

18 Creative and Transformative Approaches to Justice

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molly: Many of us who work in and around sexual violence know that no amount of reform will ever *really* make the criminal legal system “better.” Indeed, as was the common refrain in the sexual violence support service I used to work for: “you can’t polish a turd.” However, despite the deep-seated nature of this knowledge, which stems from decades of organising work against state-based systems, when doing justice work around gender-based violence (GBV), it can often feel as though the criminal legal system is the best we can hope for.

This chapter, which arose from discussions beginning in June 2020 between myself, Melanie, Kamilah, Aviah, and Yara, culminated in an online-facilitated conversation hosted by the Violence Against Women and Girls Research Network (VAWGRN) and the *What Really Makes Us Safe?* project in September 2020. All five of us came to this conversation with different yet overlapping experiences. Some of us were or had been frontline workers in GBV support services. Some of us were writers, in academic and non-academic contexts. Some of us had experience in community organising and transformative justice (TJ) work. It is with these experiences in mind that we hoped that our conversation, and more recently this chapter, would buck against what I describe in my ongoing PhD work as an almost cruelly optimistic attachment to carceral systems and structures (Berlant, 2011), these being systems and structures rooted in punishment and punitivity. In doing so, we also seek to explore how carcerality is not simply located in a “prison-like building ‘over there’ but [in] a set of relationships that undermine rather than stabilize everyday lives everywhere” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 242). In taking this more expansive approach to carcerality, we hope to explore some of the ways that carceral praxes are showing up in frontline sexual violence support work, but more importantly some of the ways to navigate justice for survivors in more creative, transformative, and ultimately non-carceral ways.

In the first instance, therefore, this chapter is a space to reflect upon different experiences of doing creative and TJ work across four distinct spheres, these being: frontline work, community organising, therapeutic work, and writing. Importantly, while each author brings with them their own understanding of creative and TJ, we all understand it as something much broader than an accountability process between two people, and each of us sees this type of justice work as something that must be lived in the everyday (Lamble, 2021) as well as in the aftermath of conflict, harm, and abuse.¹ We hope this framing will be of use to people trying to push for creative TJ-oriented approaches in their organisations and to survivors who may not want a “process” but still long for transformation.

In this chapter, which we have written in a conversational format, we also attempt to tackle some of the knottier, messier questions that many of us have grappled with in doing this work and which we continue to work through to this day. We hope too that this will be of use to anyone thinking of moving away from carceral framings of justice towards TJ or simply more creative ways of approaching justice.

Experiences of shifting towards a more transformative praxis

molly: It is important for us to start by acknowledging that moving away from carceral structures and ways of working is difficult; for, as Jackie Wang expresses, so many of us are “sleepwalkers under the spell of the prison” (Wang, 2018, p. 316). With this in mind and given the stranglehold that the prison and carceral systems have on so many of our abilities to really imagine a world without carceral ways of doing justice for survivors, exploring some of the transformative frameworks that exist seemed a pertinent place to begin this chapter, something Melanie will speak about shortly.

We also wanted to begin by offering a space to reflect on the process of shifting away from carceral ways of doing the work, something that feels especially useful given we each have vastly different experiences of this. While Aviah and I both come from frontline GBV work and have gradually shifted into doing more transformative work elsewhere, Kamilah continues to find ways to imbue her frontline GBV work with a creative and transformational qualities. Melanie’s work has always been clearly guided by these transformative principles, while Yara has only recently noticed the ways in which her writing is clearly rooted in the principles of TJ. We hope these different experiences of navigating towards a more transformative praxis will each offer something distinct and help to illustrate that, as Wang goes on to note, “the spell (of prison) is never total” (Wang, 2018, p. 316).

Melanie: TJ comes out of the traditions of Black and women of colour feminism as well as trans and queer feminism, and my pathway into this work began there. I first learnt about TJ and community accountability alternatives to the carceral system when I was working as an assistant at my college’s sexual violence prevention and response office, and my visionary boss put the work of INCITE! on my desk. INCITE! is a US-based network of feminists of colour against violence. Their work, alongside that of many other feminists and queers of colour, taught me that we cannot truly separate individual justice for situations of interpersonal violence from other interlocking forms of oppression such as racism, transmisogyny, and ableism. For example, calling in organs of state violence such as police and prisons to try to get individual justice can end up re-entrenching the cycle of violence in survivors’ lives by criminalising or harming them or those they love. To quote INCITE! “the question is not, should she call the police. The questions are, why is that her only option, and can we provide other options that will keep her truly safe?” (INCITE!, 2003, para. 3).

