

# Community Accountability: Emerging Movements to Transform Violence

Editors

*and know we are not safe...  
we've learned to fear  
for our lives...  
Can I stir her back to life  
with so much death surrounding us?—Cherríe Moraga*

*the irony of power,  
those who are vulnerable  
are a source of strength—Sista II Sista collective*

**W**E HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN. RACE WOMEN,<sup>1</sup> INDIGENOUS WOMEN, AND WOMEN of color feminists have a long history of exposing the connection between the violence committed by social and state institutions (and their representatives) and the intimate violence experienced by women. Activists have continuously identified and organized around key moments that demonstrate how the state produces and sanctions gendered violence while leveraging prisons as violent tools of racialized population control.

Ida B. Wells publicly critiqued how the issue of rape was exploited to justify ongoing lynchings of black people, stressing that they were organized acts of police-sanctioned sexual violence and torture. The 1974 grass-roots movement to free Joan Little—a black woman convicted of murdering a prison guard who attempted to rape her during her incarceration—sparked dynamic coalitions among anti-prison activists, black nationalists, and antiviolence feminists. It also exposed the role of the state in the politics of intimate violence against women, especially women who are treated as if they were disposable. According to Antonia Castañeda (2005: 87), coloniality has historically constructed the bodies of Indian women and women of color “to effect territorial and political conquest, [while] women constructed and used their bodies, both symbolically and materially, as instruments of opposition, resistance, and subversion.”

The insights of these activists and movements echoed throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, which witnessed the pervasive expansion of unchecked policing and imprisonment. The prison system expanded through an onslaught of regressive policies, such as privatization, “law and order” policies popularized by leveraging white fear, anti-immigrant policies such as the Illegal Immigration

Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which increased criminalization of migrants and imposed mandatory detention, the unyielding War on Drugs, and the 1994 Crime Bill and Violence Against Women Act.

The prison project landed in communities as a ubiquitous force of violence, with as many as two million people caged. It also relentlessly inhabited our imaginations, creating an epistemic occupation within antiviolence work that shaped political priorities and marginalized dissent. As antiviolence work became “officialized,” activists found that similar syntheses stemming from the politics of our everyday lives as people of color were increasingly rare in “official” antiviolence work, which rapidly became less oppositional and more fundamentally *integrated* with prison and police imperatives. Although some have called this transformation a “depoliticization” of the antiviolence movement, the politics of antiviolence work were not rendered neutral. Rather, they were *dislocated and repositioned* into the repressive state’s powerful, and largely successful, conservative agenda. In this repoliticization, violence against women did not diminish. The prison project invigorated the colonial agenda of racial, classed, gendered, and sexual violence against indigenous peoples and communities of color, while attempting to stymie and redirect consciousness and social movements.

The Color of Violence Conference, which took place on April 28 and 29, 2000, at the University of California, Santa Cruz, brought together over 1,200 people, mostly women of color, who were enlivened by a promise of something different. Since this gathering focused on indigenous women and women of color,<sup>2</sup> their histories and knowledge of violence led to calls for building a social movement that focused on the sources of that violence, including state institutions.<sup>3</sup> We discussed the foundational role of sexual violence from the U.S. colonial project through its contemporary manifestations, as well as the correlative geographies of violence in our intimate lives. After years of struggle against ongoing marginalization and the erasure of our lives and politics, many activists of color who came to the conference—particularly those within the antiviolence movement—were hungry for alternatives. We had been engaged in small insurrections at the edges of established institutions of social change and within our families, friendship networks, neighborhoods, and organizing spaces. However, this gathering served as a specific and important intervention for the U.S. antiviolence movement, which had largely abandoned that history and the political analyses grounded in the stories of our lives.

For two days in late April, even the most cynical among us became excited by the convergence of diverse historical legacies, cultural complexities, spoken and gestured languages, points of critical analysis, and visions of possibility that connected women of color and examined the violence that we, our mothers, and grandmothers have experienced. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, an organization created at this historic conference, opened a portal for critique, analysis, and new visions for change, while contributing energy and resources to on-the-ground alternative responses to violence.

In its first year, INCITE! took this conversation on the road. Through a series of activist institutes across the country, mostly women of color gathered in large and small groups to talk about how we deal with violence in our lives and communities and how we create safety. INCITE! set out to spark imagination and memory, analytically and practically, and to enliven the community's agency in healing and transforming violence. During the late twentieth century, when incidents of violence occurred victims increasingly turned to nonprofits, professionals, and the police. Nonprofit service provision organizationally channeled activists into hyper-specialized roles that narrowly focused on state-imposed reporting schemes that robbed us of the sense of freedom and creativity needed to develop and implement interventions against domestic and state sexual violence.

