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Re-imagining an End to Gendered Violence: Prefiguring the worlds we want

Julia Downes¹

Introduction

Critical analysis of feminist anti-violence movements have argued that dominant social responses to gendered violence have been shaped by a ‘carceral feminist’ epistemology.² This outlook invests in the use of punitive state responses, such as the law, police, courts and prison, to resolve gendered violence. However, evidence of ‘anti-carceral’ feminisms that resist punitive state solutions have been excavated in social movement histories in the US and Australia.³ Black and working class feminist movements have long recognised the state as a primary source of violence in, rather than a protector of, working class Black, minority and migrant women’s lives.⁴ In the US, feminists of colour have worked in coalition with penal abolitionists to develop non-state responses to interpersonal violence.⁵ The conceptual frames of ‘community accountability’ and ‘transformative justice’ that underpin non-state responses to gendered violence have emerged primarily from aboriginal communities and communities of colour based in the US, Canada and Australia. These approaches reject the state as a viable partner and propose instead to expand the capacity of communities to end violence.⁶ The key idea here is to prefigure a world capable of responding to violence and harm with the support, care and compassion necessary to end it so that dominant punitive state solutions become obsolete.

In this chapter I will explore both the potential and challenges faced in doing accountability work on gendered violence within what has been termed the ‘British Left’.⁷ I draw on empirical research with women and non-binary survivors who have experienced violence (such as domestic and sexual violence) from fellow activists within grassroots social movements.⁸ Accountability work is attempted within a punitive state, which circulates dominant ideas of thinking about and responding to violence as a problem of ‘bad’ individuals. Traces of this ‘criminal legal imagination’ can recirculate within British Left grassroots social movements faced with gendered violence within their groups. However, learning from the perspectives of survivors and experienced transformative justice

practitioners and facilitators can help to map out a framework for transformative justice within the British Left. This open acknowledgement of how wider conditions can limit accountability work aims to open up pathways towards cultivating accountability as a crucial practice in dismantling the punitive state. This includes the development of an anti-carceral feminist imagination to contest the reliance on punitive state responses, such as the law, police, courts and prison, to resolve gendered violence.

Situating the British Left and anti-violence activisms

The British Left has been conceptualised as three key strands.⁹ The first is the Labour Party: a dominant party in the political system. The second relates to smaller political parties located to the left of the Labour Party associated with Trotskyism, Marxism and revolutionary socialism. This includes organisations such as the International Marxist Group, Alliance for Worker's Liberty, Socialist Workers Party and Left Unity who have mobilised grassroots opposition to capitalism, racism and imperialism. The third strand involves grassroots social movements that have a significant influence in cultural and political life. This includes grassroots LGBTQ, feminist, anarchist and anti-authoritarian groups, environmental and animal rights groups, DIY cultures, autonomous spaces and social centres.¹⁰ In recent years, gendered violence, and inadequate responses, has been uncovered at all levels of the British Left.¹¹ Activist-scholars have also found evidence of routine exclusions across intersections of race, class, gender, disability and sexuality within grassroots social movement groups.¹²

Deeply unsatisfied by how violence has been managed within organisations and wary of the state, survivors and their supporters within grassroots social movements have explored the use of creative strategies (safer space and accountability processes) to prefigure movements that are safer and inclusive of survivors of trauma. Information about these approaches has been largely disseminated to British grassroots activists in fanzines, self-published anthologies of re-printed articles and submissions.¹³ Articles and zines included references to resources created by US-based organisations including INCITE!. Whilst this offers up potential to develop non-state responses, attempts to use community accountability processes, largely envisioned by people of colour, within a white-dominated British Left is contentious. Widespread support for, and implementation of, community accountability approaches have proved difficult to realise in practice.¹⁴ This persistence of, and difficulty in dealing with,

gendered violence within grassroots social movements is a frustrating and painful impasse for activists.