Another thing that my transformative and healing justice forebears taught me is that I cannot only do this work from the neck up. To paraphrase something, I believe I first heard from “Black feminist love evangelist” Alexis Pauline Gumbs, resistance is healing and healing is resistance. We must heal trauma from oppression and violence that lives inside our bodies in order to change both our individual behaviour and the social structures that perpetuate harm. This is because our bodies are where social structures imprint on us and where they are reproduced, often unconsciously.

Kamilah: My experiences are somewhat different from Melanie’s. I predominantly work with cis-women survivors of sexual violence in a traditional therapeutic setting, many of whom have experienced sexual violence alongside other forms of systematic violence. This work has shown me that mainstream therapeutic formulations often lack the political and social frameworks to understand the underlying issues marginalised groups of survivors experience. These foundations teach us specific ways of engaging with each other and relating to people in the therapeutic space (Watson, 2019). For example, they incorrectly tell us that therapists or organisations always know what is best or that survivors are disempowered, or that growth and healing are obtained through the justice system. In addition, this training does not necessarily encourage practitioners to be critical of their lived experiences outside of their own emotional growth. Nor does it encourage or hold space for these

marginalised survivors to have a voice whilst they go through the training process (Charura & Lago, 2021). Many of these philosophies were formulated by white middle-class men and women in the global West, centuries ago, and yet to my knowledge critiques of the whiteness that sprouts from this genealogy and its impact on psychotherapeutic formulations are still relatively new (Turner, 2021).

Building on this, the creative ways of practice that I'm increasingly fostering are very much rooted around working with survivors in ways that do more than offer empathy, compassion, and unconditional positive regard. Instead, I believe that therapeutic practice should look more like therapeutic social praxis. This requires therapists to move away from an over-protection of survivors who come into the therapeutic space and instead to lean into uncomfortable issues outside of the room, name difference, and acknowledge that at times who we represent can be traumatising for those we support. A lot of the time this type of work is also about sitting in a place of unknowing, because the moment that we engage with people from that place of not knowing and questioning is the moment that a whole different dynamic is brought in. This place of unknowing requires a huge amount of vulnerability and congruence, and by this I mean being a human person rather than an expert therapist in the room and telling those I work with that that's the place I come from. In doing so I seek to challenge conventional notions of what it means to be an all-knowing overly powerful therapist and instead coming from a place of being myself who sometimes doesn't know or have all the answers. I'm not alone in this more radical practice, and it is deeply transformative for those I work alongside.

Aviah: I came into this work because of my own experiences of trauma and domestic violence growing up, both of which were a really big part of my upbringing. It was because of this that when I left university, I wanted to work in domestic violence. I had all these visions of working in an imagined 1970s style refuge that I hoped would do loads of really transformative work; however, the reality of doing this work was so different. At the time of going into the work, a lot of funding was channelled into domestic violence advocacy, a system modelled on US mainstream support services which were largely criminal justice focused (Shepard et al., 2000). As such, I ended up working in a service which, although not solely focused on the criminal justice system, encouraged survivors to go through it.

While doing this work, I found that many survivors I was working with were getting arrested, some for counter-allegations made by the person who had abused them and others for immigration offences, and this is what inspired my PhD research because I wanted to understand why this was happening (Day, 2018). Although I was very critical of the criminal justice system, during these early stages of frontline and PhD work, I definitely was not a prison abolitionist. It was only through my research and through activism that I was exposed to ideas of alternatives.

The push towards the criminal justice system has been the dominant response over the last 20 or 30 years in the UK (Gill & Banga, 2008) and, as such, it's very difficult to imagine any kind of alternative. Everything, every support service, is sustained by this system, so thinking about how we can divest from it feels really difficult. It is because of how impossible divesting can feel that turning to activism is so essential, since I believe it is only through organising that we are able to effectively integrate theory and practice and in turn find practical ways to respond to violence at home in our community. For example, I've learnt so much from groups like the Bay Area TJ Coalition (BATJC) who offer us practical tools for how to hold ourselves and our community to account and I've seen these models work in practice in my community. I've seen the power of chosen community which is often just as strong as blood ties.

