative models" often end up reflecting the structures we set out to oppose. For all our talk about prison abolition and hating cops, we apply the logics of policing and carceral punishment all too easily. As challenging as it is to unlearn the violent and coercive social forces that perpetuate harmful behavior, the logics of policing, surveillance, and punishment are also deeply ingrained in our culture. Our collective response to harm must be "flexible enough and adaptive enough to account for the realities of abuse as well as things like weaponized accountability processes."[32]

Unlearning heavily ingrained patterns takes a lot of time. Growth and learning are not linear or instantaneous. No one can expect a person who has spent a lifetime inheriting particular ways of thinking and acting — consciously or unconsciously — to flip a switch and become a new person in the span of a year, much less overnight. These things should and do take time.

It is not anyone's fault when these processes seem to fall flat and leave participants frustrated and dissatisfied. We are only just beginning to understand how new models of confronting harm might work, experimenting, failing, and learning. Transformative justice models and non-punitive community support systems are relatively new ideas for most folks. There are very few established models and examples of "successful" accountability processes are rare. In fact, because of the nuanced and fluid nature of these processes, the rhetoric of "success" and "failure," isn't really appropriate. Accountability processes are bound to fail if this binary is imposed on them, especially if they are set up with vague boundaries, unrealistic expectations, and punitive orientations. When an accountability process "fails," the person who has caused harm is not only labeled as an abusive or "bad" person, but also someone who "failed their accountability process," leaving them feeling fundamentally flawed, with very low expectations of themselves and less support from the community than ever.

It is not that community intervention of harm or abuse is impossible or unworthy of our efforts, but the approach, expectation, and understanding of what an accountability process looks like cannot be an abstraction. It is essential to remain behaviorally specific, focus on realistic and

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[31] *How To Be Accountable* – Joe beil and Faith Harper
[32] *After Accountability* – Emi Kane & Hyejin Shim

manageable goals, and give things time. When the accountability processes we've been exposed to don't seem to "work," we lose faith in our capacity to address harm in a productive, healthy way, which inevitably leads us to falling back into the dominant ideological framework of punishment and carceral logics. This is not to say that accountability is impossible, and we should abandon any attempt at community responses to harm. To the contrary, it is highly important that we recognize these failures and highlight the current pitfalls of these processes so we might avoid them moving forward. We should continue to experiment with non-carceral transformative justice models, failing and learning, rather than throwing our hands in the air because the "accountability processes" we've seen seemed to have failed. As LV states,

Within radical spaces, accountability is fraught with its perceived failures. As a concept or discourse, it is also too generalized and unspecified to fully address the complexities of conflict. Conflict on the interpersonal and societal scale is complex and delicate. Accountability is like a sledgehammer of a term that doesn't always encapsulate the multiple nuances of conflict and its ramifications.[33]

LV continues this line of thinking, explaining that in the real world beyond rhetoric, the process of being accountable is a "social process of having conversations with a lot of different people and creating space for folks to come to their own understanding."[34] Sometimes community intervention is necessary. We have to remain dynamic, and when we encounter a situation in which harm was caused, is acknowledged by the person who caused harm, and that person has a genuine desire to take accountability, we should embrace that willingness and do our best to support that growth. "We are promoting accountability as a way to keep our communities whole, safe and healthy, rather than a way to punish, separate, and send away."[35] These alternatives rely on helping the person doing the harm to recognize, take responsibility for, and put an end to their harmful behavior without dehumanization or exile, but also without allowing for excuses or ignoring the problem entirely.

What is Accountability?

The use of the word Accountability can bring up a lot of different feelings for people based on personal experience. For some, it may represent an abolitionist alternative to carceral systems of domination and punishment. For others, it may be understood as a cooptation of "radical" language used in bad faith. We've discussed at length how the language of accountability is often misappropriated and how accountability processes can so often be unsatisfactory. But, when coming from a place of compassion, accountability can be a tool used for taking responsibility for harm we may have caused, committing to meaningful change, and healing the relationships we may have damaged.

