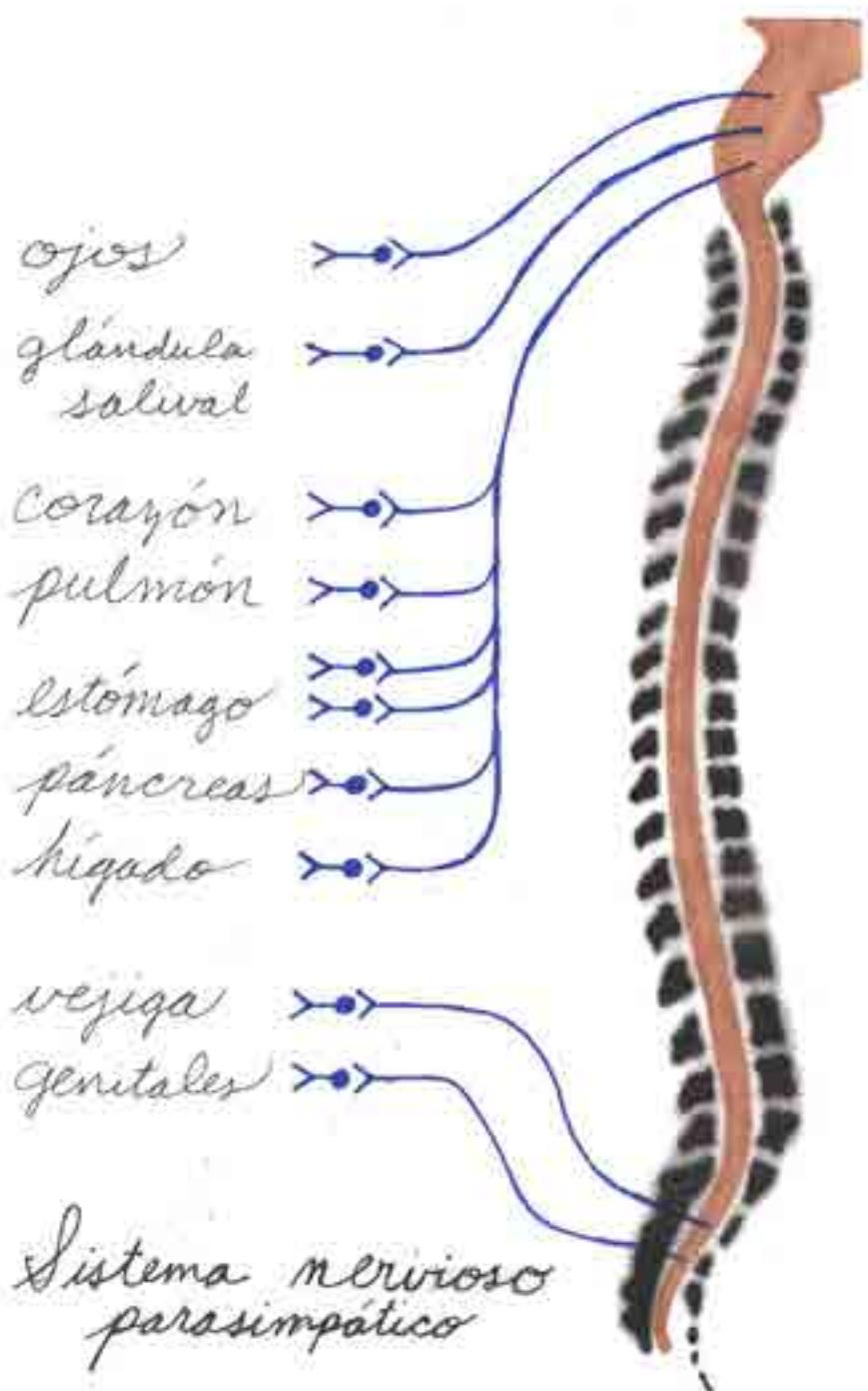




The Broken Teapot



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Second edition, Seattle, 2014

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The Broken Teapot

We all start life with our teapot intact and at some point a little crack starts and slowly grows, or maybe one day we slip and the whole thing just crashes to the floor. Those with intact teapots, they don't know what it's like to try and make tea with all the water leaking out. You can't do it.

The play of power that is accountability and how it currently (mal) functions in the anarchist 'community' has become a great fissure in my teapot. It's a big crack because I used to be very invested in it but it isn't working anymore. When tea is made now, because of this crack and, of course a few others, all that happens is that steam comes out and people get burned.

Ever notice the way that trauma can build up in your system gradually? You come to expect a certain amount of loss and you stop noticing how much it affects you until one day something really small makes you cry (you usually don't) and then you realize how toxic you have become. Then you really appreciate how grief accumulates. Everything feels like mourning, even things that usually make you happy.

The idea that we could somehow help each other through the pain of resistance, love and loss used to help me hold my shit together. Support was the counter balance to each instance of abuse, queer bashing, eviction, suicide, murder, and rape. If sometimes life hurt, if it hurt in ways that threatened to drive one to madness, at least there was the understanding and compassion of friends to get one through.

Lately, however, I have found that a funny thing has happened, at least with the anarchists. We've become afraid to hold one another up in a real honest way. The language of accountability has made support a weird community currency, more important in appearance than deed. It has become something which must be unquestioningly offered that functions in rigid and essentialist ways. There is an algorithm for support now and if you don't engage with the algorithm in the correct manner you find yourself out in the cold or, even worse, hunted.

Last year when I left my partner, they totally lost their shit, became obsessed, fixated and eventually began stalking me. I received some support from close friends and family, but the general anarchist community, usually vocal to a fault, said nothing. Some said nothing because they did not know the extent of the escalation and some said nothing out of fear, a desire to avoid conflict. I hold no malice towards any of those people. Others said nothing because I would not begin an accountability process. It is these people, who could not have known at the time how they were breaking me, that hurt me in ways that are hard to express.

I did not want an accountability process and all the exposure and tendrils that came with it. I wanted to be left alone. I would not identify myself as a victim because I was not solely ‘a victim’. Is anyone? In their saner moments neither was my ex solely ‘a perp’, in fact they considered themselves to be a victim of my manipulations and omissions. Somewhere far away from those flat unforgiving categories we might have found some gracious out but with the language available to us it was a mess. In order to pull support I was expected to mediate this Kafkaesque disjuncture by branding them an abuser. I would not do that because abuse dynamics aren’t so simple. I participated in a codependent relationship and at the end I lied like all hell to get out.

My ex started to use their need ‘to address our issues’ as a reason to continue to be in my life. When I would not give in to their demands, and understanding well how power works, they threatened to start an ‘accountability process’ against me. It was a bleak affirmation of my worst suspicions to watch them use these ‘community’ norms, so well-intentioned in their inception, in a manner befitting a very large stick. In the end wary, no doubt, of not winning a showdown at the larger ‘community’ level they never made good on that threat.

I had moved out of our collective house to get away but, not anticipating an escalation of hostilities, I made the tactical error of moving into a place alone. They started coming over unannounced. As their behavior became more and more erratic my fear of them grew. People expressed concern *for* me but no intervention was made *to* them. Consent culture precluded anyone telling my ex to leave me the fuck alone without some rubber stamp of approval. I needed someone else to say something totally independent of any request on my part because in ex’s head I deserved to be punished, no reasonable discussion or amount of screaming or pleading from me made any difference.

I left town. They found reasons to be in each subsequent city I traveled to. At some point the categories of abuse flipped in their head. This did not actually help much, they continued contacting me, this time in order to be ‘accountable’ to me. I told them to fuck off and to leave me alone. From when I left them to when they finally left me alone was about 6 months.

After the therapist at the walk-in clinic told me if I didn’t move far away without telling anyone, stop being a part of our shared radical ‘community’ and get a restraining order I was ‘participating in my own stalking’ I went to the park and cried long and hard in exhaustion and desperation. Eventually I pulled myself together and made a few phone calls to see who might be able to help. I begged a mutual friend to encourage my ex to leave me alone. They basically told me ‘without an accountability process, they didn’t feel comfortable intervening’. I wanted out of our terrible relationship not to be pressured into continuing it in the name of ‘healing’. The tears I shed then were angry and bitter.

This is but one vignette in a thousand of the ways these processes have failed us. If not getting support unless you agree to the ‘correct’ process is one failure, then being unfairly damned and righteously condemned is another. I have seen people pulled into these processes through gray area miscommunications of consent. There have been people falsely accused, a verbal yes in the moment became a retroactive no later. We have hurt and branded people through our practicing of unquestioning belief and our sloppy use of really broad categories.

I have witnessed these processes become tribunals which continue codependency and become about revenge. It is hard to say if this is intentional or not but as they say, ‘the road to hell is paved with good intentions’. I know that these processes were born out of trauma, hope and all the best of our desires for solidarity and healing. I know that to be true, but it’s not working out that way. We wanted to free ourselves from patriarchy except we just created a new kind of ‘justice’, and it is damning us! It is making us act more and more like our enemies. Through much soul searching, I have concluded that I was wrong to believe in, participate in and perpetuate accountability processes. This anthology is part of my amends.

Since this break point I have started to try and challenge them, but even at a theoretical level, this gets falsely categorized as ‘blaming the victim’. To question ‘accountability’ is to question the sex positive culture of consent we have all worked so hard to create. When did these things get so tangled together? There is a ‘can’t win for losing’ mentality to these discussions. If you don’t believe anymore, you don’t care about violence, assault or abuse. To question is to betray.

