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*“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 that 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 judgement against whoever 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 resolve.”*

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**Safety is an Illusion:  
Reflections on Accountability**

*This piece was originally published with a collection of others in “Dangerous Spaces: Violent Resistance, Self-Defense, and Insurrectional Struggle Against Gender”*

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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 and I don't have any of those... 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.

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

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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 that 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 judgement against whoever 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 resolve. Using accountability models developed all those years ago to deal with serial rapists in the radical scene has not been much to help in getting people 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.

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 feeling 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 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 I had allowed myself in a moment of vulnerability 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 OK 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 overabundance 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