Emi Kane & Hyejin Shim write that the term accountability

can mean different things depending on context and in some cases has been stripped of its meaning. When it comes to serious harm, abuse or violence, I think it means not just an apology but being able to meaningfully demonstrate through your actions a commitment to changing behavior that will ensure that it doesn't happen again. I think accountability also means considering

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[33] *After Accountability* – LV

[34] *After Accountability* – LV

[35] *Creative Interventions Toolkit* – Incite!

the impact of your choices on your community and yourself, and accepting the consequences of those choices.[36]

In their book *How to Be Accountable,* Joe Beil & Faith Harper put it as such:

Accountability is the ownership of your choices and behaviors and the impact they have on the world, regardless of your intent. Accountability is aligning your patterns of behavior to your values.[37]

Mia Mingus writes of accountability not as an event or destination,

> but as a skill we can build and practice. Accountability can be reimagined from something that was once scary to something we can long for, a practice of love and liberation, and to practice the kinds of people we want to be.[38]

According to *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement,* accountability might look like,

> stopping harmful behavior, naming harmful behavior, giving sincere apologies, stepping down from leadership roles, developing daily healing and reflection practices to address root causes of harmful behavior, building a support pod, providing material repair, contributing to community efforts to end intimate and sexual harm.[39]

Creative Interventions defines accountability as follows:

Accountability is the ability to recognize, end, and take responsibility for violence .... We promote a vision that is more positive, tied to responsibility, and change, but not to punishment and revenge, and can be driven by connection and care rather than fear and anger alone.[40]

If you assaulted someone or acted abusively, you need to take responsibility for that behavior. Be honest with yourself, recognize the harm that was caused, and express an understanding of how damaging that harm was. If you're afraid of being dehumanized or excommunicated, the impulse to be defensive is understandable. However, acknowledging that your actions affected someone negatively, maybe even traumatized them – even if that was not your intention – is part of making amends. I find Clementine Morgan's guidelines for making amends helpful.[41]

- Do internal work of self-reflection to understand root causes of harm

- Express sincere regret

- Show an understanding of how what you did was hurtful

- Ask if anything is missing in that understanding

- Explain repair actions you will take

- Explain how you're changing things moving forward

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[36] *After Accountability* – Emi Kane & Hyejin Shim
[37] *How To Be Accountable* – Joe beil and Faith Harper
[38] Mia Mingus
[39] *Beyond Survival* – AK Press
[40] *Creative Interventions Toolkit* – Incite!
[41] *Fuck the Police Means We Don't Act Like Cops to Each Other* – Clementine Morgan

A genuine apology requires a commitment to change. Dedication to changing harmful behavior comes from a place of dignity, a belief in your own capacity for growth, even if it is difficult. This is why shame is counter to accountability – it inhibits the self-respect necessary for change. Furthermore, transparency about harmful behavior breaks the silence around these issues and helps to normalize honest confrontation with harm. Taking responsibility for your own actions does not require humiliation, groveling for forgiveness, or tireless seeking of approval. Being honest does not doom you to excommunication. More and more, there are people in our scenes more willing to sit with the complexity of these issues with compassion, and without a hair trigger for punishment.

Taking responsibility won't look the same for everyone, but developing an understanding of where these behaviors come from and *why* is absolutely necessary for people who have caused harm. Using that point of initial exploration and self-reflection as a foundation, individuals can then attempt to make amends where possible for the harm they've caused. Therapy can be a helpful tool to facilitate the necessary internal work and reflection required for someone who has caused harm. With our broken healthcare system, though, good therapists are often difficult to find or unaffordable.

Alternative community-based support may also present itself. Particularly if substances were a factor in the harm caused, recovery programs such as AA, or more localized peer support groups that take a "harm reduction" approach can be profoundly helpful resources. "Men's work groups" have cropped up as intentional meetups focused on education about patriarchy and unlearning abusive behaviors while also providing a much needed space for honest vulnerability, emotional intimacy, and deep trusting relationships. These various groups offer a space for folks who "whether by community compulsion or self motivation, want to work on their shit."[42] However you seek it, serious self-reflection is required to transform behavior. Regardless of the particulars, engaging in a supportive space free from judgment to get feedback with a stable community of people who have gone through something similar builds trusted relationships from which we might create processes for accountability that are not frantic reactions to crisis, but established structures for thoughtful response or preemptive intervention.