Instead of embracing honest conflict we hide our true feelings under so many layers of mental gymnastics and double speak. If these algorithms also feel wrong to you, trust those feelings and say something! We are all so afraid to speak our minds least we be judged to be on the wrong side of the ‘fucked up’ ‘not fucked up’ dichotomy. Adjudication requires such stark differentiation. There is always a price when you are asked to sit in judgment, be sure you are willing to pay it. It usually comes later in the form of futile prayers that no one will ever discover or prosecute your own faults. Regardless of what others feel, I know the jury is already in.

I know myself to sometimes be ‘fucked up’. It’s taken a long long time but I am finally comfortable with my contradictions and the slow progress to be made in changing them. I want friends and lovers who are also comfortable with those disjunctions. I do not want comrades who either pretend such imperfections don’t exist or condemn me for them.

What we do now is back people up against an ideological brick wall in an attempt to control them. In comparison beatings look straight forward—even merciful. At least those end and can be healed from on a physiological time frame. The message they provide is clear! That kind of hate is transparent and sometimes appropriate and necessary.

Perhaps that kind of violence makes you wary, that's good! Embrace those small nagging feelings of doubt. Wielding power should always make one a little disquieted. After reading and considering these essays, I hope accountability processes will make you feel at least as uncomfortable. I regret now that we've spent the last few years feeling so damn sure of ourselves.

I offer this anthology up to you out of deep pain, not hope for something better. I don't have anything better. This isn't about offering an alternative model. If any words here are taken out of context and somehow become a new orthodoxy we will have failed. This is about pointing out some of the more egregious missteps we have made and encouraging people to think and act contextually.

In parting I offer up only one concrete plea. Stop using the algorithm. It is hurting us. The teapot may be nothing but jagged pieces, but we don't *have* to slit our wrists with them.

in love, despair, anger and contradiction.
Anonymous

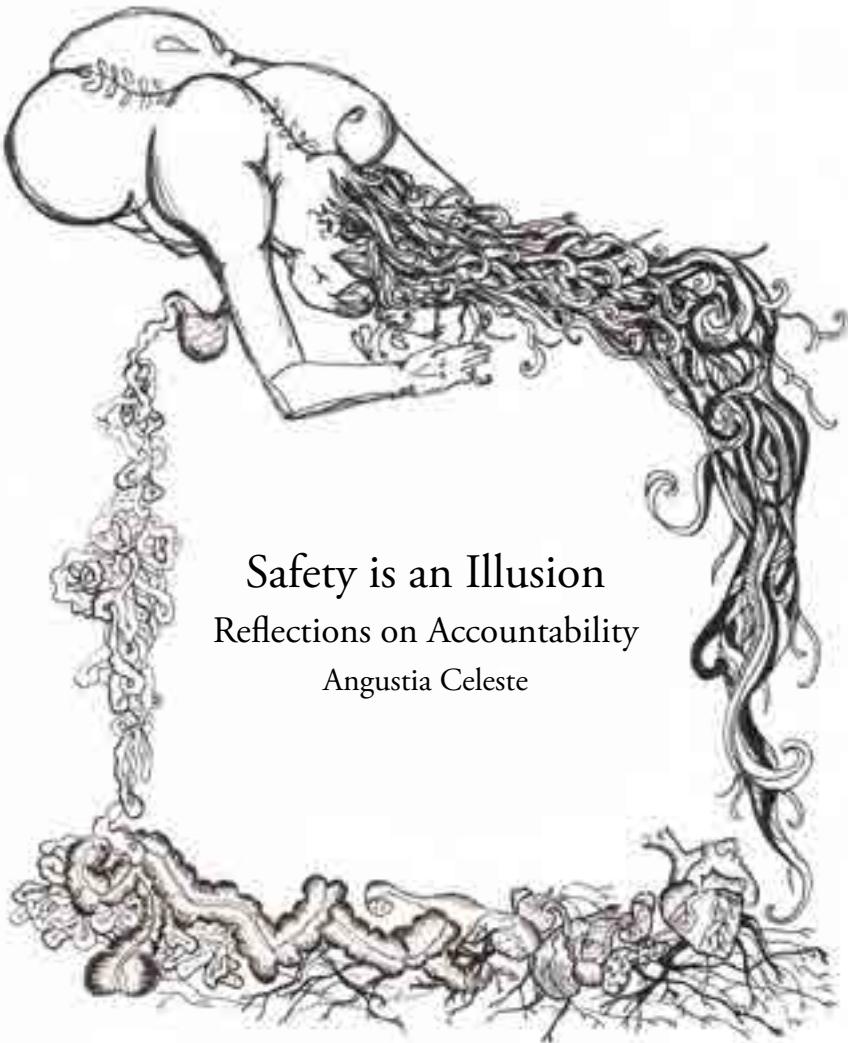
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Please forgive any repetition herein. It seemed more important to present pieces in long form and allow each author space to fully express their points than to edit for redundancy.

To those who contributed it is no small act of bravery to speak so bluntly against stacked ideological odds. This kind of discourse and debate is well past due. Thanks for being a catalyst.

To all of my friends who didn't shrink from conflict, understood the contradictions and supported me anyway... you've helped keep me sane during a long period of darkness. I love you.

(Spring 2012)



Safety is an Illusion
Reflections on Accountability
Angustia Celeste

I was asked by a dear friend to write this piece about accountability within radical communities—offer some insight in light of the years we've spent fighting against rape culture. Except I don't believe in accountability anymore. It should be noted that my anger and hopelessness about the current model is proportional to how invested I've been in the past. Accountability feels like a bitter ex-lover to me. The past 10 years I really tried to make the relationship work but you know what?

There is no such thing as accountability within radical communities because there is no such thing as community—not when it comes to sexual assault and abuse. Take an honest survey sometime and you will find that we don't agree. There is no consensus. Community in this context is a mythical, frequently invoked and much misused term. I don't want to be invested in it anymore.

I think it's time to abandon these false linguistic games we play and go back to the old model. I miss the days when it was considered reasonable to simply kick the living shit out of people and put them on the next train out of town—at least that exchange was clear and honest. I have spent too much time with both survivors and perpetrators drowning in a deluge of words that didn't lead to healing or even fucking catharsis.

I am sick of the language of accountability being used to create mutually exclusive categories of 'fucked up' and 'wronged.' I find the language of 'survivor' and 'perp' offensive because it does not lay bare all the ways in which abuse is a dynamic between parties. (Though I will use those terms here because it's the common tender we have.)

Anarchists are not immune to dynamics of abuse, that much we can all agree on, but I have come to realize more and more that we cannot keep each other safe. Teaching models of mutual working consent is a good start, but it will never be enough; socialization of gender, monogamy—the lies of exclusivity and the appeal of 'love' as propriety are too strong. People seek out these levels of intensity when the love affair is new, when that obsessive intimacy feels good and then don't know how to negotiate soured affection.

That's the thing about patriarchy it's fucking pervasive and that's the thing about being an anarchist, or trying to live free, fierce and without apology—none of it keeps you safe from violence. There is no space we can create in a world as damaged as the one we live in which is absent from violence. That we even think it is possible says more about our privilege than anything else. Our only autonomy lies in how we negotiate and use power and violence ourselves.

I really want to emphasize: there is no such thing as safe space under patriarchy or capitalism in light of all the sexist, hetero-normative, racist, classist (etc) domination that we live under. The more we try and pretend safety can exist at a community level the more disappointed and betrayed our friends

and lovers will be when they experience violence and do not get supported. Right now we've been talking a good game but the results are not adding up.

There are a lot of problems with the current model—the very different experiences of sexual assault and relationship abuse get lumped together. Accountability processes encourage triangulation instead of direct communication—and because conflict is not pushed, most honest communication is avoided. Direct confrontation is good! Avoiding it doesn't allow for new understandings, cathartic release or the eventual forgiveness that person to person exchanges can lead to.

We have set up a model where all parties are encouraged to simply negotiate how they never have to see each other again or share space. Some impossible demands/promises are meted out and in the name of confidentiality lines are drawn in the sand on the basis of generalities. Deal with your shit but you can't talk about the specifics of what went down and you can't talk to each other. The current model actually creates more silence—only a specialized few are offered information about what happened but everyone is still expected to pass judgment. There is little transparency in these processes.

In an understandable attempt to not trigger or cause more pain we talk ourselves in increasingly abstracted circles while a moment or dynamic between two people gets crystallized and doesn't change or progress. "Perps" become the sum total of their worst moments. "Survivors" craft an identity around experiences of violence that frequently keeps them stuck in that emotional moment. The careful nonviolent communication of accountability doesn't lead to healing. I've seen these processes divide a lot of scenes but I haven't seen them help people get support, retake power or feel safe again.

Rape breaks you—the loss of bodily control, how those feelings of impotence revisit you, how it robs you of any illusion of safety or sanity. We need models that help people take power back and we need to call the retribution, control, and banishing of the current model for what it is—revenge. Revenge is OK but let's not pretend it's not about power! If shaming and retaliatory violence is what we have to work with then let's be real about it. Let's choose those tools if we can honestly say that is what we want to do. In the midst of this war we need to get better at being in conflict.

Abuse and rape are inevitable consequences of the sick society we are forced to live under. We need to eviscerate and destroy it, but in the meantime, we can't hide from it—or the ways it affects our most personal relationships. I know in my own life an important process in my struggle for liberation was making my peace with the worst consequences of my personal assault on patriarchy. Dealing with being raped was an important part of understanding what it meant to choose to be at war with this society.