The salvage collective and research project

The salvage collective formed in November 2014 to bring together women (cis, trans and intersex), trans and non-binary individuals who experience gender oppression, violence and abuse in grassroots social movements. The salvage collective was initially envisioned as a network to share experiences, resources, skills and build communities of belief, support and action. It emerged from a need to better understand the character of violence and the needs of survivors in activist communities. This was identified in workshops that we facilitated independently from each other in anarchist and feminist events, which is how we first met each other.¹⁵ A small collective of three white women, the research collective, and ten survivors carried out a research project to explore experiences of gendered violence, abuse and harm from the perspectives of survivors in British Left grassroots social movements.¹⁶ Drawing on models of ‘research justice’ and ‘participatory action research’ approaches we carried out semi-structured interviews with 10 women and non-binary survivors between August 2015 and January 2016.¹⁷¹⁸

We launched an activist-facing zine-report and toolkit at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies in September 2016 and facilitated a series of five one-day workshops across the UK funded by the Feminist Review Trust in November and December 2016. This was followed by four capacity-building one-day workshops funded by the Harm and Evidence Research Collaborative in 2017 as we identified specific support needs and skills for activists doing accountability work in their communities. One forum event was held in Sheffield in September 2017 where the decision was made to put the collective on pause to undertake a reflective process that began in January 2018. The demands placed upon us by the wider activist community were at times overwhelming. Whilst this confirmed the need to acknowledge gendered violence and harms within these grassroots spaces we received many requests for us to provide a service that went beyond our capacity: to act as consultants, experts, counsellors and mediators. In short, to fix it.

This desire for an organisation to provide accountability services ‘for hire’ is rooted in capitalist ideas of work. The limitations of formalised models of service provision as a strategy for social change has been highlighted by feminists of colour in the US and by European prison abolitionists.¹⁹ This also contradicted our aim to encourage communities to develop ways to respond to harm that best made sense for them in their local contexts and networks. It became evident that *within white-dominated British Left grassroots social movements the social conditions were not yet in place to enable accountability work to take hold*. I remember facilitating one workshop and a participant told me that we need to develop one accountability process that really ‘works’. The one that can offer us the solution. In reflecting on this I returned to the research interview data we generated with new questions. Paying close attention allowed me to interrogate how activists invested in punitive thinking around gendered violence and how this impacted on survivors who wanted and/or attempted to realise accountability work. It raised the question: what is required to transform these investments into sustainable practices of transformative justice in the British Left?

The criminal legal imagination

Cultures of disbelief require a means to control what counts as truth and who can be recognised as a victim. As a dominant means to determine ‘innocence’ from ‘guilt’ the ‘criminal legal imagination’ can emerge in anti-authoritarian spaces as one means of achieving such ‘truth’. The term ‘criminal legal imagination’ draws on Mimi Kim’s work on ‘carceral creep’ in which she describes how social movement actors can go against, alongside and within legal logics to leverage movement goals.²⁰ The dominance of the criminal legal imagination can crowd out creative and transformative responses. For instance, gender-based violence scholars have problematised a tendency in the field of looking ‘to the state to correct injustices’ and warn that a ‘focus on criminal justice interventions’ can occur ‘often at the expense of other forms of thinking and acting on the issue’.²¹ Indeed, social movements are not exempt from investments in punishment to achieve movement goals, as S. Lamble has demonstrated in the growing endorsement of hate crime by LGBTQ activist communities in Europe and North America.²² Understanding social movements as ‘hybridized spaces between civil society and the state’²³ enables comprehension of how activist groups can reject the viability of state institutions to provide justice whilst investing in legal action to hold the state accountable to achieve specific goals.

This approach can also help to explain how community responses to gendered violence within activist groups can fall into the trap of mimicking a criminal process. The grip of the criminal legal imagination is strong within social orders that are invested in individual punishment as the solution to social problems, especially for the most stigmatised harms such as rape and child sexual abuse. For activists, attempting accountability work, the lens of punishment undermined these efforts, as Collette²⁴ described:

That's not what the process is for, it's not about punishment it's about trying to get people to acknowledge what they've done [...] What they've got in their head, what they've brought into their activism from the evil outside world. They haven't got their head around transformative justice so they're still approaching it [violence in activist communities] from a punishment view.