Making mistakes is a guaranteed and necessary part of any learning process. In the context of accountability, mistakes should be expected and met with reaffirmation of the goals and adjustment towards them, rather than a dismissal of the person involved in the process, or the process itself. Efforts to confront harm must allow space for mistakes but encourage adjustments, must understand human complexity but establish strong boundaries, must be built upon faith in our community members who are showing their best efforts to genuinely change for the better.

A successful example of community accountability would have the person who was harmed feeling safe and properly cared for, the person who caused harm transforming their behavior substantially, and the community feeling better equipped to stop further harm from taking place in the future and with a stronger resolve and resiliency in broader struggle. "Accountability is a promise to commit ourselves to transforming and learning from each other to become better comrades."[43] These processes must be focused on the goals of intervention, not a hyper-fixated micromanagement of people's lives. Efforts for accountability should be communal invitations and exercises in understanding, respectful communication, and relating to each other with com-

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[42] *What About the Rapists?* – Dysophia
[43] *After Accountability* – Pinko Collective

passion – opportunities to build more resilient relationships. These processes must be able to shape themselves to the nuances and complexities of any given conflict. Continual progress towards growth and transformation, reflection, and understanding – this is what accountability looks like when made actionable and unrestricted by punitive models or rigid moral binaries.

Accountability is not some goal to be achieved, nor is it a constant state that can be objectively defined for all people. Accountability is a fluctuating needle on a spectrum of how much your values and behaviors align in any given moment or decision. These practices are ongoing and the process is never complete. After causing harm or behaving abusively, one cannot ever dust off their hands and say "I'm done, I'm accountable, everything is fine now." We must all live with the consequences of our actions – and the work of accountability lasts a lifetime. That doesn't mean we are defined by our worst acts, but that we attempt to live up to our values in the dynamic process that is our lives. We will never be perfect, but we can keep trying to grow. Let's allow ourselves some grace and patience as we learn and grow together.

The Big Picture

The people who cause harm are not monsters, they are people — flawed and complicated – just like the rest of us. In a complex world, judgement and punishment do not help us build resilient and healthy communities, but further separate us from our own humanity and from solidarity with our neighbors, friends, community members, and strangers alike. Productive responses to sexual assault require a willingness for difficult, uncomfortable, and challenging conversations as well as allowing for opportunities for people to take responsibility for harm they've caused without their social and material livelihood being threatened. Nobody will ever reach perfection, nobody will ever be able to undo what has already been done.

Intervention and confrontation with the abusive or harmful behavior of people in our lives should encourage a better understanding of that behavior and offer resources for change. People who have caused harm must establish tools for ensuring they will not fall out of line with their integrity in such a way again.

Engaging in conversation about, reading about, and thinking critically about patriarchy, capitalism, rape culture, mass incarceration, and social media can be beneficial.[2] A basic comprehension of how these systems and cycles of violence function can help to form a deeper understanding of the world and our place in it. A broader education on pervasive, systemic issues like domestic violence, sexual assault, or gender inequality can simultaneously help a person who has caused harm to recognize their own internal assumptions or biases, while ultimately providing them a greater cause to engage in beyond their own individual failings or flaws. This might be a long term goal, but it is worth striving for.