Rape has always been used as this tool of control—proffered up as a threat of what would happen if I, in my queerness and gendered ambiguity, continued to live, work, dress, travel, love or resist the way that I chose to. Those warnings held no water for me—in my heart I knew it was only a matter of time, no matter *what* kind of life I chose to live, because my socially prescribed gender put me at constant risk for violation. I was raped at work and it took me a while to really name that assault as rape. After it happened mostly what I felt, once the pain, rage and anger subsided was relief. Relief that *it* had finally happened. I had been waiting my whole life for it to happen, had had a few close calls and finally I knew what it felt like and I knew I could get through it.

I needed that bad trick. I needed a concrete reason for the hunted feelings that stemmed from my friend's rape, murder and mutilation a few years back. I needed to have someone hurt me and realize I had both the desire to kill them and the personal control to keep myself from doing it. I needed to reach out for support and be disappointed. Because that's how it goes down—ask the survivors you know most people don't come out of it feeling supported. We've raised expectations but the real life experience is still shit.

I was traveling abroad when it happened. The only person I told called the police against my wishes. They searched the “crime” scene without my consent and took DNA evidence because I didn't dispose of it. Knowing that, in a moment of vulnerability, I had allowed myself to be pressured and coerced into participating in the police process against my political will made me feel even worse than being violated had. I left town shortly thereafter so I didn't have to continue to be pressured by my ‘friend’ into cooperating with the police any more than I already had. The only way I felt any semi-balance of control during that period was by taking retribution against my rapist into my own hands.

I realized that I also could wield threats, anger and implied violence as a weapon. After my first experience of ‘support’ I chose to do that alone. I could think of no one in that moment to ask for help but it was okay because I realized I could do it myself. In most other places I think I could have asked some of my friends to help me. The culture of nonviolence does not totally permeate *all* of the communities I exist in. The lack of affinity I felt was a result of being transient to that city but I don't think my experience of being offered mediation instead of confrontation is particularly unique.

In the case of sexual assault I think retaliatory violence is appropriate, and I don't think there needs to be any kind of consensus about it. Pushing models that promise to mediate instead of allow confrontation is isolating and alienating. I didn't want mediation through legal channels or any other. I wanted revenge. I wanted to make him feel as out of control, scared and vulnerable as he had made me feel. There is no safety really after a sexual assault, but there can be consequences.

We can't provide survivors safe space—safe space, in a general sense, outside of close friendships, some family and the occasional affinity just doesn't exist. Our current models of accountability suffer from an over-abundance of hope. Fuck the false promises of safe space—we will never get everyone on the same page about this. Let's cop to how hard healing is and how delusional any expectation for a radical change of behavior is in the case of assault. We need to differentiate between physical assault and emotional abuse—throwing them together under the general rubric interpersonal violence doesn't help.

Cyclical patterns of abuse don't just disappear. This shit is really really deep—many abusers were abused and many abused become abusers. The past few years I have watched with horror as the language of accountability became an easy front for a new generation of emotional manipulators. It's been used to perfect a new kind of predatory maverick—the one schooled in the language of sensitivity—using the illusion of accountability as community currency.

So where does real safety come from? How can we measure it? Safety comes from trust, and trust is personal. It can't be mediated or rubber stamped at a community level. My 'safe' lover might be your secret abuser and my caustic codependent ex might be your healthy, tried and true confidant. Rape culture is not easily undone, but it *is* contextual.

People in relation to *each other* create healthy or unhealthy exchanges. There is no absolute for 'fucked up', 'healed' or 'safe'—it changes with time, life circumstance, and each new love affair. It is with feelings of unease that I have observed the slippery slope of 'emotional' abuse become a common reason to initiate an accountability process.

Here is the problem with using this model for emotional abuse; it's an unhealthy dynamic between two people. So who gets to call it? Who gets to wield that power in the community? (And let's all be honest, there is power in calling someone to an accountability process.) People in unhealthy relationships need a way to get out of them without it getting turned into a community judgment against whomever was unlucky enough to not realize a bad dynamic or call it abuse first. These processes frequently exacerbate mutually unhealthy power plays between hurt parties. People are encouraged to pick sides and yet no direct conflict brings these kinds of entanglements to any kind of resolution.

Using accountability models developed all those years ago to deal with serial rapists in the radical scene has not done much to help people get out of the sand pit of damaging and codependent relationships. Emotional abuse is a fucking vague and hard to define term. It means different things to every person.

If someone hurts you and you want to hurt them back—then do it but don't pretend it's about *mutual* healing. Call power exchange for what it is. It's OK to want power back and it's OK to take it but never do anything to

someone else that you couldn't stomach having someone do to you if the tables were turned.

Those inclined to use physical brutality to gain power need to be taught a lesson in a language they will understand. The language of physical violence. Those mired in unhealthy relationships need help examining a mutual dynamic and getting out of it—not assigning blame. No one can decide who deserves compassion and who doesn't except the people directly involved.

There is no way to destroy rape culture through non-violent communication because there is no way to destroy rape culture without destroying society. In the meantime let's stop expecting the best or the worst from people.

...

I am sick of accountability and its lack of transparency.

I am sick of triangulating.

I am sick of hiding power exchange.

I am sick of hope.

I have been raped.

I have been an unfair manipulator of power in some of my intimate relationships.

I have had sexual exchanges that were a learning curve for better consent.

I have the potential in me to be both survivor and perp—abused and abuser—as we all do.

...

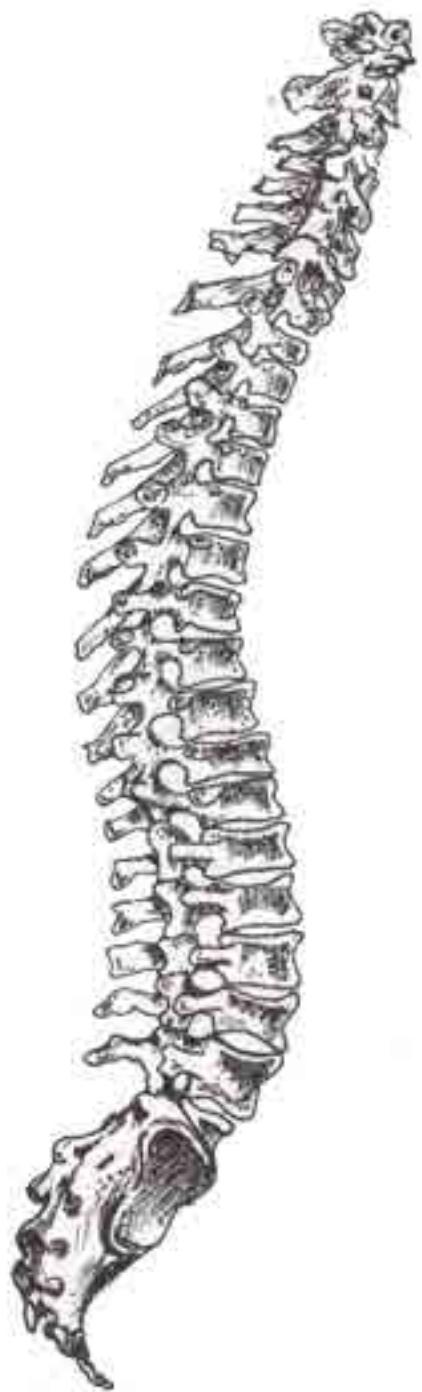
These essentialist categories don't serve us. People rape—very few people are rapists in every sexual exchange. People abuse *one another*—this abuse is often mutual and cyclical—cycles are hard but not impossible to amend. These behaviors change contextually. Therefore there is no such thing as safe space.

I want us to be honest about being at war—with ourselves, with our lovers and with our ‘radical’ community because we are at war with the world at large and those tendrils of domination exist within us and they affect so much of what we touch, who we love and those we hurt. But we are not only the pain we cause others or the violence inflicted upon us.

We need more direct communication and when that doesn't help we need direct engagement in all its horrible messy glory. As long as we make ourselves vulnerable to others we will never be safe in the total sense of the word.

...

*There is only affinity and trust kept.
There is only trust broken and confrontation.
The war isn't going to end anytime soon
Let's be better at being in conflict.*



Love You Too Much¹

Alex Gorron

*Hope the rising black smoke carries me far
away and I never come back to this town.*

The gnostic priests of Capital, who wish to see in everything only their imperfect, evil God, can nail down the torrential force of romantic love within their flat cosmology by referring it to the nuclear family, which exists only to reproduce labor power, and thus will disappoint the desires that justify it; or they can claim, and not without evidence, that love has been commoditized, and the consumption of a commodity extinguishes its value and produces, again, disappointment. But they are as inadequate as their nemeses, the priests of the Market, who assure that every ill will be worked out by an Invisible Hand. Capitalism's effect on the emotions is nearly always dulling. The anticlimax of Christmas, that most condensed gifting and extinguishing of commodities, does not lead to bloodbaths, but to boredom. The violence born of love does not climax in the formation of the family, as it would if its cause were the inability of a labor-power factory to satisfy human emotion, but accompanies it every step of the way. To understand the wrath that hides behind the mask of that most tender sentiment, we need to seek out older, more jealous gods.

Perhaps it is the way pop music conditions our expectations that kept me from realizing, at first, that Eminem's "Love the Way You Lie" (featuring Rihanna) is not a macho glorification of domestic violence but rather one of the few honest love songs to ever top the charts.