In the legal process accompanying criminalization, the state rather than the survivor/community becomes the plaintiff. Antiviolence nonprofits displace community intervention, and instead emphasize counseling services. Consequently, the collective injury that violence imposes is limited to the individual (or perhaps the survivor's children). Such a response to violence against women weakens a community's ability to intervene against all violence and prevents marginalized communities from dreaming, learning, imagining, and acting. Colonial and racial subordination seek to break down the spirit of a people—to break down communities. While listening to communities across the country recount their histories of official violence via deportation, incarceration, family separation, and abuse, it became clear that the antiviolence industry exacerbates violence in and against communities of color by dismissing the complex interplay between state and gendered violence.<sup>4</sup>

In October 2001, INCITE! convened an activist institute with *Sista II Sista*—a collective of young and adult working-class Latinas, Afro-Latinas, and black women in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. The structure of “*Sista Act Out!*” mirrored that of other institutes. We began with large-group presentations and discussions and then formed smaller groups for brainstorming and strategizing. The organizers and participants voiced concerns about a post-September 11 intensification of state violence against communities of color, particularly through surveillance and detention.<sup>5</sup>

During a discussion of alternatives to the violence of criminality and potential organizing strategies, a 12-year-old *sista* stood with her hand in the air and exclaimed, “Why don't we make Bushwick a liberation zone for women?” The room became quiet, but the deep, meditative pause was then interrupted by an enlivening set of questions: How would we do that? What would that look like? Where would we start? What would need to be in place? No one doubted its possibility. This young *sista*'s phrase swiftly illuminated minds that had been clouded by years of state maneuvers to disempower communities. After this moment, members of the group addressed one another differently. We spoke as if we could attain that goal, and many voices became one. That question sparked our imaginations to think as a community and to conceive of solutions and responses not offered by the mainstream antiviolence

movement. Sista II Sista then campaigned to make Bushwick a liberated zone, and INCITE! took steps to deepen its work concerning community accountability.

In 1999, Critical Resistance—the prison abolitionist organization—held its historic conference at U.C. Berkeley. This set the stage for a national movement and an organizational structure that would promote an analysis and agenda aimed at abolishing prisons. In 2002, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence joined with Critical Resistance to draft a *Joint Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex*.<sup>6</sup> The statement mapped the underlying concepts, principles, and practices that bridged the antiviolence and prison abolitionist movements. Various alternatives to violence emerged, both informal and institutionalized, which were consistent with the document’s principles and mandates.<sup>7</sup>

New social movement formations arising alongside and within these newly mapped spaces energized community discussions, activist institutes, study groups, cultural work arenas, and informal and formal organizational and institutional arenas. These community formations developed concepts and practices that did not substitute intimate and community-level harms with those of the state and collaborating institutions. Most important, struggles to articulate a radical political agenda and guide practices on the ground resulted in a new period of innovation, collaboration, and a shared visions across divides. We examined the links between our multiple communities and confronted harms that could not always be attributed to the “other.” The resulting critiques and strategies addressed the material, social, cultural, political, and economic structures and conditions that contribute to the proliferation of violence in our lives.

### **Bringing Community Back**

Often, what seemed new simply recognized community-based responses to violence that had historically been used to call out, contest, and challenge violence. Feminist social movements constructed under the logic and constraints of capitalist commodification, binary entrapments of gender, victim/perpetrator dichotomies, institutionalization and professionalization, and law-and-order cooptation of demands for justice delegitimized and invalidated non-state and non-institutional responses. Following colonial narratives, communities were dismissed as romanticized remnants of a pastoral past or as backward purveyors of harm. Communities also became appendages to policing initiatives or passive participants in the construction of social capital and the upholding of social norms geared toward reproducing capitalism.

Despite their inconsistent and at times ineffective responses to domestic and sexual violence, communities have left a meaningful legacy. Such responses have *persevered* and are far more common than criminal responses are. Community accountability practices are revealed in family oral histories and in intimate kitchen-table and backroom storytelling. They are also present in fictional texts such as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), where Sophia challenges Celie to account for her participation—however complicated—in the violence Sophia

endured from her husband, Harpo. They are visible in the intuitions of those who have encountered profound violence. People have responded to gender violence within conditions of specific, sustained, and violent alienation from police, such as during Jim Crow, in the criminalization of migration, the racial profiling of Arab, South Asian, and Muslim communities, the criminalization of sex work or same-sex acts, and in the punishment of gender nonconformity (see NNIRR, 2010; Ritchie, 2012; Naber, 2007). It would not occur to many of them to entrust the state with problems of family or community violence. That work remains unnamed, articles are not written about it, and political organizations do not house or support it. As Theryn Kigvamasud' Vashti puts it in an interview entitled "Catalyzing Possibility" in this volume, community accountability efforts have often been imagined simply as "handlin' your business."