The criminal legal imagination is embedded in western ideas of justice rooted in systems of white supremacy, capitalism, ableism and heteropatriarchy. Characteristics of systemic power relations can show up in grassroots social movement cultures as unspoken norms and values that are brought into being whilst never being explicitly named or chosen.²⁵ Within grassroots movements power relations can shape who is recognisable as a victim, whose victimhood is visible, as well as what counts as violence and how it should be responded to. The individual and systemic are therefore entwined, as activist Morgan Bassichis summarised 'the very systems we are working to dismantle live inside us'.²⁶ In grassroots movements and in feminist anti-violence work we are not immune from perpetuating systems of domination; however, we can work towards attending to power inequalities that emerge in our interventions. Naming abuses of power offers up the potential to dismantle oppression.

For instance, at our launch event, we received a 'call-in'²⁷ from Camille Kumar at Imkaan, a London-based black and minority ethnic women's anti-violence organisation, who highlighted the whiteness of our research team, sample and definition of activism. Within our research project we had perpetuated a logic in which survivors, and responses to address gendered violence, centred whiteness. Our intervention in the grassroots social movements of the British Left had perpetuated a white feminist narrative that obscured power relations between white feminists and feminists of colour.²⁸ We had framed the problem of gendered violence and harm through a white lens and failed to attend to the racialised aspects of gendered violence. For instance, in working with white activists in grassroots anti-austerity

groups, minority and migrant women have encountered racism which can show up as defensiveness, an inability to admit mistakes, and a lack of solidarity with minority and migrant women's interests, lives and activism.²⁹ The presence of racism and sexism feeds into an inability to recognise and respond to survivors of colour who experience racialized sexual violence within grassroots social movement spaces.³⁰ Paying attention to how the criminal legal imagination, embedded in systems of domination, can show up in our feminist anti-violence work and lives, by practicing self-accountability³¹, is crucial in transformative justice work. In this section I will highlight how the criminal legal imagination operates within grassroots social movements in the British Left and how this impacts on survivors drawing on data gathered in the salvage research project.

Centring the objective 'truth': Investigations and evidence

Grassroots confidence in the police and the state has been decimated by state control and discipline of activism.³² Despite antagonistic attitudes to police conduct and state violence in grassroots activist circles, disclosures of violence within movement spaces were not commonly met with care and compassion but with denials and requests to prove it with evidence and calls for investigations. Hayley recalled how this reaction to a disclosure of sexual assault in her activist group impacted on her:

People were saying 'no no no you need to have checks and balances you need to have an investigation you need to get evidence person A person B and you need to find out the facts of what happened' and all of this [...] He didn't even know what happened because he couldn't remember and if he'd said 'well I think you're lying' what evidence could I have brought? It made me feel dead unsafe and vulnerable.

This way of thinking values objectivity, linear and logical thinking and having one right way to get to the facts or truth of the situation.³³ Belief is equated with having evidence. Even when survivors had gathered evidence belief was still contingent on validation of this evidence from powerful community members. For instance, Anna compiled a document on her computer to evidence the violence she was experiencing. She used this document to persuade powerful members of her social centre to believe her:

I had quite a lot of evidence as well, so I could show people quite concrete things at the start of it [...] I showed some fairly significant people at the [social centre] some emails and stuff, which were really hateful. I'd started, like, cataloguing them, and just had this huge text document full of everything [...] It's so difficult to

communicate and explain and relive, I could just sit people down with this thing and 15 minutes later, they get it.