These social conditions are so intrinsically connected to how our society perpetuates, reacts to, avoids, normalizes, and attempts to confront harm. It is all tangled up and messy. Likewise, it is important that we recognize why people *react* to harm in the ways that they do, even if we find them unproductive, punitive, or cruel. Trauma is real – it is dysregulating and trigger the desire for cruelty and payback. We all feel disempowered and alienated by the capitalist hellscape we are subjected to. Subjected to those conditions, and deeply hurt by someone, reacting with a desire for punishment isn't hard to understand. Clementine Morgan writes,

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[2] See a list of reading materials in the back of this zine

As we move away from a culture of punishment and dehumanization towards a culture of compassion and empathy, we must not fall into the trap of punishing and dehumanizing people who are not practicing compassion and empathy. People do not transform through threats, coercion, demands, or domination. They transform when it is safe and empowering to do so.[44]

We can simultaneously hold empathy for survivors of harm, for those who cause harm, and for ourselves as we navigate the challenges of confronting harm – all of which are wrapped up in complex systems of social conditioning and personal experiences. "This empathy is at the root of the love and compassion that will begin to disrupt the systems that create harm."[45]

Abolitionist approaches to confronting abuse must undertake a radical analysis of power. Alternative models for addressing harm communally and taking responsibility for harm individually must sufficiently challenge the alienation we suffer under capitalist domination as well as the state sponsored violence of policing and prisons. We must identify and overcome the puritanical ideologies that are adopted from corrupted, outdated, and oppressive judicial and theological systems which rely on a fixed, formulaic morality. We must reject rules or laws based on coercion or violence, whether they are enforced by the state, or the social mobility of people in our communities. We must avoid the urge to essentialize and categorize people and instead speak to specific acts and specific situations, thinking, responding, and acting contextually. Kai Cheng Thom writes that,

We must be open to the notion that survivors of harm can also be perpetrators of harm. Survival is not a badge of purity, nor a shield from accountability. We must invest deeply and fervently in the dignity of human life. We must not give in to the urge to cause harm even in Justice's name. We must recognize, name, and transform the instinct to humiliate, harm, and coerce those we see as bad or as wrongdoers. No one is disposable.[46]

Let us be accountable to ourselves and the people we hold community with rather than partaking in moral performance for a faceless online audience or cohering to an ideological framework we deem the most virtuous. Let us reject the rigidity of any specific set of principles to be universally applied to all situations and accept that relationships are contextual, fluid, and always subject to change. Refusal to think critically about how we handle harm means we will continue to fall back onto the ideological frameworks of the prison industrial complex which are the norm in our society, empowering the logic and structural power of policing and incarceration. Abolition means deconstructing these logics in our interactions with the people in our lives.

The communities in which we work, live, organize, socialize, and express ourselves are "the site and stage of accountability. Community is the imagined basis and hoped for outcome of accountability."[47] While potentially empowering, this dependence on community might be the precise reason why attempts at accountability seem to be so flawed. The Pinko Collective, in their book *After Accountability* make the discomforting point that under capitalist social relations, the concept of community is illusory.

As we've established, accountability is a communal process, one that relies on and is dictated by interpersonal relationships. Safe, responsible, and caring communities are built on trust within personal interactions. Trust and safety are difficult to secure under violent, exploitative, and alienating social conditions. Pinko suggests community accountability processes "often fail

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[44] Clementine Morgan

[45] *Love and Rage* – Lama Rod Owens

[46] *I Hope We Choose Love* – Kai Cheng Thom

[47] *After Accountability* – Pinko Collective

because they necessarily depend on the existence of what people call the community."[48] The kinds of communities we have referred to in this text, that are so often illuded to in leftist discourse "rarely exist as imagined, in part due to the material structure of capitalist society."[49] Increasingly alienated by the social conditions of modern capitalism, real life embodied interaction with other people is troublingly fleeting. "Community," they argue, is unable to do what we require of it, in this context, because we are captured by market demands and capitalist logics, required to self-alienated in order to survive.

Community serves as an ideological fiction covering over the relentless harm of capitalist social relations in a cruel state of policies. … We seize upon a given group of friends, a snapshot of momentarily vibrant social world, and hope it can last … When deployed by liberals or elite class forces, the language of community can be a cruel deception that ultimately promotes the very forces which systematically render it impossible.[50]

Abolitionist models for confronting harm require a level of trust, investment, and commitment to community cohesion that is not only lacking in our subcultural scenes, but rare in our society at large. Communities are interdependent networks that bind people together, but "if it is easier to kick someone out than to go through a difficult series of conversations with them – that is not a community."[51] The social bonds which were once necessary for the survival of our species are greatly weakened in modernity, but the need for inclusion and belonging persists. For most of our species' history, exile meant certain death – so it makes sense that threats of public denunciation and social exile are destabilizing. People behave in all manner of destructive or unhealthy ways out of fear of being denied acceptance or belonging.