The last decade of intentional collective thinking and organizing has been a process of recovering the legacy of this work and assessing what can be done within a more sustained, broad-based movement. Generative practices such as imagining, brainstorming, storytelling, inventing, planning, testing, critiquing, archiving, and circulating have reinvigorated processes formerly deemed impractical and ineffectual due to the cultural and epistemological domination of prisons.

Community accountability and community-based approaches challenge us to seriously address violence and intimate harms without reproducing the technologies of individualization, pathology, penalty, protection under the authority of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy, and criminalization, all of which continually deny and subvert our notions of safety and justice. We are asked to consider, recover, and build the potential of community while recognizing and disengaging from strategies that undermine the possibility of community formation. Communities must acknowledge the devastating impact of gender and other forms of intimate and community violence and take responsibility for creating new social agreements and everyday forms of political practice.

According to The Revolution Starts at Home Collective, community accountability is "any strategy to address violence, abuse, or harm that creates safety, justice, reparations, and healing without relying on police, prisons, childhood protection services, or any other state systems" (see Ching-In et al., 2011). Extending newly articulated principles of liberatory community engagement from our most intimate relationships to broader political action requires the development of multiple strategies and models of community accountability that do not participate in the violence of criminality or in silence and collusion.

### **Community Accountability: Pitfalls, Portals, and Possibilities**

In this issue of *Social Justice*, community refers to a conceptual and material space, a systematically rationalized and defended location of unchecked violence and a deep well of resources and cultural references that sustain body, mind, and

spirit for individuals and collective formations devoted to disrupting that violence. The writings reflect the dynamic tension that arises when resisting idealized, protectionist notions of community that purport to lessen intra-community violence, among other concerns, and reclaiming the transformative power of community as a critical locus of antiviolence resistance.

This issue provides a sampling of projects that are engaged in community accountability and transformative justice. It reflects critically on some internal aspects and offers comparisons across projects, communities, nations, types of violence, strategies, and political frameworks. It encapsulates a decade of local and national initiatives led by or inspired by allied social movements. Moreover, it illustrates the complexities of integrating the theory and practice of community accountability. One challenge is to shed internalized criminalization without colluding with violence or succumbing to retributive versions of community justice or vigilantism. Another is that the dominant frame for social movements remains a rights discourse and demands for laws and legislation that champion individual benefits or protections.

The issues examined in the following articles have unique sociopolitical contexts and distinct sets of resources, opportunities, and constraints, as well as historical legacies and lineages that regrettably can only be hinted at. Authors call for an integration of critical engagement, knowledge production, and radical political practice arising from struggle and collective organizing. Each reveals the imperfections and brilliance of radical responses to multiple forms of violence that will surely elicit disappointment, accolades, and new sets of questions and challenges.

In the first article, “Moving Beyond Critique: Creative Interventions and Reconstructions of Community Accountability,” Mimi Kim of Creative Interventions reflects on a community accountability project that emerged from the interaction of INCITE! Women of Color against Violence and Critical Resistance. Kim shares the motivations and outcomes of two projects that promote knowledge production by documenting and constructing community accountability models based on non-state and non-social-service violence intervention on the part of informal social and community networks.

In contrast, Andrea Smith’s “Decolonizing Anti-Rape Law and Strategizing Accountability in Native American Tribal Communities” analyzes lawmaking and the contestation of gender-based violence, specifically rape and colonization, in the context of tribal legal practice. Her exploration of Sara Deer’s legal projects suggests that expanding the capacity of tribal lawmaking can challenge gender-based violence against Native women and build the tribal infrastructure necessary for Native sovereignty.

Esteban Lance Kelly follows with a political history of Philly Stands Up, a collective within the punk-anarchist community of West Philadelphia that emerged in response to a series of sexual assaults within that community. Kelly explains how the community attempted to resolve the contradictions of the initial radical-

feminist, gender-bifurcated response through an evolving constitution, principles, and internal political practices.

Alisa Bierria's interview of community organizer Theryn Kigvamasud' Vashti and Aishah Shahidah Simmons, who directed the documentary entitled *No!*, addresses how this form of media can serve as a technology of community accountability. The discussion reveals the complex dynamics of addressing gender violence in the black community through documentary film and community organizing. Kigvamasud' Vashti explains how organizing possibilities opened up and expanded once *No!* became available, emphasizing a potential link between media and community mobilization.

Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo's article on community accountability as pedagogical strategy shows how the classroom can be a site for the development of community accountability practices. It documents how students and faculty set out to create a community space to assess, witness, and contest the complex linkages of the forms of violence experienced by Chican@s/Latin@s. The authors reveal intimate lessons about a community's accountability process and the possibilities for reproducing and transforming violence.

In her essay, "Where Them Bloggers At? Online Reflections of Rihanna, Accountability, and Subjectivity," Alisa Bierria explores the role of media in generating discourse related to gender violence and accountability. Bierria examines survivor accountability and gender expectations, focusing on the implications of the LAPD-produced and leaked photo of celebrity and "good victim" Rihanna as a "battered woman/victim of crime."

The concluding piece, "Death and Rebirth of a Movement: Queering Critical Ethnic Studies," by Cathy Cohen, challenges the often dominant liberal, rights-based identity politics that characterize the outcry over queer youth suicides provoked by homophobic violence. By emphasizing the intersection rather than distinction between violence targeting queer and black, the critiques of several queer social justice organizations resonate with those made against the conventional anti-rape and domestic violence movements. Violence against queer youth is part of a broader context of violence perpetrated against youth of color through a project of pathologizing and criminalizing youth across race, gender, and sexuality.

This issue concludes with reviews of a powerful collection of new books on state violence, social movements, and community-based antiviolence activism. These texts share a political universe with the strategies, critiques, and political formations discussed in this issue and emerge from common roots. The political sensibilities demonstrated in these examinations, frameworks, and visions are informed by overlapping historical trajectories of state violence within queer, trans, Arab, and Arab-American communities and liberatory practices grounded in radical and accountable social movements.

### New Social Movements: Connecting Across Communities

This issue would not have been possible without the inspiration and camaraderie of people and institutions working together within and across communities to forge collective resistance to violence in all of its forms. We approach these topics in conversation and *diálogo* with the many spirits, minds, bodies, and formations. We speak their names to invoke and join in their wisdom, contributions, and *energía* as we actively engage in the ongoing work related to community accountability and transformative justice. They include: Asian and Pacific Islander Women and Family Safety Center (Seattle); Audre Lorde Project (New York); Casa Atabex Aché (Bronx); Casa Che of La Clinica de la Raza (Oakland); Challenging Male Supremacy (New York); Chrysalis Collective (San Diego); Colorado Antiviolence Program (Denver); Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA) (Seattle); Community United Against Violence (CUAV) (San Francisco); Conciencia Femenil (CSU Long Beach); Creative Interventions (Oakland); Critical Resistance (Oakland, Los Angeles, New Orleans, national); DataCenter (Oakland); Dulwich Centre (Adelaide, Australia); Females United for Action (FUFA) (Chicago); FIERCE (New York); Free Battered Women (San Francisco); Freedom, Inc. (Madison); Gender JUST (Chicago); Generative Somatics (national); Generation Five (national); Harm Free Zone (Durham, New York); local chapters and affiliates of INCITE! Women of Color against Violence (national); Institute for Family Services (Somerset, NJ); Justice Now (Oakland); Ke Ala Lokahi (Hilo); Kindred (Atlanta); MEChA de San Pancho (SFSU); MALCS (National); The Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse (Seattle); Project Nia (Chicago); Queer People of Color Addressing Intimate Partner Violence (New York); Queers for Economic Justice (New York); Revolution Starts at Home Collective (national); Rose City Copwatch (Portland); San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR) (San Francisco); Shimtuh: Korean Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Program (Oakland); Sista II Sista (Brooklyn); Southern California Library (Los Angeles); SpiritHouse (Durham, NC); StoryTelling and Organizing Project (STOP) (national); Support New York (New York); Sylvia Rivera Law Project (New York); Ubuntu (Durham, NC); Third Path (Honolulu); Transforming Silence into Action (TSIA) of Asian Women's Shelter (San Francisco); Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project (TGIP) (San Francisco); Women and Girl's Collective Action Network (Chicago); Young Women United (Albuquerque); Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP) (Chicago).

This issue of *Social Justice* is one effort to document and amplify the community accountability work taking place nationally and internationally, particularly over the last decade. Although it focuses on projects and efforts within the United States, these examples also illustrate the generative work across communities and borders. The war on terror and neoliberalism continue to assert that criminalization constitutes “common sense” and to export these ideologies and technologies as a

package of “modernization” and social improvement. Ten years after the historic convergence of the feminist of color antiviolence movement and the prison abolition movement, we are witnessing a powerful collective re-imagining and reconstruction of community and liberatory community-engaged practice with an explicit mandate to interrupt and transform gendering violence and other forms of intimate and community violence, as well as violence perpetrated by the state. This writing emerges within and for the purposes of social movement work. We intend to incite and inspire imaginations, and we ask you to join us in continuing the *diálogo* and the work to build free and just communities.