Yara: When I began my first novel, *Stubborn Archivist* (Rodrigues Fowler, 2019), I was thinking about how to write about healing from sexual violence in a way that showed the boring, everyday side of being a survivor. I wrote from the point of view of a young, white, middle-class, British-Brazilian woman who has experienced sexual violence perpetrated by

her white British middle-class teenage boyfriend during their relationship. The criminal justice system doesn't feature in the book because in real life it wouldn't usually be present in a situation like that. The perpetrator and the violence don't appear that much either; instead, the book is about the protagonist and the other women in her family.

In these early stages of writing, I didn't have an abolitionist or transformative framework in mind – I hadn't come into contact with those ideas then. The question I had in my mind was: how can I represent trauma without romanticising it, dehumanising the subject, or (re)traumatising the reader? I took what I knew about depicting imperialist violence and applied it to writing about sexual violence because what I did have was the framework of postcolonial theorists, like Gayatri Spivak (1988, 1999), Homi Bhabha (2012), and Edward Said (1978, 2012). The postcolonial theory makes a strong argument against the British realist novel, which emerged as a dominant cultural form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By adopting a style that purported to represent reality – and in some cases that explicitly claimed to be true stories – early British novels were able to provide within their imagined but consolidating accounts of England and its empire – their “imagined geographies” (Said, 1978) – authoritative alibis for imperial and sexual violence.

I wanted to reject this epistemic dominance. This meant rejecting the “beginning–middle–end” formula. What I mean by that is the book holds information back from the reader and acknowledges its own incompleteness. It has a deliberate zigzagging shape, which mimics the back and forth of the protagonist's healing and remembering, which is shaped by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It is told in fragments, using blank space in poetry. It refuses to show a rape scene. Instead, I show the protagonist's experiences of healing, in all its silliness and awkwardness, as well as its pain and alienation from the body. In the final pages, you see her (re-)connected to her body experiencing joy, but not cured; there is no promise to take away the trauma, no “The End.”

A lot of this analysis is retrospective, but at the time of writing, which was before all the #MeToo posts began, I already knew I wanted to draw the reader's attention away from a single “beginning” moment of violence with one perpetrator – for example, the rape scene – towards the bigger intergenerational, intercontinental causes of that violence. For example, in *Stubborn Archivist*, the protagonist's teenage boyfriend is a super average blank-canvas guy; I'm not that interested in his agency or morality. Instead, I want the reader to see how big and blunt the weapon of settler colonialism is and was – that even 500 years after the Portuguese arrived in Brazil, a middle-class white girl in England in the 2000s is hypersexualised, exoticised, and harmed because of it. For this reason, the book had to be multigenerational, and colonial violence is woven throughout. For example, there is a scene where the protagonist's grandma tells her a “bedtime story” in which one of her ancestors kidnaps, and presumably sexually assaults, an Indigenous woman.

When my timeline started filling with #MeToo posts, which happened just after I finished *Stubborn Archivist*, it felt like being stuck between the “beginning” and the “middle,” constantly re-reading testimony of sexual violence and being asked to revisit the moment of violence.

Looking back, *Stubborn Archivist* goes some way towards a transformative approach because it focuses on finding a way for survivors to live joyfully, without recourse to carceral solutions or illusions of reversing the violence that happened.

Navigating non-carceral creative and TJ through survivor centred approaches

molly: It is important to note that the everyday practice of creative and TJ approaches is, in many ways, just as difficult as the process of moving away from carceral systems and structures in the first place. In fact, this type of non-carceral justice work is often experienced as a constant series of navigating negotiations and tensions.

One area these tensions are often felt most keenly is in regard to the balancing of two distinct yet overlapping goals of non-carceral creative and TJ, these being: (i) centring those who have experienced GBV and (ii) pushing for approaches that do not further embolden the carceral state and systems of punishment (Ben-Moshe, 2013). One way of moving through this at times knotty place, which we will speak to in this section, is by following a survivor centred approach as opposed to a survivor-led approach.