It's an easy song to hate or to fear, because it protagonizes someone who beats his partner, and climaxes with the following lines:

*Next time I'm pissed
I'll aim my fist
At the dry wall
Next time
There will be no next time
I apologize*

1. Ed note: This piece has been slightly revised since it was first published in *The Anvil* on December 5th 2010. One paragraph was removed. <http://theanvilreview.org/music/love-you-too-much/>

*Even though I know it's lies
I'm tired of the games
I just want her back
I know I'm a liar
If she ever tries to fucking leave again
I'mma tie her to the bed
And set the house on fire*

Rihanna, singing the chorus, responds periodically with:

*Just gonna stand there
And watch me burn
But that's alright
Because I like
The way it hurts
Just gonna stand there
And hear me cry
But that's alright
Because I love
The way you lie
I love the way you lie*

The song follows a moral compass that unequivocably signals domestic violence as wrong. But it also presents such violence as an inevitable tragedy, reproduced by the beater as much as by the person beaten. The song itself explains their love as an irrational, overpowering addiction.

*I can't tell you what it really is
I can only tell you what it feels like
And right now there's a steel knife
In my windpipe
I can't breathe
But I still fight
While I can fight
As long as the wrong feels right
It's like I'm in flight
High off a love
Drunk from the hate
It's like I'm huffing paint
And I love it the more that I suffer
I suffocate
And right before I'm about to drown*

*She resuscitates me
She fucking hates me
And I love it
Wait
Where you going
I'm leaving you
No you ain't
Come back
We're running right back
Here we go again
It's so insane*

I can't remember if it was the comparison to addiction or if it was the line "I love you too much" that forced me to recognize that this song had more validity than my fears wanted me to admit. It's a commonplace that songs on the radio pine "I can't live without you," "I never want to leave your side," and other statements of absolute codependency that decorate the elaborate myth of romantic love—in which two people complete each other in a static and unending congruity. How many of these songs are honest enough to mention the abuse that logically accompanies this kind of love?

...

It was the look in his eyes as he beat her. As though his dearest illusion had shattered, and he had snapped with it. She wasn't his, she never had been, and she never would be. Up until now, she had chosen to accompany him, and after today, clearly, she would not. "Whatever happened to 'Until death do us part?'" he muttered confusedly, on one of the few occasions he ever talked about it with me. He didn't understand the kind of love that changed, the kind that was contingent on choice.

I continued to love them both, not with the proprietary love of a husband or a mother, but with the love of a child who wants everyone to be okay. By loving them I learned a number of things. I learned that she was strong; that we may not get to choose if we get beaten, but we can choose whether we become victims, or whether we walk out. She never hated him, either, but unlike Rihanna's character in the Eminem song, her sympathy was not a weakness, not a resignation to being abused. I also learned from her that "abuser" and "survivor" are flexible categories, that one is very likely to become the other, and therefore neither of these can define someone. Someone who has been hurt very often wants to hurt others, or to turn them into protective appendages. The patriarchy I grew up in never taught me that my gender entitled me to abuse without being abused. What I was taught is that you gotta pay your dues.

And what I learned from him is that his story was also important. He was not evil, but hurt. What happened in that cold family he never talked about? He was clearly scarred. Now I was too. I was sure that I would be much better than him. I wasn't entirely correct. The story that's never spoken is sure to be repeated. Hate it, fear it, ban it from the radio. It's going to come back around.

...

A singleminded critique of capitalism cannot possibly explain the vehemence of love, and must neglect love's central role in perpetuating the harm we do to ourselves. Love is something more than desire and its misplaced satisfaction in commodity form. But the traditional understanding of patriarchy, as a hierarchical system with men dominating women, is also inadequate, because love is also something different than hierarchy. Love does not end in the domination of the other but in the mutual destruction of self and other. Its most uncensored expression is the murder-suicide.

...

N was starting to lose it. S became the object of his obsessions. They had been comrades and lovers. Once it got undeniably unhealthy, she ended it. But he couldn't walk away. He became unhinged, but she refused to call the police, because she cared about him, and hated the state. The rest of us couldn't provide the support they both needed, neither the friendship that would have given him the strength to heal, nor the accompaniment that would have saved her. I lived in a different town: that was my excuse.

One night he killed her, walked up the hill to watch her house burn down, opened his wrists, and spilled his guts out on the ground in front of him.

I understood those who hated him for it. But I couldn't find it in myself. He already hated himself enough, and that was the part that finally triumphed.

In our society, love is the perfect mask for self-hatred. I don't believe that self-hatred is a product of capitalism, but an inevitable companion to the anguish of living. However, work, politics, colonialism, deforestation, and the patriarchal family give us many more reasons to hate ourselves. And they deprive us of means to heal ourselves. Strength is collective property. No one is alone. The illusion of individuality, where it succeeds, leaves us constantly bleeding. All the nodes on our body that connected us with the world—my hand that gripped yours, my lips that kissed his, my feet that held up the earth, my lungs that traded secrets with the leaves in the trees, my belly that was a furnace transmuting one living thing into another—become open wounds.

By promising us one intimate relation with another being, they in fact take away all those other relations, and they produce a silence that exiles us

into one another, often destroying the affection of the couple by demanding the world of it. When the opium must also be food and water and shelter, the user destroys, ultimately, her love affair with the opium as well.

...

Patriarchy doesn't reproduce itself as a hierarchy, but as a network. What will be most hard to accept, and most easily dismissed as a dangerously sexist idea, is that it is a fully participatory enterprise.

The tendency of some feminists today to reject the fact of participatory patriarchy only shows how deeply they have internalized a capitalist and statist worldview. Believing that we all have agency does not mean we believe in the American dream, that anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and that any misfortune that someone suffers is ultimately their fault. S was one of the strongest people I knew. She died first and foremost because N gave her no choice in the matter, and secondly because we, her friends, could not give her the support she needed to defend herself and we could not give N the critical support he needed to heal. S's agency resides in how she chose to deal with the situation, decisions that were brave and principled, even though everything ended so horribly. It shouldn't have to be said: we live in a shit world and things often end, no matter what we do, in the worst possible way. This doesn't change our agency in these situations. Perhaps ninety-nine times, we may try to avoid tragedy and fail. The difference is, if we refuse to be victims, the way S was a fighter and not a victim, the hundredth time things might just turn out better.

The point is, within circles dedicated to fighting patriarchy- i.e. most anarchist and feminist circles- we need to get over our politically correct fear of blaming victims. If we are consistent in our political views then we do not believe in blame, nor do we feel affinity with victims.² We must focus on agency and on the potential for underdogs and disempowered people to

2 It should be noted that the substitution of "survivor" for "victim" does not entail any actual critique of victimhood, or how victimhood embodies a patriarchal and legalistic role. Those who wish to end patriarchy should feel no affinity with the victim-mentality. It is important to distinguish a political critique of victimhood from a lack of support for victims. It is understandable that we sometimes fall back on victimhood, a socially recognized powerlessness, because it is one of the only identifiable ways to access support, and taking a different route requires more intention and energy than most people can muster during a vulnerable period in their lives. We should have compassion for the people who, lacking other clear options, fall into the role of victim while acknowledging that it is time to create alternative narratives.

change their situations. I feel it is essential to stress: it's the only way out of this mess.

Some patriarchal societies have practically imprisoned women. Others, such as ours, offer mobility. What contradicts the theory of a hierarchical patriarchy is that whether or not a society offers this mobility, most people still don't walk out. Regardless of whether a woman would get stoned for leaving her husband, or whether she'd be able to get a job and an apartment, the abusive relationships don't end. Because they are not predicated on enforcement. The content of the gender roles differ wildly from one patriarchy to the next, and although a duality and some kind of privileging of the male half are features common to all of them, the means of enforcement, and even the availability of centralized coercion to enforce these roles, are inconsistent. The universal feature that could guarantee the reproduction of these roles with or without enforcement is their complementality.

*You're the same as me
But when it comes to love
You're just as blinded*

Patriarchy would either have aborted capitalism or been abolished by it long ago if its functioning required that any power or autonomy remain in the hands of its male half. Capitalism can brook no independence. No radical feminist can deny this. Yet a misunderstanding of privilege has done everyone a disservice, by painting women as too weak to break out of this system if they actually wanted to, and men as the monsters who keep the whole thing going. Privilege means, among other things, that male perspectives and experiences are the default, but this could only be possible within an oppressive system if it were impossible for men to live within their own prescribed experiences. In other words, male perspectives are the default, but they do not belong to or serve the interests of those categorized as male.

And this is exactly how it works. As an oppressive network system that supplements structurally enforced hierarchies (such as capitalism and the State), patriarchy functions like an addiction, by fostering dependency, casting incomplete parts to seek completion in an impossible way, and in so doing to articulate a web of mutual theft or destruction of value. It is, if you will, a scarcity machine, in which people keep the treadmills running by stealing from those closest to them to fill their own holes, like four people in a bed with a blanket big enough for two. Love is this machine's dynamo. Its violence arises when people can't live without exactly what is destroying them, when one thinks he is completing another and actually he is filling up his hole by eviscerating the other.

You ever love somebody so much

You can barely breathe

When you're with them

...

I told her from the beginning that I didn't think monogamy was healthy in a romantic relationship, at least for me. She considered this an unhealthy, selfish attitude. Consequently, she was always right, or at least excused, when she looked through my address book, read my old love letters, searched the files on my computer, screamed at me, in order to discover my infidelities. And when she broke the rules she herself had laid down, it was only an error caused by the stress of loving a selfish bastard. Our own imperfections are always easy to understand.