However, the evidence was lost. This meant that Anna had to return to telling her story, which required potentially exposing herself to re-traumatisation and disbelief. Lydia had meticulously gathered evidence of the long-term abuse she had experienced from her partner, which included police reports, photos and diaries. However, whereas Anna could use evidence to persuade significant members, influential community members refused to acknowledge or recognise Lydia's evidence, which was experienced as a painful rejection:

I did eventually once send a message to the one who was really antagonizing online who was very openly calling me out and saying that I was lying and I sent him a message saying look I can show you arrest reports, I can show you pictures of the injuries, because I'd followed all the you know the abuse website help suggestions I had a suitcase packed under my bed I had photographs I kept diaries and I said I can show you it all and he said 'no I'm not interested' he said 'you will manipulate it to make him look bad' and that was the only time I ever reached out and said please I want to show you I said come round I want to show you what he's done.

A need or desire for evidence or an investigation to determine the objective facts of a harmful or violent situation demonstrates an inability to directly engage with the affective qualities of survivors experiences. The discomfort that survivors who express pain and suffering directly challenges a social movement culture invested in dominant values that disregard emotions as 'inherently destructive' to a group process.³⁴ This can shut down space to recognise and listen to disclosures of violence and harm experienced in social movements.

Wanting to be straight back out: Urgency in grassroots movements

Grassroots social movements frequently engage in direct action, occupations and acts that can make heavy and urgent demands on the time and labour of activists. This can side-line resources required for long-term accountability work as a group prioritises more immediate goals. However, this 'continued sense of urgency makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think and consider consequences'.³⁵ Within a constant state of urgency survivors can be sacrificed to meet quick or highly visible goals. Survivors can be abandoned in movements, left with a stark choice of leaving or managing alone. For example, to maintain a protest camp Leah told us how she 'just had to get on with it because I had too many other things going on [...] at the time you're too busy just getting through the next 10 minutes the next half an hour and you're just

too busy surviving and it is hard'. Hayley also had to tolerate what she had been through on her own to continue direct action:

I was determined so I wasn't going to let it stop me so I was just like wanting to be straight back out [...] it was that unifying thing of like look we're all in it for the [cause] so let's put our differences aside and that worked for a long time and I think it did in the end it was water under the bridge and it was a really horrible experience but no one held it against anyone after a while so, there are some benefits to that kind of real united against a common enemy thing like but at what cost.

The costs of this model of activism are high, and survivors needs for care and compassion cannot be met. A continued sense of urgency places priority on maintaining the spectacle of resistance rather than long-term visionary work, deepening connections and practices of care.

Some groups, including the protest camp that Leah was involved in, did have 'safer spaces' policies, which on the surface indicated some level of understanding that violence and harm can be perpetuated in grassroots spaces. However, questions can be asked about how many were in effect merely symbolic: placed on a wall or website to signal a politic that failed to be translated into ways of relating with each other in everyday life. In times of urgency, safer spaces could be ignored or used as a last resort to remove 'bad' people from groups and venues, leaving the long-term community building function of safer spaces work to be overshadowed. This was a common trap that transformative justice facilitators have highlighted. US-based Philly Stands Up activists explained: 'safe spaces tend to function as bubbles designed to stave off folks with anti-oppression politics or to respond to people who have perpetrated assault and have not been accountable'.³⁶ Violence and harm can therefore be framed as a problem of 'bad' individuals or 'outsiders' and the role of social and cultural conditions that sustain violence, including social capital and personal networks, can be obscured.

Distancing survivors in attempts to address violence

Several survivors, including Breanna, Anna, Collette and Micah, decided to engage with the safer spaces, community accountability or complaints processes that were available to them. However, the criminal legal imagination, embedded in 'paternalism'³⁷, crept into these processes as powerful activists made decisions for, and in the interests of, those without power and failed to explore or engage with survivors needs or feelings. Micah, who had been

sexually violated by a fellow activist, gave an account of a complaints procedure that was hastily put in place to hold the person who caused harm accountable within an activist organisation. However, this process invested in and mimicked multiple aspects of a criminal process such as taking statements, composing a jury, holding a hearing, and offering a limited role and set of pre-determined outcomes for the survivor:

