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Are We Really Revolutionary? Accountability, Transformation, and the Differences We May Not Be Ready For

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Lastly, I have a confession to make:

I was a member and lead organizer on the Accountability and Consent Committee (ACC) almost since its beginning. I was present and complicit in all the mistakes and decisions we made, and I wish, knowing what I know now, that we did things vastly differently. But, especially after part one of this series received a wave of blowback from organizers, I hope this dialectical will spur us all to look gravely at what we have done as a movement. Both to each other and to the global push for revolutionary transformation. This series is not a call-out. Not in the twitter-verse sense of the word. It is a lengthy and verbose calling-in. These discussions about what we've done right and wrong and how we treat each other need to have happened yesterday. 2022 will be a big year. And we need a community of revolutionaries who are loving, trusting, humble, and patient enough to heal, as well as be ready to fight when the moment calls for it. But, perhaps most of all, we need comrades who are brave enough to look just as honestly at themselves as the systems which we will, in solidarity, push down. When the moment calls for it. We'll know.

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Lastly

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This piece is the second in an ongoing dialectical discussing the successes and failures of accountability processes in social justice/Black liberation spaces in DC. Each piece is written by contributors to The Washington Revolutionary and represents the personal views of the writer, not the perspective of the Wash Rev itself. We hope this conversation will shed light and inspire our communities to think deeply about accountability and justice in their own lives.

Part one in this series reflecting on accountability processes in DC outlined many issues which we've seen come out of attempts to address harm without the criminal justice system. We heard how groups with purportedly good intentions to protect survivors of abuse caused more harm. And how abolitionist groups fighting the police state while trying to build community in DC often fail to uphold mutual respect between their members. This editorial will build on these issues and take a hard look at "why" these patterns happen. Where/how did these good intentions become corrupted, despite the fact that we are all bonded by fierce commitment to oppose systemic, gendered, and racial injustice?

I posit that these mistakes stem from a series of interrelated confluences, made with the best of intentions, and mired by the trauma of our shared struggle to fight the police state and prison industrial complex on the frontlines. In response to my comrade's discourse about the function and failure of disappearing people when purporting to hold them accountable, I will start by naming the conflation of 'being reactionary' with 'being revolutionary.' This piece will build on real world examples from our community in DC, social allegory, and my per-

all fundamentally deserve as human beings. Harm-doers and abusive personalities deserve second chances because robbing them of that allows the cycle of trauma to fester and resurface. And that does damage to our movement, both karmically and practically. To me, there should be no back and forth on this.

The ACC did not make any space for bridges to be built back into community after statements were dropped or people were otherwise called out. Moreover, it stands to reason that white comrades who piss off Black and Brown community leaders for less-than-abusive offenses equally deserve their humanity recognized. Because we would expect the same done for us. Sometimes it feels that we are still treating one another as if we are soldiers. As if there can be no space for patience, grace, and humanity. But the revolution needs healers, I'm gonna say, even more so than fighters. Revolutionaries are supposed to be both. Soldiers are not. And we are divided. We cannot continue to isolate one another because we need all the comrades we can get. All of em. That way, when the time comes for the American system to fall, we will be able to sit together as full and loving humans prepared to push in solidarity.

And it will be wild.

The ACC, anti-fascist groups, Black liberation activists, and social justice warriors alike often appear to the public, each other, and themselves as soldiers ready to lay it all down for the revolution. By watching George Floyd's life be slowly stolen by Derek Chauvin, hearing of Breonna Taylor's heart wrenching assassination in her sleep, learning of the corruption and scandal that killed Karon Hylton-Brown, An'Twan Gilmore, Deon Kay and so many more just in DC, we were all bonded by a fierce and necessary resolve to never let these things happen again. To hold this system and all it has ever stood for accountable. Our fighting spirit, the final answer to the prayers of our ancestors, is the context which brought us all here. It is right and it is here to stay. However, I fear we will not do justice to ourselves nor the future if all we consider ourselves to be is soldiers.