A survivor centred approach stems from the work of groups like Creative Interventions who show us that consequences and accountability are far removed from punishment and punitivity (Creative Interventions, 2012, pp. 2–30, s. 4F). This way of working shows us several things. In the first instance, it highlights that we must never shame or judge survivors for their decisions to engage with carcerality (brown, 2021, p. 21) or the carceral state when there are no other options (Creative Interventions, 2020, p. 25) and also recognise that it is common for survivors to hunger for punitivity (Creative Interventions, 2020, p. 101). However, it also shows us that we must hold the very real truth that at times “the choices of some survivors result(s) in violence for others,” and that these choices are not transformative (ackhurst, 2021, p. 422).

While there are many different toolkits for how to do this work (Chen et al., 2011; Creative Interventions, 2012; Dixon & Piepza-Samarasinha, 2020; Generation Five, 2007; Kaba & Hassan, 2019; Mingus, 2016), in practice the act of supporting survivors to work through “the inner struggle to let go of the carceral imagination” (Brazzell, 2021a, p. 170) can be incredibly challenging. Within this section, we also explore the role that fantasy, and more explicitly punitive fantasy, can play in this work.

Aviah: The idea of what it means to be survivor-led is something I have oscillated on for years, especially what it means in terms of our collective response to violence. Importantly, when thinking of punitive or carceral responses, it’s important for us to understand that carceral feminist responses are also not necessarily survivor centred. For while there are *some* survivors who see safety within these institutions, the vast majority do not, and so we have to question who carceral feminists are centring or being led by.

In critically thinking through the difficulties that lie in being led by survivors, I keep coming back to some work I did with a survivor when I was an IDVA (Independent Domestic Violence Advocate), supporting a white survivor of childhood sexual exploitation at the hands of a so-called “Asian grooming gang” (Gill & Day, 2020). The survivor told me that since she was abused she felt really uncomfortable being in South Asian areas and that this had been heightened through the press attention around what had happened in her case. While it was difficult for her to speak it through with me, she let me know that a part of her felt comforted by this racism, but at the same time she made it clear that it was something that she really wanted to go into, at some point later down the line when she felt like she could, that she wanted to change.

This memory always reminds me that the responses we have as survivors around what does and does not make us safe are sometimes productive, but also sometimes they aren’t. Sometimes there’s something that we feel is worth pursuing, but it may be really destructive. While it’s important to think about how, yes, survivors need to be central, this is also an individualistic frame. Instead, we need to be moving towards a place where we centre survivors and balance this against the needs of the community. Just because we hold harmful responses, it doesn’t mean that that can’t change. Some of the work that I did with that young survivor was around deconstructing the responses we hold as humans, to situate these responses within the systemic sort of racism and violence that’s going on. To be there through these types of processes with survivors is a collective response, and we need to have more of these safe spaces. Spaces where survivors can share their own punitivity and be supported through it. Spaces where they aren’t going to be judged but supported.

Kamilah: As has already been alluded to at multiple times, the reality of working with survivors is that most of the time they are not going to receive justice through the criminal legal system (End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2020). A significant part of the work therefore has to be around exploring what healing and recovery look like without the system. Consequently, when we are working with survivors of sexual violence, we are working with disappointment, anger, and frustration on multiple levels, and so finding creative ways to release emotions is essential in the therapeutic work. Working with these emotions is what really leads us to the truly creative imagination work. Rather than turning to a system that breeds more violence, we imagine where we can go from here without the system.

This kind of imagination or fantasy work necessitates a critical understanding of empowerment, something that is tricky when we also hold the ways in which so many organisations focus on individual empowerment without exploring the importance of the collective. In relation to fantasy, seeing survivors as disempowered individuals can also play a role in blocking the imagination to think creatively. In my practice, I support people I work alongside to access their emotions, work through shame, and act out fantasies which direct anger away from themselves in creative, non-violent ways, and the results are magical.