How long it took me to discover that healthy love is only possible when we take responsibility for our own emotions—expropriate them from these networks of codependency, as it were. And in fact I can be most grateful to the lovers who treated me like shit, for teaching me this. They took good care of themselves. Beyond that: "If we meet, it's marvelous. If not, that's alright." I could either choose to take care of myself, and not demand anything of others but what they gave as a gift, or I could choose to be a victim. I chose the former, and our love existed where we coincided. When we stopped coinciding, we went our separate ways, each stronger and wiser.

We love in order to destroy ourselves, and build ourselves back up again, a heartbroken friend tells me in a moment of hope.

...

Once the affair is over, we're free, until the end of our days, to think about the person we loved, to care about them, to wish them well, to wonder what part of ourselves must be broken that it turned out this way, to malign the nature of our love that it became a weapon against our lover; where it should have completed, it only hurt and controlled, and we will never be able to make it right, nor reconcile the sincerity of the concern we feel for that person with the damage we caused in the intensity of our passion. Perhaps the best way to go on loving them is to love the next person better.

...

Both the idea of romantic love and many of the radical responses to its inevitable abuses are implicitly predicated on the idea of human fragility.

Love runs perpetually from a fear of loneliness, but only by embracing this loneliness and—not conquering it; it will never be conquered—make our

peace with it, can we love not as a parasite but as one creating a joyous project among companions. Accountability, meanwhile, often unknowingly fosters moral and judicial frameworks of blame. In this paradigm, pointing out that patriarchy is participatory will be interpreted not as the first step towards a strategy of liberation, but as blaming the victim.

This defensiveness is perfectly understandable, given how judicial processes impose themselves on us, and in these processes the person with less social privilege usually takes the blame for whatever disorder has interrupted the illusion of social peace.

But if what we are setting up is not a courthouse but a commune, a conspiracy among friends, the embodiment of our dreams, we have to permit ourselves to talk about things that could never be said in a society in which “everything you say will be used against you.”

One of these unmentionables is that sometimes we choose to be abused. Sometimes it feels good. Sometimes we “like the way it hurts.”

As we move from a world of imposed desires and addictive relationships to one in which relationships express our paradoxical agency and independence as subjects of the world and interlaced hubs in a network of mutual aid, play can be as important a tool as destruction.

Patriarchy is a game that solidified and forgot its own rules. Queer theory and some of the libertarian psychologists who preceded it have taught us that suppressing what troubles us only perpetuates it. By playing with power dynamics, playing with pain, even playing with torture, we make them our own, and we can make them harmless to us.

We are not so fragile that by having our partner tie us up and having her whip us or choke us with a dildo we lose something to her, we become dominated.

A consensual scenario is a world apart from an abusive relationship, but the hidden connection between the two, and the one thing that would allow us to move from the latter to the former, is that in both situations we have agency, whether we recognize it or not, and that our own desires may well be contradictory and frightening.

Compare the Eminem song to “Kiss with a Fist” by Florence and the Machine. Though the singer croons that “A kiss with a fist is better than none,” and, just like Eminem, promises to set her lover’s bed on fire, only a dogmatic second-waver could claim “Kiss With a Fist” is a fucked up song that apologizes for abuse or victimization.

*I broke your jaw once before
I spread your blood upon the floor
you broke my leg in return*



Questioning Rape

Anonymous

Coming to Terms

How do you begin to say, “I think we’ve been going about this all wrong”? How do you get out of a dead-end without going in reverse?

It seems like in the last fifteen years, rape has gone from being an issue that was only talked about by feminists and downplayed in other radical communities, to one of the most commonly addressed forms of oppression. Part of this change might be owed to the hard work of feminist and queer activists, another part to the spread of anarchism, with its heavy emphasis on both class and gender politics, and another part to the antiglobalization movement, which brought together many previously separated single issues.

Despite all the changes in fifteen years, it’s just as common to hear the sentiment that rape is still tacitly permitted in radical communities or that the issues of gender and patriarchy are minimized, even though in most activist or anarchist conferences and distros I know about, rape culture and patriarchy have been among the most talked about topics, and it wasn’t just talk. In the communities I have been a part of there have been cases of accused rapists or abusers being kicked out and survivors being supported, along with plenty of feminist activities, events, and actions.

I used to know a lot more people who were dismissive of feminism or the idea that we all needed to take rape culture seriously. Now I can’t think of any activist who would say so openly, and few who are dismissive implicitly, through their actions.

All the same, every year I meet more people who have stories of communities torn apart by accusations of rape or abuse, both by the shock and trauma of the original harm, and then by the way people have responded and positioned themselves. One option is to blame a passive majority that toe the line, giving lip service to the new politically correct doctrine, without living up to their ideals. In some cases, I think that is exactly what happened. But even when there is full community support, it still often goes wrong.

After years of thinking about this problem, learning about other people’s experiences, and witnessing accountability processes from the margins and from the center, I strongly believe that the model we have for understanding and responding to rape is deeply flawed. For a long time I have heard criticisms of this model, but on the one hand I never found a detailed explanation of these criticisms and on the other I was trained to assume that anyone criticizing

the model was an apologist for rape, going on the defensive because their own patriarchal attitudes were being called out. After personally meeting a number of critical people who were themselves longtime feminists *and* survivors, I started to seriously question my assumptions.

Since then, I have come to the conclusion that the way we understand and deal with rape is all wrong, and it often causes more harm than good. But many of the features of the current model were sensible responses to a Left that simply didn't give a damn about rape and patriarchy. Maybe the biggest fault of the model, and the activists who developed it, is that even though they rejected the more obvious patriarchal attitudes of the traditional Left, they unconsciously included a mentality of puritanism and law and order that patriarchal society trains us in. I don't want to go back to a complicit silence on these issues. For that reason, I want to balance every criticism I make of the current model with a suggestion for a better way to understand and deal with rape.

My Experience

When I was in a mutually abusive relationship, one in which both of us were doing things we should not have done, without being directly aware of it, that resulted in causing serious psychological harm to the other person, I learned some interesting things about the label of "survivor." It represents a power that is at odds with the process of healing. If I was called out for abuse, I became a morally contemptible person. But if I were also a survivor, I suddenly deserved sympathy and support. None of this depended on the facts of the situation, on how we actually hurt each other. In fact, no one else knew the details, and even the two of us could not agree on them. The only thing that mattered was to make an accusation. And as the activist model quickly taught us, it was not enough to say, "You hurt me." We had to name a specific crime. "Abuse." "Assault." "Rape." A name from a very specific list of names that enjoy a special power. Not unlike a criminal code.

I did not want to create an excuse for how I hurt someone I loved. I wanted to understand how I was able to hurt that person without being aware of it at the time. But I had to turn my pain and my anger with the other person into accusations according to a specific language, or I would become a pariah and undergo a much greater harm than the self-destruction of this one relationship. The fact that I come from an abusive family could also win me additional points. Everyone, even those who do not admit it, know that within this system having suffered abuse in your past grants you a sort of legitimacy, even an excuse for harming someone else. But I don't want an excuse. I want

to get better, and I want to live without perpetuating patriarchy. I sure as hell don't want to talk about painful stories from my past with people who are not unconditionally sympathetic towards me, as the only way to win their sympathy and become a human in their eyes.

As for the other person, I don't know what was going on in their head, but I do know that they were able to deny ever harming me, violating my consent, violating my autonomy, and lying to me, by making the accusation of abuse. The label of "survivor" protected them from accountability. It also enabled them to make demands of me, all of which I met, even though some of those demands were harmful to me and other people. Because I had not chosen to make my accusation publicly, I had much less power to protect myself in this situation.

And as for the so-called community, those who were good friends supported me. Some of them questioned me and made sure I was going through a process of self-criticism. Those who were not friends or who held grudges against me tried to exclude me, including one person who had previously been called out for abuse. In other words, the accusation of abuse was used as an opportunity for power plays within our so-called community.

For all its claims about giving importance to feelings, the activist model is coded with a total apathy. The only way to get the ball of community accountability rolling is to accuse someone of committing a specific crime.

The role of our most trusted friends in questioning our responses, our impulses, and even our own experiences is invaluable. This form of questioning is in fact one of the most precious things that friendship offers. No one is infallible and we can only learn and grow by being questioned. A good friend is one who can question your behavior in a difficult time without ever withdrawing their support for you. The idea that "the survivor is always right" creates individualistic expectations for the healing process. A survivor as much as a perpetrator needs to be in charge of their own healing process, but those who support them cannot be muted and expected to help them fulfill their every wish. This is obvious in the case of someone who has harmed someone else; it should also be clear in the case of someone who has been harmed. We need each other to heal. But the others in a healing process cannot be muted bodies. They must be communicative and critical bodies.

Perp/Survivor

The term "perpetrator" should set off alarm bells right away. The current model uses not only the vocabulary but also the grammar of the criminal justice system, which is a patriarchal institution through and through. This makes

perfect sense: law and order is one of the most deeply rooted elements of the American psyche, and more immediately, many feminist activists have one foot in radical communities and another foot in the NGOs. The lack of a critique of these NGOs only makes it more certain that they will train us in institutional modes of thinking.

The current method is not only repulsive for its puritanism and its similarity to the Christian notions of the elect and the damned; it is also a contradiction of queer, feminist, and anarchist understandings of patriarchy. If everyone or most people are capable of causing harm, being abusive, or even of raping someone (according to the activist definition which can include not recognizing lack of consent, unlike the traditional definition which focuses on violent rape), then it makes no sense to morally stigmatize those people as though they were especially bad or dangerous. The point we are trying to make is not that the relatively few people who are called out for abuse or even for rape are especially evil, but that the entire culture supports such power dynamics, to the extent that these forms of harm are common. 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 or police officer, we now have the community.