Fighting, seeking sanctions and punishment, cannot take up the space necessary for healing. Fighting affords us a sense of retribution which healing does not always give in the short-term – when we feel we need it. But maybe, based on the context, we need to flip this sometimes. Perhaps we need to sit in our yearning for retribution long enough to let ourselves and our communities heal first. We need to be revolutionaries – with “love” embedded backwards. Revolutions do not succeed just by tearing down, but also by building back, and giving kindness and grace to one another. The same way we do absolute good to the communities we serve by doing mutual aid, we need to show the same to each other through moments of conflict, even in moments of harm and abuse, so that no comrades are left in total isolation without a bridge back to community. Which we

sonal observations as a radical Black/bi-racial organizer of two years with this community who I hold more dear than any one.

**Reactionary vs.
Revolutionary**

**Soldiers vs.
Revolutionaries**

versation. Collectively, we refer first to punishment and anger instead of attempting transformation. Which, if we are to be truly revolutionary, is the only option. Transformation of harm and conflict only happens when we are loving, trusting, humble, and patient enough to let both sides heal. To soothe the root causes of harm instead of disappearing and allowing them to fester and resurface later. It is so hard to carry that patience as Black and Brown, Queer and Trans comrades, because we all feel the pain of our ancestors and the echo of our personal burdens in every step we take as activists. We need to fight so badly that we often forget about healing. But it must be done, and our anger must be reckoned with. Otherwise we will end up like the boy in the allegory. Or worse. Like his parents. Failing in our responsibility to better the next generation because we are not brave enough to face our own faults when the moment calls for it. And this leads me to my last conflation.

The “Accountability and Consent Committee” (ACC) was named in part one as a body which released punitive statements on behalf of survivors in retaliation for harms committed by community leaders in DC, resulting in those individuals’ complete social disappearance. I was present for the large community gathering which eventually gave birth to the ACC. And while I saw and felt bad for the many mistakes this group made, I feel it is important to discuss first how they came into being. And from there I will explain what I think went so wrong.

At a lively community bonfire in late 2020, frontline activists from various groups and many without affiliation came together to enjoy food, drink, and talk about our movement. Toward the end, the conversation uncovered a number of sexual abuses reported by a femme-identifying comrade about a male member of our community. It became clear to all, through discussed consensus, that something had to be done to protect this survivor and hopefully stop these abuses without resorting to police. A few of the attendees volunteered to take on this monumental task, and the community was effectively left out of it from there. I thought it was admirable, but perhaps a little naïve, for a group of volunteers to assume this was something they could accomplish. But I personally supported them at the time, because the moment demanded action, and everything we were doing that year seemed too bold to be possible. However, looking back, I believe the fatal flaw of this action was that, from the beginning, the group failed to distinguish what they were doing as ‘reactionism’ from ‘being revolutionary.’

‘Reactionism’, as I will coin the term, involves responding to harms felt or injustices witnessed, and is typically opposed

to taking preemptive or independently generative action. That is to say, in this article, 'being reactionary' will refer to basing one's actions only on the context which is given. Instead of on thinking 'outside the box.' The context given to the future ACC at this gathering was (put very simply):

1) as a community, we are fighting an ideological war against fascists and the police state and our actions must reflect that war-time sense of urgency

2) repeated instances of sexual abuse and interpersonal harm are happening among our ranks and something must be done about it, and

3) survivors of harm and abuse are asking for help and they do not know where else to turn

For anyone present at that gathering or faced with a similar call to action, it would be hard to judge them for at least doing something. Unfortunately, I think the ACC was never able to grow out of that original context, and, in short, they remained reactionary.

'Being revolutionary' I will define first by looking closely at the word itself. Embedded backwards in the beginning of the word is the answer and the difference from reactionism: "love". While "love" is absolutely a cliché, and too often weaponized by white liberals trying to steal the teeth from our movement, I believe it is also the bedrock of which we, as a collective, may have lost sight over time, and I would like to think deeply on it. Love, to me, is defined as "the will to do absolute good to a person, or people." It is a feeling in your chest which affirms the commitment to help someone else in spite of yourself or your interests. It can be hot or angry, like when justice demands you

curity, the honesty, the time off from work, or the bravery to dig up these root causes when the time called for it. Perhaps, if they did, they could have prevented the boy's girlfriend from experiencing more trauma.