People in our scenes react to abusive behavior with immediate dehumanization because they are adhering to the subcultural norm, for fear of their own exclusion. There is an apparent contradiction between the supposed values we claim and how they are applied in our real life, because we harbor paranoia of being judged and shamed by some omnipresent observer. But we are the ones who create this air of paranoia — this fear of damnation — and we perpetuate this social tendency each time we refuse to engage in productive conflict or avoid the discomfort of pushing against a social expectation that we find problematic. The performativity of virtue signally, the jockeying for social status, and puritanical moral dichotomies debilitate our ability to embody abolitionist values and render our attempts to confront harmful behavior superficial. Just as the illusion of safety promised by "safe spaces" is a false one, these contradictions and flaws are often experienced as if the whole premise of our communities are built on deception and bullshit.

If we are to build and sustain communities which are capable of enduring capitalism's pervasive alienation, we must outwardly reject domination, cruelty, coercion, dehumanization, punishment, or supremacy of any kind. We must divorce ourselves from the models of supremacy, domination, and punishment that have structured this world in the pursuit of something better. How we handle harm, according to Peter Gelderloos, will be

either be the seeds of a new punitive system or the seeds of our liberation, the seeds of a community that would never turn to police or prisons. There is no manual for this process. Countless people have already tried writing one and nobody has succeeded. The more we try to codify the complexities of defending ourselves, healing ourselves, and holding ourselves accountable in the

[48] *After Accountability* – Pinko Collective
[49] *After Accountability* – Pinko Collective
[50] *After Accountability* – Pinko Collective
[51] *What About the Rapists?* – Dysophia

real world, the more we resemble the carceral justice system of the state. Formal mechanisms for conflict resolution that rely on rules or protocols don't help us because they rely on simple, stable categories that can't account for the messiness of real-life conflicts.[52]

We must stand in firm opposition to all dehumanization, to all concepts of supremacy. If we want to build a more dignified world, we must treat everyone with basic dignity, even those who cause harm, been abusive, or committed sexual assault. We cannot just take on the same old oppressive and degrading models for addressing harm and conflict handed down to us, make slight adjustments to our language and posturing, and expect real change to take place.

We have to find ways to confront harm and abuse without getting lost in procedure, seduced by vengeance, burnt out by conflict or demoralized by ineptitude. We need to foster human relationships in intimate networks where we can openly and honestly discuss ways we have caused harm without fear of being outcast. We need to take on conflict with mediation that is grounded in care, which allows for the exchange of authentic apologies rather than performances of shame. We must live in the reality of the moment while challenging the status quo of punitive logic and disposability. Creative Interventions states their mission aims to

gather together to create grounded, thoughtful community responses [which] build on our connections and caring rather than looking at solutions that rely only on separation, and disconnections from our communities. It invites us to involve even those who harm us as potential allies in stopping that harm and as active partners in deeply changing attitudes and behaviors towards a solution to violence. It expands the ideas of violence and its solutions from that between individuals to one that includes communities – both close and intimate communities and the broader communities in which we take part.[53]

If it is true that our only hope is within our relationships, if they form the communities which are the terrain of meaningful struggle, we cannot delete each other when our imperfect nature rears its head. Even outside of the realm of political struggle, the relationships we build with others are quite literally life's purpose, and meaningful communal relationships are a human need. We are social creatures that can only thrive in environments of support, care, and connection. The communal level is where we can begin to build models of the world we would like to see, where we cultivate and share resources, where we build capacity and fortitude. Strong communities of mutual obligation and reciprocal care are what weaken the potential for violence to take place to begin with. The resilience of these communities is only possible through thoughtful and productive conflict resolution that keeps firmly intact the basic needs and humanity of all people involved in that conflict. It is our collective responsibility to build this capacity, to handle harm productively without taking on the logics of our mutual oppressors. According to adrienne maree brown this will require we build movements not of perfectionist utopia behind barbed wire and tests and judgements and righteousness but a vast sanctuary where our experiences as humans who have experienced and caused harm are met with centered, grounded invitations to grow.[54]