The term “survivor,” on the other hand, continues to recreate the victimization of the standard term, “victim,” that it was designed to replace. One reason for calling someone a “survivor” is to focus on their process of overcoming the rape, even though it defines them perpetually in relation to it. The other reason is to spread awareness of how many thousands of people, predominantly women, queer, and trans people, are injured or killed every year by patriarchal violence. This is an important point to make. However, given the way that rape has been redefined in activist circles, and the extension of the term “survivor” to people who suffer any form of abuse, the vast majority of things that constitute rape or abuse do not have the slightest possibility of ending someone’s life. This term blurs very different forms of violence.

Judging Harm

Hopefully, the reader is thinking that an action does not need to be potentially lethal to constitute a very real form of harm. I absolutely agree. But if that’s the case, why do we need to make it sound like it does in order to take it seriously? Why connect all forms of harm to life-threatening harm instead of communicating that all forms of harm are serious?

As for these crimes, their definitions have changed considerably, but they still remain categories of criminality that must meet the requirements of a certain definition to justify a certain punishment. The activist model has been most radical by removing the figure of the judge and allowing the person harmed to judge for themselves. However, the judge role has not been abolished, simply transferred to the survivor, and secondarily to the people who manage the accountability process. The act of judging still takes place, because we are still dealing with punishment for a crime, even if it is never called that.

The patriarchal definition of rape has been abandoned in favor of a new understanding that defines rape as sex without consent, with whole workshops and pamphlets dedicated to the question of consent. Consent must be affirmative rather than the absence of a negative, it is canceled by intoxication, intimidation, or persistence, it should be verbal and explicit between people who don't know each other as well, and it can be withdrawn at any time. The experience of a survivor can never be questioned, or to put it another way, an accusation of rape is always true. A similar formulation that sums up this definition is, "assault is when I feel assaulted."

This new definition is a response to the patriarchal definition, which excuses the most common forms of rape (rape by acquaintances, rape of someone unable to give consent, rape in which someone does not clearly say "no"). It is a response to a patriarchal culture that was always making excuses for rape or blaming the victim.

The old definition and the old culture are abhorrent. But the new definition and the practice around it do not work. We need to change these without going back to the patriarchal norm. In fact, we haven't fully left the patriarchal norm behind us. Saying "assault is when I feel assaulted" means one thing if we are transitioning to a wholly new ethics, in which the important thing is dealing with the "feeling" of harm. This is a subjective ethics, giving priority to people's emotions and personal needs. But when "assault is when I feel assaulted" is only a new way to determine when the crime of assault has been committed, keeping the focus on the transgression of the assaulter, then we still have the mentality of the criminal justice system, but without the concept of justice or balance.

Distinguishing Rape and Abuse

I don't want to distinguish rape from other forms of harm without talking about how to address all instances of harm appropriately. One solution that does not require us to judge which form of harm is more important, but also

does not pretend they are all the same, would have two parts. The first part is to finally acknowledge the importance of feelings, by taking action when someone says, “I have been hurt,” and not waiting until someone makes an accusation of a specific crime, such as abuse or rape. Because we are responding to the fact of harm and not the violation of an unwritten law, we do not need to look for someone to blame. The important thing is that someone is hurting, and they need support. Only if they discover that they cannot get better unless they go through some form of mediation with the other person or unless they gain space and distance from them, does that other person need to be brought into it. The other person does not need to be stigmatized, and the power plays involved in the labels of perpetrator and survivor are avoided.

The second part changes the emphasis from defining violations of consent to focusing on how to prevent them from happening again. Every act of harm can be looked at with the following question in mind: “What would have been necessary to prevent this from happening.” This question needs to be asked by the person who was harmed, by their social circle, and if possible by the person who caused the harm.

The social circle is most likely to be able to answer this question when the harm relates to longterm relationships or shared social spaces. They might realize that if they had been more attentive or better prepared, they would have seen the signs of an abusive relationship, expressed their concern, and offered help. Or they might realize that, in a concert hall they commonly use, there are a number of things they can all do to make it clear that groping and harassing is not acceptable. But in some situations they can only offer help after the fact. They cannot be in every bedroom or on every dark street to prevent forms of gender violence or intimate violence that happen there.

In the case of the person who caused the harm, the biggest factor is whether they are emotionally present to ask themselves this question. If they can ask, “what could I have done to not have hurt this person,” they have taken the most important step to identifying their own patriarchal conditioning, and to healing from unresolved past trauma if that’s an issue. If they are emotionally present to the harm they have caused, they deserve support. Those closest to the person they hurt may rightfully be angry and not want anything to do with them, but there should be other people willing to play this role. The person they have hurt deserves distance, if they want it, but except in extreme cases it does no good to stigmatize or expel them in a permanent way.

If they can ask themselves this question honestly, and especially if their peers can question them in this process, they may discover that they have done nothing wrong, or that they could not have known their actions would have been harmful. Sometimes, relationships simply hurt, and it is not necessary to find someone to blame, though this is often the tendency, justified or not.

The fact that some relationships are extremely hurtful but also totally innocent is another reason why it is dangerous to lump all forms of harm together, presupposing them all to be the result of an act of abuse for which someone is responsible.

If their friends are both critical and sympathetic, they are most likely to be able to recognize when they did something wrong, and together with their friends, they are the ones in the best position to know how to change their behavior so they don't cause similar harm in the future. If their friends have good contact with the person who was hurt (or that person's friends), they are more likely to take the situation seriously and not let the person who caused the harm off the hook with a band-aid solution.

At the other extreme, there are people who act inexcusably and are totally unable to admit it. Simply put, if someone hurts another person and they are not emotionally present in the aftermath, simply put, it is impossible to take their feelings into consideration. You can't save someone who doesn't want help. In such a case, the person hurt and their social circle need to do what is best for themselves, both to heal and to protect themselves from a person they have no guarantee will treat them well in the future. Maybe they will decide to shame that person, frighten them, beat them up, or kick them out town. Although kicking them out of town brings the greatest peace of mind, it should be thought of as a last resort, because it passes off the problem on the next community where the expelled person goes. Because it is a relatively easy measure, it is also easy to use disproportionately. Rather than finding a solution that avoids future conflict, it is better to seek a conflictive solution. This also forces people to face the consequences of their own righteous anger, which can be a learning process.

Finally, the most important question comes from the person who was hurt. The victimistic mentality of our culture, along with the expectation that everyone is out to blame the victim, make it politically incorrect to insist the person who has been hurt ask themselves, "What would have made it possible to avoid this?" but such an attitude is necessary to overcoming the victim mentality and feeling empowered again. It is helpful for everyone who lives in a patriarchal world where we will probably encounter more people who try to harm us. It's not about blaming ourselves for what happened, but about getting stronger and more able to defend ourselves in the future.

I know that some zealous defenders of the present model will make the accusation that I am blaming the victim, so I want to say this again: it's about preventing future rapes and abuse, not blaming ourselves if we have been raped or abused. The current model basically suggests that people play the role of victims and wait for society or the community to save them. Many of us think this is bullshit. Talking with friends of mine who have been raped, and looking

back at my own history of being abused, I know that we grew stronger in certain ways, and this is because we took responsibility for our own health and safety.

In some cases, the person who was hurt will find that if they had recognized certain patterns of dependence or jealousy, if they had had more self-esteem, or if they had asserted themselves, they could have avoided being harmed. Unless they insist on retaining a puritan morality, this is not to say that it was their fault. It is a simple recognition of how they need to grow in order to be safer and stronger in a dangerous world. This method focuses not on blame, but on making things better.

The Most Extreme Form of Harm

Sometimes, however, the person will come to the honest conclusion, “there was nothing I could have done (except staying home/having a gun/having a bodyguard).” This answer marks the most extreme form of harm. Someone has suffered a form of violence that they could not have avoided because of the lengths the aggressor went to in order to override their will. Even shouting “no!” would not have been enough. It is a form of harm that cannot be prevented at an individual level and therefore it will continue to be reproduced until there is a profound social revolution, if that ever happens.

If we have to define rape, it seems more consistent with a radical analysis of patriarchy to define rape as sex against someone’s will. Because will is what we want taken into the realm of action, this idea of rape does not make the potential victim dependent on the good behavior of the potential rapist. It is our own responsibility to express our will. Focusing on expressing and enacting our will directly strengthens ourselves as individuals and our struggles against rape and all other forms of domination.

If rape is all sex without affirmative consent, then it is the potential rapist, and not the potential victim, who retains power over the sexual encounter. They have the responsibility to make sure the other person gives consent. If it is the sole responsibility of one person to receive consent from another person, then we are saying that person is more powerful than the other, without proposing how to change those power dynamics.

Additionally, if a rape can happen accidentally, simply because this responsible person, the one expected to play the part of the perfect gentleman, is inattentive, or insensitive, or drunk, or oblivious to things like body language that can negate verbal consent, or from another culture with a different body language, then we’re not necessarily dealing with a generalized relationship of social power, because not everyone who rapes under this definition believes they have a right to the other person’s body.

Rape needs to be understood as a very specific form of harm. We can't encourage the naïve ideal of a harm-free world. People will always hurt each other, and it is impossible to learn how not to hurt others without also making mistakes. As far as harm goes, we need to be more understanding than judgmental.

But we can and must encourage the ideal of a world without rape, because rape is the result of a patriarchal society teaching its members that men and other more powerful people have a right to the bodies of women and other less powerful people. Without this social idea, there is no rape. What's more, rape culture, understood in this way, lies at least partially at the heart of slavery, property, and work, at the roots of State, capitalism, and authority.