Yara: The importance of survivor centred fantasy arises in my work in different ways. With *Stubborn Archivist*, I wanted something that would not retraumatise survivors as readers and that would also show how embodied joy and healing are possible, and so placing survivors at the centre of this process was essential. However, increasingly, my work is focused on utopia, resistance, and drawing attention to how close we have come to revolutionary change before. I want to create revolutionary – or, if you like, transformative – texts.

For my second novel, *There Are More Things* (Rodrigues Fowler, in press), I'm researching the revolutionary movements that were active during Brazil's military dictatorship, writing a sort of fantasy narrative about two guerrilheiras² on a road trip, who may or may not be related to the book's modern-day protagonists. For this, I was strongly influenced by Anne Boyer's concept of "a communism of two," which she compares to the feeling of falling in love as "the place where you might have this opening into the possibilities of an unalienated healing, of true feeling" (Richards & Boyer, 2018, para. 56).

Another element of my work that engages with the importance of survivor centred fantasy is a short film work in progress project, currently titled *Ladies Room*, with filmmaker Jade Jackman and molly. It involved first gathering around 40,000 words of testimony from survivors, which we have then fictionalised. In this process, we saw there were several clear punitive revenge fantasies and we included them in the final script by opening with one of these fantasies because we wanted to show that revenge fantasy can be part of processing and healing that is OK to hold. Another "fantasy" aspect is that we show what might happen if the protagonist reported her sexual assault to the police and if it went to trial. In showing this, and then revealing it's not "real," we want the audience to feel relief that the protagonist hasn't gone to the police or through the courts because of how this can create another trauma. The film is predominantly set in a women's toilet, and we wanted to show this woman and her friend being the community, being the safety, and being the place where justice can happen. We explore similar terrain to Michaela Cole's *I May Destroy You* (Cole & Miller, 2020), in which the protagonist goes to the police (without success or "justice") and later fantasises about revenge. In including these fantasies, and arguably making them central to the script, we wanted to acknowledge, and forgive, the "ugly" desire for revenge, especially as it's not a realistic course of action for most survivors.

Melanie: Sometimes I get pessimistic that we as survivors are doomed to disappointment in the real world, so fantasy becomes the terrain of wish fulfilment, of justice fulfilment. But it can also give us a visionary horizon (even if unreachable) that can guide our steps in

the real world and soften the ground for us to plant seeds for a future that will be different for other survivors.

Fantasy is a space to explore ambivalence; interventions often demand decisiveness. Several years ago, I convened a healing circle of friends to help me heal from and address an abusive relationship and this helped transition me from the contradictions in my head towards taking action for my well-being in the world. I was surprised to find that this circle of supporters often gave voice to different, sometimes conflicting needs inside me. And that allowed my fractured mind to be reflected in something collective beyond my individual self. It also allowed me to externalise the conflicts in my head into conversations in the circle, which could then move in unexpected, new directions instead of dead ends. It didn't have to all be crowded in my own mind.

When I think about how to handle punitive wishes and desires for revenge, I think a lot about a distinction a friend of mine once made between loyalty and solidarity. There were times in my healing and accountability process when I wanted friends in that circle to just cheerlead for me and validate my experience. But I also needed friends who would hold me to my values and gently push back, like “I really see the pain that you're in. And I want to ask this question about your analysis of the situation. Have you thought about this element? Can you take a step back? What from your own past experiences is this restimulating for you and reminding you of?” Without intending to, I chose different people for the healing circle who were good at each of those roles.

Figuring out how to go from that conversation to action, from the multiverse of all these possible responses to choosing one path, is a whole other complicated story. Laying out all the different stories and fantasies and needs in the room can be a good first step. And then asking, what are the ones that we want and have resources to act on beyond this space?

The role of services and the state

molly: Two further important areas in need of “figuring out” when doing this type of creative and TJ work is, firstly, what role frontline GBV services and organisations can play and, secondly, where the state fits in with all of this.

As has already been highlighted in this chapter, many frontline support services are deeply enmeshed in carceral systems and structures. This is the result of decades of what some refer to as “co-optation of their causes by the carceral state” (Taylor, 2018, p. 12) and others see as stemming from “positions that were broader than criminal law reform and that acknowledged the perils of the carceral embrace” (Gotell, 2015, p. 56), and this enmeshment has several direct consequences.