We cannot control our past, so let us be defined by the choices we make today. We must unlearn deeply engrained patterns and carve new pathways while refusing to be defined by our worst acts. We need communities, friends, and comrades who won't give up on us, even when we fuck up, but also do not allow cycles of harm to continue unchecked. We need to orient around

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[52] *Organization, Continuity, Community* – Peter Gelderloos

[53] *Creative Interventions Toolkit* – Incite!

[54] *We Will Not Cancel Us* – adrienne maree brown

an ethical framework which "cares about people more than ideas, that prizes each and every one of us as essential and indispensable."[55] If we continue to exile, shame, punish, and cancel each other, soon there will be nothing left to fight for. In the face of the impending ecological, social, political collapses that appear inevitable, this is a bleak prospect indeed. While we cannot ignore or excuse harm, abuse or assault in the name of some rhetorical solidarity, we also cannot insist on purity character – we are people; flawed, chaotic, and capable of a multitude of thoughts, feelings, emotions, and behaviors. We need to be honest and vulnerable while holding compassion for ourselves and for one another. Peter Gelderloos writes that we must apply these ethics to "how we treat our comrades right now." He continues,

For our criticisms to be useful within a practice that is revolutionary, communitarian, anarchic, and loving, they cannot be a way to measure people and actions against some ideological standard. Our evaluations must be historical and affectionate, situating the person or action being criticized between the current context of oppression and the emancipatory horizon we are building. It has to be an attempt to take all of us together, the next step towards that horizon.[56]

There are no blueprints, no easy answers, no neat categories. What is required is patience, compassion, dynamism, critical analysis, and principled struggle grounded in ethical commitments against disposability and dehumanization. In legitimizing productive discussions around harm and ethical community responses to abuse we grow our capacity to build resilient communities capable of contributing to collective liberation.

Additional Resources & Reading

Supporting Survivors:

- *Support* – Cindy Crabb

- *Thoughts About Community Support Around Intimate Violence* (Zine)

- *Strategies for Survivors* – Philly Stands Up

Consent:

- *Learning Good Consent* (Zine)

- *Ask First* (Zine)

- *Let's Talk About Consent, Baby* (Zine)

- Radiolab "*In the No*" Series (Podcast)

Patriarchy & Gender Violence:

- *The Lie of Entitlement* – Terrance Crowley

- *Why Does He Do That?* - Lundy Bancroft

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[55] *I Hope We Choose Love* – Kai Cheng Thom
[56] *Organization, Continuity, Community* – Peter Gelderloos

- *Understanding Patriarchy* – bell hooks

Substances & Harm:

- *The Naked Mine* – Annie Grace

- *Towards a Less Fucked Up World* — Nick Riotfag

Accountability Processes:

- *Creative Interventions Toolkit* – Incite!

- *Toward Transformative Justice* — Generation Five

- *How to be Accountable* – Joe Beil & Faith Harper

Abolition:

- *Becoming Abolitionists* – Derecka Purnell

- Ruth Wilson Gilmore

- *Instead of Prisons* — Prison Research Education Action

- *Peacemaking Circles* — Kay Pranis

- *What is Transformative Justice?* – City Deer Distro

Supporting People Who Have Caused Harm:

- *Fucking Cancelled* (Podcast)

- *As If They Were Human: A Different Take on Perpetrator Accountability* (Zine)

- "Supporting Harm-Doers" & "Building Accountable Communities" (Video Series by Barnard Center for Research on Women)

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800-656-4673

National Crisis Lifeline: 988

Punch Up * Kick Down Distro
How We Handle Harm
Contextualizing Harmful Behavior Understanding Accountability & Exploring Community
Response to Interpersonal Violence
2025

punchupkickdowndistro.bandcamp.com/album/how-we-handle-harm>

theanarchistlibrary.org