This is a dividing line between one kind of violence and all the other forms of abuse. It's not to say that the other forms of harm are less serious or less important. It is a recognition that the other forms of harm can be dealt with using less extreme measures. A person or group of people who would leave someone no escape can only be dealt with through exclusion and violence. Then it becomes a matter of pure self-defense. In all the other cases, there is a possibility for mutual growth and healing.

Questioning Rape

Sympathetic or supportive questioning can play a key role in responses to abuse. If we accept rape as a more extreme form of violence that the person could not have reasonably avoided, they need the unquestioning support and love of their friends.

We need to educate ourselves how systematically patriarchy has silenced those who talk about being raped through suspicion, disbelief, or counter-accusations. But we also need to be aware that there have been a small number of cases in which accusations of rape have not been true. No liberating practice should ever require us to surrender our own critical judgment and demand that we follow a course of action we are not allowed to question.

Being falsely accused of rape or being accused in a non-transparent way is a heavily traumatizing experience. It is a far less common occurrence than valid accusations of rape that the accused person denies, but we should never have to opt for one kind of harm in order to avoid another.

If it is true that rapists exist in our circles, it is also true that pathological liars exist in our circles. There has been at least one city where such a person made a rape accusation to discredit another activist. People who care about fighting patriarchy will not suspect someone of being a pathological liar every time they are unsure about a rape accusation. If you are close to someone for

long enough, you will inevitably find out if they are a fundamentally dishonest person (or if they are like the rest of us, sometimes truthful, sometimes less so). Therefore, someone's close acquaintances, if they care about the struggle against rape culture, will never accuse them of lying if they say they've been raped. But often accusations spread by rumors and reach people who do not personally know the accuser and the accused. The culture of anonymous communication through rumors and the internet often create a harmful situation in which it is impossible to talk about accountability or about the truth of what happened in a distant situation.

Anarchists and other activists also have many enemies who have proven themselves capable of atrocities in the course of repression. A fake rape accusation is nothing to them. A police infiltrator in Canada used the story of being a survivor of an abusive relationship to avoid questions about her past and win the trust of anarchists she would later set up for prison sentences¹. Elsewhere, a member of an authoritarian socialist group made an accusation against several rival anarchists, one of whom, it turned out, was not even in town on the night in question.

Some false accusations of rape are totally innocent. Sometimes a person begins to relive a previous traumatic experience while in a physically intimate space with another person, and it is not always easy or possible to distinguish between the one experience and the other. A person can begin to relive a rape while they are having consensual sex. It is definitely not the one person's fault for having a normal reaction to trauma, but it is also not necessarily the other person's fault that the trauma was triggered.

A mutual and dynamic definition of consent as active communication instead of passive negation would help reduce triggers being mislabeled as rape. If potential triggers are discussed before the sexual exchange and the responsibility for communicating needs and desires around disassociation is in the hands of the person who disassociates then consent is part of an active healthy sexual practice instead of just being an imperfect safety net.

If someone checks out during sex, and they know they check out during sex, it is their responsibility to explain what that looks like and what they would like the other person to do when it happens. We live in a society where many people are assaulted, raped or have traumatic experiences at some point in their lives. Triggers are different for everyone. The expectation that ones partner should always be attuned enough to know when one is disassociating, within a societal context that does not teach us about the effects of rape, much less their intimate emotive and psychological consequences—is unrealistic.

1. <http://anarchistnews.org/node/19486>,
<http://www.crimethinc.com/blog/2011/11/24/g20-conspiracy-case-the-inside-story/>

Consent is empowering as an active tool, it should not be approached as a static obligation. Still, the fact remains that not all rape accusation can be categorized as miscommunication, some are in fact malicious.

There is a difficult contradiction between the fact that patriarchy covers up rape, and the fact that there will be some false, unjustified, or even malicious rape accusations in activist communities. The best option is not to go with statistical probability and treat every accusation as valid, because a false accusation can tear apart an entire community make people apathetic or skeptical towards future accountability processes. It is far better to educate ourselves, to be aware of the prevalence of rape, to recognize common patterns of abusive behavior, to learn how to respond in a sensitive and supportive way, and also to recognize that there are some exceptions to the rules, and many more situations that are complex and defy definition.

Solutions

The typical proposal for responding to rape, the community accountability process, is based on a transparent lie. There are no activist communities, only the desire for communities, or the convenient fiction of communities. A community is a material web that binds people together, for better and for worse, in interdependence. If its members move away every couple years because the next place seems cooler, it is not a community. If it is easier to kick someone out than to go through a difficult series of conversations with them, it is not a community. Among the societies that had real communities, exile was the most extreme sanction possible, tantamount to killing them. On many levels, losing the community and all the relationships it involved was the same as dying. Let's not kid ourselves: we don't have communities.

In many accountability processes, the so-called community has done as much harm, or acted as selfishly, as the perpetrator. Giving such a fictitious, self-interested group the power and authority of judge, jury, and executioner is a recipe for disaster.

What we have are groups of friends and circles of acquaintances. We should not expect to be able to deal with rape or abuse in a way that does not generate conflict between or among these different groups and circles. There will probably be no consensus, but we should not think of conflict as a bad thing.

Every rape is different, every person is different, and every situation will require a different solution. By trying to come up with a constant mechanism for dealing with rape, we are thinking like the criminal justice system. It is better to admit that we have no catch-all answer to such a difficult problem.

We only have our own desire to make things better, aided by the knowledge we share. The point is not to build up a structure that becomes perfect and unquestionable, but to build up experience that allows us to remain flexible but effective.

Conclusion

The many failings in the current model have burned out one generation after another in just a few short years, setting the stage for the next generation of zealous activists to take their ideals to the extreme, denouncing anyone who questions them as apologists, and unaware how many times this same dynamic has played out before because the very model functions to expel the unorthodox, making it impossible to learn from mistakes.

One such mistake has been the reproduction of a concept similar to the penal sentence of the criminal justice system. If the people in charge of the accountability process decide that someone must be expelled, or forced to go to counseling, or whatever else, everyone in the so-called community is forced to recognize that decision. Those who are not accused of supporting rape culture. A judge has a police force to back up his decisions. The accountability process has to use accusations and emotional blackmail.

But the entire premise that everyone has to agree on the resolution is flawed. The two or more people directly involved in the problem may likely have different needs, even if they are both sincerely focused on their own healing. The friends of the person who has been hurt might be disgusted, and they might decide to beat the other person up. Other people in the broader social circle might feel a critical sympathy with the person who hurt someone else, and decide to support them. Both of these impulses are correct. Getting beaten up as a result of your actions, and receiving support, simply demonstrate the complex reactions we generate. This is the real world, and facing its complexity can help us heal.

The impulse of the activist model is to expel the perpetrator, or to force them to go through a specific process. Either of these paths rest on the assumption that the community mechanism holds absolute right, and they both require that everyone complies with the decision and recognize its legitimacy. This is authoritarianism. This is the criminal justice system, recreated. This is patriarchy, still alive in our hearts.

What we need is a new set of compass points, and no new models. We need to identify and overcome the mentalities of puritanism and law and order. We need to recognize the complexity of individuals and of interpersonal

relationships. To avoid a formulaic morality, we need to avoid the formula of labels and mass categories. Rather than speaking of rapists, perpetrators, and survivors, we need to talk about specific acts and specific limitations, recognizing that everyone changes, and that most people are capable of hurting and being hurt, and also of growing, healing, and learning how to not hurt people, or not be victimized, in the future. We also need to make the critical distinction between the forms of harm that can be avoided as we get smarter and stronger, and the kinds that require a collective self-defense.

The suggestions I have made offer no easy answers, and no perfect categories. They demand flexibility, compassion, intelligence, bravery, and patience. How could we expect to confront patriarchy with anything less?

Half a dozen lessons I might never learn, not until them troubles come around...¹

Anonymous
-Spring 2014

First off, this zine was meant to be descriptive not prescriptive, although I own the suggestions I've laid out and continue to hold to them. The hope was that the zine would encourage contextual, thoughtful and critical responses to rape and abuse. It should be possible within anarchist circles to have critical reflection about the use of essentialist categories without being accused of being a rape apologist. We are all holding on so tight to these labels and I think it is apparent that they are not working for us.

The zine was meant to parse out what wasn't working about our ever-expanding definition of rape and assault. It was an attempt to call the innate judicial reasoning behind accountability processes into question. It was meant as a critique of innocence and guilt, not an attack on people who identify as survivors.

When we rely on appeals to innocence, we foreclose a form of resistance that is outside the limits of law, and instead ally ourselves with the State ... When people identify with their victimization, we need to critically consider whether it is being used as a tactical maneuver to construct themselves as innocent and exert power without being questioned. That does not mean delegitimizing the claims made by survivors—but rather, rejecting the framework of innocence, examining each situation closely, and being conscientious of the multiple power struggles at play in different conflicts.²

Giving voice to the “multiple power struggles” at play is an uncomfortable process. Many people have offered feedback that they did not like the zine because it perpetuates the myth that abuse is a dynamic between two people and that feels like blaming the victim. It was never my intention to downplay the pain of abuse. I do, however, think that abuse is participatory and that it is useful to understand it as such in order to heal. My criticism of an essentialist

1 Gillian Welch. “Only One and Only.” *Revival*, Alamo Sounds, 1996.

2 Wang, Jackie. “Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety.” *LIES: A Journal of Materialist Feminism* Volume 1, 2012, pg 162.

understanding of victim or survivor is twofold: first, not everyone uses those categories with honesty or transparency, and second, even when they do, I am not sure that these identities really help you heal.