So, the guy running it, it was his job to take the statements and anonymise them and give them to the jury [...] They didn't actually see the statement until the day we had the hearing so they had the statements anonymised and given to them. [...] I don't really know what they did in the preliminaries it was going to be them talking over how the process worked but then they invited me in to like read statements and say anything I wanted to say and then they asked me what I wanted to come out of it and handed a little tick box list of options [...] They weren't particularly varied options. I was offered some support during the process but I was given an email of someone I could email but I didn't use that. It was kind of only then as well at the hearing that they asked me how I felt the complaints procedure had gone like that was the only time I'd been asked that and I was like "pretty shit actually" [...] The fact that the whole thing just mirrored a court process and was really weird. How long it took, it took two months. I'd found it quite hard to make a complaint because it is hard to balance confidentiality with getting something done about it. Also, there was no like waiting area for me at the meeting so we had to go down the road whilst they made their decision. Lack of support during the process.

It is particularly striking that this procedure progressed despite an early admission and validation of harm made by the person who caused harm at the statement stage. Instead of exploring survivors needs and imagining creative solutions activists collectively replicated the procedural harms commonly experienced by 'complainants' in a criminal process. These harms included a lack of sensitivity, support and control in the process. The complaint that Anna made about a person who had harmed her triggered a review of the social centre's safer spaces policy, in which she was invited to attend:

I went into it expecting something very different, I'll say that much. I was, expecting it to be like "right, so, this has happened, and this is why I feel like this" and I was kind of presented with quite a lot of bureaucracy. Which is quite a strange response when you're feeling so emotional about a thing [...] But yeah, it was just, for their sake. Trying to cover themselves, but there seems to be a sort of conflict of interest there, if your main priority is making sure that you can account for everything, and you don't act until you absolutely need to, that's not my top priority, my top priority wasn't them keeping a cool front.

In this example, there was little exploration of what Anna may potentially want or expect from the process. The latter part of the quote brings us to the heart of issue, a process constrained in this way can assist the powerful in avoiding accountability for creating and sustaining the conditions that enable violence and abuse. The bare minimum can be done

(removal of the person who has caused harm) to maintain a reputation or image of inclusion. This links with Sara Ahmed's recent work on complaint in which complaint procedures can come into existence without coming into use.³⁸ Processes can be slow, bureaucratic and complicated to exhaust and wear down survivors. Without critical interrogation of the unspoken cultural values and norms that produce violence, safer spaces policies can be used to create evidence of doing something without doing anything. Within activist groups and organisations belief remains firmly in the hands of the powerful who are invested in maintaining the status quo. The ability for community leaders to abuse power and silence survivors has been recognised as a key internal barrier for feminists of colour working with Black and minority women.³⁹

Demanding a one-size-fits-all solution

The idea that one 'effective' safer spaces policy or a single solution can exist was a consistent pressure in our work. This brings me back to the workshop participant I mentioned above and his frustrated plea to me for one accountability process that can fix it. Beth also picked up on this pressure: 'there's an idea that there's a right way and wrong way to deal with this and follow these few simple steps and this problem won't arise anymore'. There is a distinct inability to sit with discomfort and uncertainty when violence happens.

A desire for a linear solution in grassroots activist groups was also recognized by Erin, however she argued that the viability of any 'solution' remains impossible without basic support and care for survivors: 'I think what we need to do first is all the stuff that goes around the accountability process because otherwise we try and do the accountability process on its own and it all falls apart because there's nothing to hold it together'. In what is needed to 'hold it together' Erin is referring to the social and cultural conditions that allow survivors to be recognised as worthy of care and compassion. Investing in a 'step-by-step' guide that is isolated from broader systemic change to 'fix' violence is limited. As explored above, the use of linear complaints procedures to resolve violence without space for the needs, feelings or due care and compassion for individual survivors can amplify harm. This is a lesson that survivors and activists involved in safer spaces and accountability work have learned, as Hayley discussed in her own practice:

Something I've learned in mediation and accountability [is] it can do harm to the person who's being harmed and actually we've put that into practice in dealing with situations in activism because I've learned that from my own experience that sometimes trying to fix things can make it worse, trying to fix things doesn't always work.