Here, we see a difference between sanctions/punishment (i.e. the revoking of video game and recess privileges) and transformation (i.e. addressing the root causes of the harms committed). As mentioned before, addressing the root causes of harm and abuse takes a tremendous amount of dedicated work, and often professional help. Sanctions, punishments, and social isolation do nothing to heal the root causes of harm. They only disappear them. Which inevitably leads to more harm in the future. I don't think the ACC ever had the capacity to do real transformative work, as they were only a group of volunteers when they started. But, if they did, it could only have happened with ample amounts of love, trust, humility, and – most challenging of all – patience. Most challenging because the ACC's supposed mission was to advocate on behalf of survivors.

Being survivor-centered in accountability processes is admirable, as our movement as a whole is founded on the recovery of justice for those most affected by systemic trauma. But, even outside of the ACC, it seems to me a flaw to be so survivor-centered or Black-centered that, in moments of conflict, there is no room left for the humanity of those accused of causing harm. In these moments, I've seen groups first resort to punishment, to public shaming, to sanctions, to ridicule based on weaponized terms of identity, instead of being patient enough to put one's anger aside and open a difficult con-

The ACC was not revolutionary because they never showed the love necessary to do absolute good to those who were accused of perpetrating harm. And this leads me to the second conflation: Sanctions/punishment with transformation. This one I don't think belongs only to the ACC, but equally to other groups who have held damaging accountability processes internally. To elaborate on the difference between punishment and transformation, I will refer to an original, but sadly familiar, allegory.

Content Warning: R*pe, D*mestic V*olence

Allegory of a child:

It is the modern era in America, and a young boy (any background) gets mad and punches his friend on the playground. His friend starts crying, the teachers notice, and they pull the boy aside and call his parents. His mother and father are angry, disappointed, and embarrassed. When the boy gets home, they revoke his privileges to play video games and they tell him he has to sit in timeout at every recess for the rest of the week. But does this solve the problem?

Years later, the boy is 18-years-old and about to graduate high school. He takes his dazzling girlfriend of a couple months to prom. Afterwards, he wants to lose his virginity to her. She tells him no. He gets angry and tries to rape her. Why?

Left out of the first half of the story was that the boy hit his friend in grade school because he grew up watching his father beat his mother at home. He grew up terrified of his father and learned that it is normal for a boy's repressed anger to be let out in severe acts of violence. This was the root cause of his punch on the playground. But his parents did not have the se-

fight to protect who or what you care for. But more often, it is a soft feeling, like giving gifts on Christmas, expecting nothing in return, even if your family members are annoying. Where 'reactionism' is based on the context of the moment, 'being revolutionary' is based on the premise of caring for those who need it most. Or seeing outside of war-time urgencies to embrace what is actually best for all people.

Too often, I feel our movement conflates 'being revolutionary' with 'being reactionary' – inside and outside the context of accountability. But this has, at times, been necessary or at least understandable. For example, as a reaction to threats of fascist violence and/or police investigation, anti-fascists and Black liberation activists choose to dress in black bloc to protect their identities. This is a necessary reaction to the threat of having Nazis or cops knock at your door. But in the long-run, is anonymity on the face of racial justice and anti-fascism a viable strategy to approach social transformation? How can we spread our message without trusting the public enough to even show our faces, after the war-time (on the surface) has ended? Yes, this made absolute sense in the short term, when cops were following people home. But what about the long-term? Doesn't the public need to hear and trust our message to join forces with us?

Similarly, I think the ACC's first mistake was falling into the exact same trap – taking an anonymous approach to accountability, hiding in the shadows, only to come forth with a statement when someone was purported to have caused harm. With the professed intention of protecting survivors and transformative justice, how could an anonymous body gain the trust neces-

sary to change harmful and abusive behavior, which is deeply rooted in psychological trauma and often takes years of therapy to undo? Where is the “love”, embedded in revolution, necessary to shift cycles of abuse when the body hides behind anonymity? This question is difficult, and posed to the collective. Not just the ACC.

Sanctions/Punishment vs. Transformation