The remarkable work done by the collectives and organizations listed above, as well as by many others, has broken crucial and fertile ground. Yet we also challenge ourselves and our political communities to be conscious of the ways in which social movements become institutionalized and inadvertently reproduce patterns of isolation, stifle radical possibility and growth, and lead to forms of commodification that often typify nonprofit and academic culture.

We also urge caution concerning the danger of state cooptation of this work, recognizing the ease with which radical community projects have been appropriated and their oppositional power deactivated. Examples of “alternative responses” and “restorative justice” are already embedded within the prison project, creating the paradox that “alternatives to prison” fundamentally rely on a prison mandate.<sup>8</sup> As Smith notes in her article in this volume, alternative responses that lack a critique of the state can easily transform community into a supplemental resource, repositioning it to legitimize state intervention rather than to serve as the central agent.

We envision community accountability work that maintains a robust critique of colonial logics, fluidly weaves through innumerable movements, groups, and individuals, exceeds and transgresses the boundaries of institutions, adapts to continuing critique and insights, has a collective and sustainable level of resources, is consistent with feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-racial, and anti-colonial commitments, and transforms and empowers communities everywhere that violence persists.

## NOTES

1. “Race women,” or “Race Women,” was a self-defining term widely used by African-American racial justice activists in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Race women were community leaders who routed resources and skills toward the goal of “racial uplift,” which often included concerns related to gender and sexuality. Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Shirley Graham Du Bois are examples of self-identified race women.

2. INCITE! began in 2000 as an organization consisting explicitly of women of color. The organization was subject to internal and external criticism regarding the marginalization and exclusion of transgender persons. Gender-nonconforming people of color have since become central to its analysis and organizing.

3. In her momentous keynote address at the Color of Violence Conference in Santa Cruz, Angela

Davis (2000) observed that cadence calls depicting graphic violence against women during military training have spurred intimate violence against women. For that reason, an analysis of violence must consider state violence.

4. As editors, we reflected on the pitfalls and possibilities in the language and logic we invoke with respect to violence. As activists, organizers, and intellectuals troubled by the chasmic rifts in academic institutions that siphon off the people's knowledges, languages, and communities into irrelevance, we know that our words matter when we talk and write about violence. Our choice of terms throughout this "Introduction" is conscious, with words referring to specific histories, locations, movements, and knowledges. We recognize the limits and portals we summon and seek language that unsettles us from comfort zones by introducing the reader to the many expressions of violence. It is true that words cannot meaningfully voice the depths and tonalities we register or embody lived violence, as we transform violence. We are conscious of their inability to represent the complexities and continuities of relations and co-constitutivities between multiple forms of violence: colonial, state, racializing, gendering, sexual, domestic, and intimate. Some terms may be used to induce imperialist and white supremacist feminist tendencies or to impose a reductionist and isolationist gender frame that can obfuscate the politics of colonial and racial violence. Despite these caveats, we find many of them useful. These instabilities may inspire us, together, to begin to talk about and create new words.

5. The massive twenty-first century reordering of the U.S. government under the guise of concerns over terrorism continues to expand and intensify policing, detention, and incarceration of people of color and migrants. The prison-industrial complex expanded with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the Immigration and Control Enforcement Agency and with the many regressive policies and military invasions and occupations initiated during the war on terror. Though framed in the language of security, anti-terrorism, and antiviolence, the state unleashed terrorizing violence against communities of color in the United States and throughout the world. However, such framing made the antiviolence against women movement, and its many federally funded agencies and projects, complicit with these countless forms of state violence.

6. See Critical Resistance (2003).

7. See INCITE! (2003, 2004). In 2003, INCITE! drafted its community accountability principles. In 2004, it joined Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA), a community organization spearheaded by survivors of sexual and domestic violence who placed anti-rape work at the center of their organizing for social justice. Together, they convened an Ad-Hoc Community Accountability Working Group Meeting to discuss community accountability in progressive, radical, and revolutionary movements consisting of people of color. See INCITE! (2004) for a report on the gathering, including a call to action and preliminary recommendations.

8. One example is a recent book by Cheryl Swanson (2009). In this stunningly condescending work, incarcerated people require imprisonment to learn basic life skills that one otherwise learns as a child.

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