Cultivating Accountability in the British Left: Transnational lessons

To move towards a framework for accountability work for British Left grassroots activists I draw on work primarily led by women of colour and migrant, queer and trans people of colour and aboriginal communities who have developed transformative justice approaches in the US and Australia.⁴⁰ Practice of 'transformative justice', articulated by Canadian activist-scholar Ruth Morris in the 1980s and 1990s, were reinvigorated by communities of colour in the early 2000s keen to re-politicise a stagnant feminist anti-violence movement in the US.⁴¹ The collective political task at hand is in how to use these lessons to shift from a criminal legal imagination that centres *punishment* to an anti-carceral feminist imagination that values *accountability* in other places and socio-political contexts.

Supporting survivors: How needs can be met

Any response to a person who has been violated should enable them to reclaim their agency and regain control over their life. Instead of distancing survivors, as Anna and Micah experienced, transformative responses to violence hold space with survivors to explore their needs, wants, feelings, options and choices. This may require community members to confront common misconceptions of survivors. The assumption of survivors as damaged and fragile can lead to community members feeling insufficiently skilled to support survivors, unable to identify what they can do to help or frozen by a fear of causing further harm. Chicago-based transformative justice facilitator Mariame Kaba challenges these perceptions: 'what I always tell people is that as a survivor and as someone who has been around survivors my entire life in my community we are actually not fragile beings we are incredibly pragmatic and resilient because we've survived a lot.'⁴² Therefore the first critical lesson is, as Erin said above: to 'go be there for them': to support survivors. This can take many different forms including emotional care, material support (including food, companionship, housing, transportation and financial support), creating and holding spaces to grieve, feel and heal in, and actively listen. Whilst it can be difficult for survivors to clarify needs, particularly in crisis situations, giving space and time to sit with pain and suffering without

jumping to an answer or resolution (to fix or rescue) is more empowering for the survivor, and more transformative for a community who can gain confidence, skills and political awareness of the impacts of harm and trauma.⁴³

In exploring what a survivor's needs look like, the next challenge to consider is whether these needs can be addressed in an accountability process? Or does a survivor, particularly an activist with privilege (e.g. white, high income, non-disabled, secure immigration status), have short-term or long-term needs that can be adequately met by state agencies, an independent advocacy service or a helpline (such as Rape Crisis, Trans Survivors Switchboard or Women's Aid)? We do not yet live in a world with accountable communities and survivors living with violence in the here and now do not have time to wait. Some survivors may have had contact with state agencies and companionship may be needed to navigate these systems (particularly those at risk of being criminalised by these systems) to access justice. It is crucial to walk alongside a survivor rather than pressure them to pursue a specific path, this requires supporters to hold space for pain, discomfort and uncertainty. Accountability is not suitable to address every harm and meet all survivors needs. For instance, it does not best serve a survivor's need for healing and can be a very difficult and time-consuming process for all involved, as Mariame Kaba explains:

Many times processes feel terrible because the harm is so central and if you are engaged in the process with the person who harmed you. My god! It's bringing up so much stuff that if you're constantly trying to grab at the healing you're not in the harm processing that. You're outside looking for that destination that's somewhere down the road but no actually we have to be right here right now handling all that the fear, the anger, the vengeance feelings, the back and forth sliding against one day you'll want them dead the next day you're ok, we just have to be here holding this right now. So that's what I mean by it's not often [that it] feels like a healing space because healed is not a destination you're always in process.⁴⁴

This underscores the need for all involved to be clear about the goals of accountability processes and what needs a process can hold. For Mariame Kaba, accountability work can hold 'an acknowledgement of the harm that occurred, to insist that this person never do this again, to address issues around trust and figuring out how to trust people'.⁴⁵ For instance, the accountability process that Breanna, a participant in the salvage research project, experienced was considered by many to be a 'failure' as the person who caused harm was not able to acknowledge the harm they had caused. However, the support that Breanna received did address her need to be heard and believed, to connect with and trust others again:

They've been amazing. They've restored my hope in people. They've made me believe which a lot of people didn't. [...] they had me tell all the harm stories about what had happened with details as much as I was comfortable and it was really traumatic and then afterwards it was like being a phoenix. They've un-sprung me. [...] They were the change they un-sprung me. Literally. It's like being carried and I don't think they'll ever know ever ever know exactly how much they've done [...] They've given me confidence they've given me strength and knowing that I can go "look this man did this shit and there's an accountability process they can answer any questions" makes me feel less like a lone screaming delusional nutter. No [abuser] has been questioning their credibility and my credibility and they've given me my credibility that I need.