Personally, I don't find it helpful to think of myself as a victim or survivor. I realize that the identity of survivor was meant to address the focus on passivity that occurs with the term victim, but in practice I think the two terms are not always well delineated and the same associations and assumptions often accrue. These identities make me the subject, the passive receiver, of another's violence or abuse. In that reading of the situation, the power to end the cycle lies firmly with the active party, the "abuser." That is a balance of power that I am uncomfortable with. In order to not feel completely helpless it has been necessary for me to honestly reflect on the parts that I played in unhealthy dynamics and violent situations because those are the things that I have the ability to change.

I started writing about accountability because I was grappling with why I felt so angry that I was supposed to identify myself as the right kind of victim in order to get support. It made me angry because I did not want to continue to be defined in relation to someone who had taken so much from me. I could not continue that relationship, in order to put myself back together I needed to cut all ties. I also could not wait for the person who harmed me to redress their ways before I began to heal. It wasn't realistic. I would have waited forever.

Think of what your body does when you cut yourself. Along with blood clotting and the immune response, your body builds a network of collagen to isolate the wound site. This allows white blood cells to clean up the area without spreading the infection. Continuing to define yourself by the pain that others have caused you creates dehiscence and keeps the wound open.

Accountability is so tied up in adjudication and external affirmations, or condemnations, that it can be very hard to modulate and process shifting feelings as you go through different stages of healing. Being someone's rape victim or survivor of abuse is not emotionally healthy. Every time a scar starts to form some part of the community process requires you to reference back to the initial pain as if it were new, and the scab gets ripped off. This can lead to chronic inflammation that can go systemic and eventually poison other relationships in your life.

Community processes that offer support based on victimization lend themselves to focusing and fixating on painful experiences. I have been raped. I was in an abusive relationship, and when I left I was stalked. Those experiences disrupted my life for a long time. I did not deserve to be treated that way, but I was not a passive participant. Being honest about participatory abuse is not

the same as self-recrimination, and analyzing unhealthy dynamics is not a form of self-blame—it's a form of self-reflection.

I have a hard time understanding why people are so offended at the idea that abuse is participatory because it was the epiphany that I was also responsible for my terrible caustic relationship that allowed me to leave. I stayed in a damaging relationship for so much longer than I should have, even after I realized it was abusive, under the absurd delusion that we were going to “end cycles of violence” together. We weren’t ending any fucking cycles, we were continuing them.

Until I rediscovered my agency I was totally paralyzed. How could I ever feel safe if nothing I had done contributed to the abuse? What could I change about the way I loved? Did I just need to implicitly know if people had that tendency in them? How do you pick “undamaged” lovers? How could I ever fall in love, and more importantly break up with anyone again, without being afraid? Different choices along the way could have kept things from getting so fucking crazy at the end, and it is both naïve and dangerous to pretend otherwise. Acknowledging that doesn’t mean I deserved to be mistreated or stalked; but it does mean that because I understand the bad choices I made, I can make better ones in the future.

I realize the rejection of victim or survivor identity is harder to stomach when it comes to violent sexual assault, but even with rape one can go through a process of critical reflection. This, of course, does not absolve the assaulter from responsibility. No one deserves to be sexually assaulted or is ever to blame for being raped. We must differentiate blame from self-reflection. In order to move on with my life and regain the ability to work and travel alone it has helped me to focus on the things I have concrete control over. It has been useful to take stock of what kind of situations I put myself in, who I trust, what kind of contingency plans I make and what weapons I am actually comfortable using. Will being proactive about these kinds of considerations keep me from all future harm? Probably not—it’s a fucked up world out there. Will these considerations give me a more grounded sense of control and remind me of my own power to deal with and affect the course of potential violence? Yes, I think so. This of course brings us to the issue of retaliatory violence and the zine being criticized for “glorifying violence.”

I think Stokely Carmichael got to the heart of why we must be wary of moral narratives about violence:

The way the oppressor tries to stop the oppressed from using violence as a means to attain liberation is to raise ethical or moral questions about violence. I want to state emphatically here that violence in any society is neither moral nor is it ethical. It is neither right, nor is it wrong. It is just simply a question of who has the power to legalize violence.³

I don't have an absolute moral or ethical justifier for retaliatory violence, because one should never work in tactical absolutes. No solution or approach will be appropriate all the time. All I can do is clarify in what context retaliatory violence makes sense to me. I think people who are violently physically assaulted should be able to beat their rapist. However it is essential to understand karmic/proportional retribution.

I don't think retaliatory violence is appropriate for situations that were not physically violent. Responding to physical violence with physical violence is understandable but responding to gray area miscommunications of consent with physical violence is manipulative and unnecessary. I also do not think it is appropriate to ask others to enact violence if you cannot bring yourself to participate. If you can't do it yourself (with help), then you need to pick a different kind of revenge. The point is catharsis, isn't it? A beating will send a direct message, but nothing can really communicate the experience of rape—only the anger and despair that come afterward.

Violence should be approached with humility and as a final resort. It is worth noting that it may not make you feel better, it may make you feel worse—it's hard to know beforehand. Revenge is intimate, and not always healthy. Protracted campaigns of shame and intimidation continue to tie you emotionally and psychologically to the person who hurt you. At some point the best revenge is separating yourself in the ways you can and trying to live a happy life. This doesn't mean you have to forgive to heal. I hold to my bitterness because it keeps me safe, but because I do not expect others to join me in that hatred it has been easier, with the passage of time, to let some of the pain recede.

To those who feel I gave up on transformative justice too soon, perhaps I did. I think if I lived in a different kind of community I would have more faith in transformative justice. I have heard that these models have worked in other kinds of communities. Within the anarchist scenes of North America however, I just don't see the cohesion, gentleness or longevity required for transformative processes to work. People are too transient. I am not an

³ Carmichael, Stokely. *Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism*. New York: Random House, 1972.

optimist at a structural level. It's not something I am particularly proud of so perhaps I shouldn't be suggesting others accept my dismal assessment of anarchist "community."

Really the discourse of transformative justice is hard for me to take at face value because the person I was in an abusive relationship with was very adept at using that kind of language in a manipulative manner, while the person who raped me had absolutely no point of reference for anything so radical. "Breaking cycles of abuse" is an enticing and lofty goal but sometimes I fear that all it means is that we put tons of time and energy into pieces of shit who will never address their socialization. At what point is it just not your fucking problem anymore?

This of course gets to the heart of most people's problem with the zine. It was criticized for not offering a productive solution. I admit, I don't have one, there is no one solution. A tendency towards myopic essentialism got us into this mess, a fancy rewriting of the survivor/perpetrator dualism with slightly more nuance sure as hell isn't going to get us out. We should be discussing what consent really means.

We have done a good job of defining healthy sex as an active yes—and not just the absence of no, but is that really a standard we practice and how do we hold people to it? If consent is a continual process what expectations do we have about how no gets communicated? Intimacy is complicated and we are all damaged in our own way. Who is responsible for identifying when yes becomes no? I would like to propose that we are responsible not only for obtaining a yes from our lovers before proceeding and keeping those lines of communication open but, more importantly, we are responsible for vocalizing our own yes or no. We need to redefine healthy consent as communicating our sexual needs in a proactive manner.

If that doesn't happen we should be able to say "you didn't notice I was dissociating, can we talk about PTSD and trauma?" That conversation seems more productive to me than "you raped me because you didn't notice I checked out, even though I didn't say no." It needs to be okay to make mistakes and we need a language for hurt that doesn't default to the worst kind of hurt ever. Hyperbolic language leads to a ranking of pain. Does everything need to be called assault or rape before we help our friends work through it? We need an intermediary language, something between "that was perfectly communicated every step of the way," and "you assaulted me."

At a spiritual level it is important to ask why couldn't I vocalize my needs? What kinds of conversations, or partners, do I need in order to do that? We should not expect our lovers to read our minds. We need to make contingency plans. Healthy sex should involve telling your lovers what you

want them to do when you check out. We are all responsible for our own happiness, pleasure and safety—these things are too important to outsource.

As for getting through the dark days, the only concrete advice I can give about sorting through the pain of assault or abuse is don't turn to a larger community for support—turn to your friends, your chosen family and a therapist (if you believe in them). Don't expect that people who were not already close to you will understand the situation or be able to respond or empathize in a way that feels good to you. They probably won't. Get as far away from the person who hurt you as humanly possible and don't take on their fucking process. Settle into the isolation and pain, because it's going to be with you for a long time. Understand your part in the experience not because you deserved it, or because you were to blame for it, but understand your part so you can play a different, healthier, role in the future.

Ultimately, I think I have come back to a state of relative homeostasis again because I took the time to consider what parts of the abuse and rape were mine to carry and which ones weren't. The process has been slow and painful. I think I began to heal when I stopped caring so much when, or if, it happened. I made my peace with being broken, and as I accepted the damage the scars slowly keratinized. I no longer care if the people who hurt me have become less caustic, because I am not responsible for them. I also don't care if people who are not close to me understand what happened. Accountability processes are much too tied into social currency, reputation and propriety. I will not be held hostage to the theoretical dictates of a false anarchist "community." I try and hold myself accountable to the community of people I have real ties to—those I parent, work and struggle with. Beyond that circle I have found the idea of accountability doesn't hold up well under strain. It's not that I don't believe in accountability—I do, just with a little "a."

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