Therefore, whilst accountability work cannot address all harms and meet all needs, it can offer opportunities to meet needs for acknowledgement, trust and connection. However, accountability cannot be forced onto a person who caused harm and the process can be emotionally distressing and challenging for those involved. The expectations of what needs a process can hold for all involved needs to be acknowledged and adjusted accordingly.

A Situated Framework for Transformative Justice

In this section I outline four key avenues for grassroots activists located in the British Left to develop a situated framework for transformative justice to shift towards responses to gendered violence grounded in accountability. This involves (i) developing understandings of, and responses to, gendered violence as a *collective* process, (ii), centring *relationships* and ways of relating, (iii), *accepting mistakes* as moments for learning/transformation; and, (iv), learning from the strengths and weaknesses of diverse anti-violence strategies in British social movement *histories*.

In salvage workshops we used a scenario-based activity that involved different groups responding to a hypothetical situation of harm from different standpoints. The group that struggled the most were the group who were designated to be close friends of the person who caused harm. The initial impulse tended to be for the group to exclude the person who caused harm from their organising spaces and terminate friendships. It was challenging to imagine other courses of action beyond exclusion. What we need to let go of here is 'the notion that there are 'good' and 'bad' people [...] We all harm people and are harmed ourselves, in different contexts and conditions and with different levels of power behind us'.⁴⁶ Whilst an impulse to exclude and shun those who harm us and/or those we care about is understandable

in a world that disposes of people in prisons, detention centres and secure institutions as Philly Stands Up activists urge, we need to ‘find ways to build community with each other without connecting our safety to somebody’s exile’.⁴⁷ In terms of complicating ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ people, Common Justice founder, Danielle Sered recognises that ‘nearly everyone who commits violence has also survived it, and few have got formal support to heal’⁴⁸. Assumptions of safety and sameness can be shifted in a collective naming of the power inequalities, harms and traumas we enter communities and groups with as survivors, supporters or bystanders. The sharing of stories of harm, resilience and resistance in ‘community support circles’ can allow groups to deepen understandings of how violence shapes all our lives and nurture a commitment to building collective strategies to address harm.⁴⁹

Prefiguring liberatory ways of relating to each other lies at the heart of social transformation. Accountability work is a long-term political orientation that questions the ways in which we understand and respond to harm with those we are in community with. Accountability work is an active process that creates and transforms community and different ways of relating to each other, as Mariame Kaba reflects upon in her practice:

I keep reminding myself and the people I’m in community with in a process that we’re doing this because we have a political commitment towards bigger things, ideals for how we treat each other, the interest we all have, the animating question we all have which is how to we adjudicate and evaluate harms in a way that is just? How do we do this? And we are testing that out by practicing together being in relationship with each other, transforming our human relationships so that we have a transformed world that’s why we’re doing it.⁵⁰

This can look like many things including: sitting with difficult feelings and experiences without jumping to resolution, figuring out the needs and boundaries of ourselves and others, finding more equitable ways of relating to each other, naming power, learning to actively listen and addressing violence at its small stages.⁵¹ Transformative justice is not ‘a replacement for police or prisons or a one-size-fits-all fix, but instead [is about] infusing our communities with skills to create resilient, honest, loving relationships’.⁵² The relationship is central in Mariame Kaba’s transformative justice work: ‘Everything is about the relationship, that is the unit that matters here is the relationship that we build with each other that allows us to build trust over time so that I am accompanying you and you are coming along’.⁵³ Instead of framing activist work around scarcity and urgency, reorienting work around values of abundance and connection, as adrienne maree brown’s principles of emergent strategy remind

us ‘there is always enough time for the right work’ and to ‘move at the speed of trust’⁵⁴, offers up a framework for a more sustainable activist practice.

Accountability work is emergent, unpaid work in which projects function with limited budgets (if any) and resources. However the scrutiny that accountability work can face from the wider community can mean that activists feel a high level of responsibility for the outcome of interventions.⁵⁵ This can fuel a culture of perfectionism that positions ‘mistakes as personal failings’ and ‘doing wrong with being wrong’.⁵⁶ Activists involved in accountability work can struggle to navigate the demands of the work. However, experienced movement facilitators argue that transformative justice work is primarily about learning and mistakes are central to this process: ‘never a failure, always a lesson’.⁵⁷ It may seem counterintuitive to expect mistakes to be made when responding to violence given additional pressure to be perfect, avoid ‘failure’ or deepen harm. However, accepting mistakes is an important lesson as Mariame Kaba explained: ‘if you go into it with the idea that the person you are working with is a fragile china doll who’s going to crack under any pressure so you can’t make a mistake well then you’re already set up for failure and failure not in the sense of learning but failure in the sense of catastrophic hurt [...] So the binary of success and failure get rid of that, that’s number one’.⁵⁸ Finding ways to accept mistakes as part of the process and devote time and resources into reflection and identifying lessons learned can be more transformative. As Beth summarised:

I think there’s something to be learned from the thing you’re trying to cut out or there’s something to be learned from the things you’re trying to shun and trying to shut it down, doesn’t make it go away for a start. There’s no possibility for transforming it when that happens.

The fourth area involves connecting with and learning from our, often messy and conflicted, movement histories. To learn from our elders. To uncover diverse tactics in anti-violence work that have so far been hidden in British feminist histories.⁵⁹ For instance, Women Against Rape (WAR), an advocacy and campaign group established in 1976, developed an understanding of the state as a sexist and racist institution, evident in slogans such as ‘Racism is Rapism’ and research on racialised sexual violence.⁶⁰ Their intersectional approach to understanding and challenging sexual violence has been shaped by a long-term relationship of organising alongside Black Women’s Rape Action Project (BWRAP) and in coalition with English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) and Wages for Housework (WFH) at Crossroads

Women's Centre in London.⁶¹ Divestment from the police, as a source of racist, sexist and homophobic state violence, was a central political tactic for the Lesbians and Policing Project (LESPOP). This London-based project, set up in 1985, conducted research on how lesbians were being treated by the police and educated Black and white lesbians of their legal rights to defend themselves from police harassment in protests, arrest and raids. Nonetheless, a growing 'carceral feminist' agenda, as the British state incorporated feminist demands in criminal justice reforms, has been at 'at the price of a radical analysis of the role of state violence in the lives of women of colour'.⁶² These reforms have arguably benefited the most privileged women to the detriment of working class Black and minority women.⁶³ The challenge here for activists is in how to pick up the call for non-state alternatives to harm that was largely abandoned by the women's specialist sector from the 1990s onwards.⁶⁴ Working in coalition across arenas of activism and specialist support services offers potential to learn from a British legacy of diverse tactics to gendered violence that oppose state regulation and control.

Conclusion

Given global conversations of the harms of state violence, carceral feminism and prison expansion, it is time for a shift of imagination in how to address gendered violence. Transformative justice offers a framework to strengthen our collective capacity to end violence and harm in the networks, spaces and places in which it occurs. However this requires careful translation into the peculiarities of Britain and its social movements that are shaped by enduring legacies of imperialism and racism. Accountability requires the cultivation of spaces to gather those invested in understanding and ending violence together to gather/sharpen tools, accounts, stories and experiences of challenging harm. To learn from each other and develop the skills and practices that we need to realise the world we want. A world in which we no longer solely rely on punitive state institutions to resolve gendered violence and harms for us. We can wait no more.

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