In the first instance, as is highlighted in INCITE!'s (2007) *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, one impact is that more radical work is simply de-funded, and we can see this in countless examples in the UK where services have had to compromise or close their doors (Mirrin, 2016; Oppenheim, 2019; Sandhu, 2015). However, a further argument often made is that the professionalisation which has accompanied frontline service cooperation with the state has meant that radical work is rarely attempted (Campbell et al., 1998, p. 479), something Ann Russo speaks to when she notes that “while agencies offer crucial support to individuals in the midst of violence, because of the mandates of funders most are not focused on building the knowledge and skills of the broader community of people with whom survivors are most deeply connected” (Russo, 2018, p. 111).

Returning to the punitive fantasy explored earlier, there is an argument to be made that in professionalised services some workers may feel compelled to safeguard rather than sit with the fantasy. Here we seek to explore what role we think these services and the state more broadly can play moving forward.

Kamilah: Many third sector organisations in the UK embody and encourage a neoliberal concept of individualism laced with a hunger for expertise that does not truly “empower” the vast percentage of those who access their support. I know this is not simply a UK problem, which Melanie will speak to shortly and is perhaps summarised best by Brittney Cooper who notes that “the politics of personal empowerment suggests to us that if we simply “free our minds, then our asses will follow.” I’m not convinced that this is true... Power is not attained from books and seminars. Not alone, anyway. Power is conferred by social systems. Empowerment and power are not the same things. We must quit mistaking the two” (Cooper, 2018, p. 122).

Working in this context is difficult and seeing that the service you work for is perpetuating similar harms to those you are fighting against can be traumatising for workers, and that has a knock-on effect for survivors. The current unionising efforts in the UK GBV sector really highlight this struggle (United Voices of the World [UVW] GBV, 2019). Finding solidarity and sharing experiences of harm across the sector has shown us how entrenched neoliberal ideas of individualism and hierarchy are in the work we do. The deeply embedded nature of these ideas sometimes makes it feel as though we aren’t able to move away from this way of working. We’re all so deeply socialised and this seems to dampen our imaginations around what is possible.

Aviah: A couple of years ago I was working on an oral history project (You Can’t Beat A Woman, 2017) talking to the people who set up some of the first refuges in the 1970s and it was quite interesting hearing about the rationale of how things happened, why they happened, and why they ended up taking money from the state. There wasn’t necessarily broad agreement about this and there was really big disagreement about what relationships feminists and people involved in the anti-violence movement should have with the state: whether they should invest in the state, rely on the state, or hold the state to account; or whether it was the state’s responsibility to respond to violence and to fund refuges; or whether actually the state was the root of violence. Eventually, it was the former that won that argument in terms of the response to the state, but a lot of the people whom I spoke to are very reflective on the question of at what costs it was to accept money from the state to sustain themselves (Day, 2018, p. 305).

From speaking with people as part of this oral history project, I learnt how exhausting running a refuge out of a squat for years was, and I can’t imagine what people must have been going through trying to hold those spaces together without a great deal of money and so my heart completely goes out to those people. However, a lot of those I spoke to said that they had really big regrets about the decisions that were taken at the time. The state funding has come with an enormous number of caveats with the state dictating the rules, something molly has already touched upon. We’ve gone from having these refuges in squats, where survivors supported each other through mutual aid, to now having up to 200 women being turned away because of the way the state dictates the terms of their funding.

If we’re going to have an anti-violence movement that is genuinely responding to violence, and all forms of violence towards all kinds of people, then the state is never really going to allow us to do that. It’s always going to dictate terms, and we’re always going to be on the back foot. While these challenges are not unique to the UK, I think that because we’ve had the welfare state, there’s an expectation that the state will provide. However, as Angela Davis (2011) tells us, the root of interpersonal violence is the state. If we want to get away from that, we need to move away from the state and start imagining a different way of resourcing our movement.

I’ve not got an example of what this can look like in the future, but I’ve become more and more inspired by examples of where this has happened in the past, where domestic violence services weren’t services but were places where survivors supported each other through

mutual aid (Irving-Clarke & Henderson, 2020). One example of where this is happening today is Sistah Space, a space set up for African and Caribbean heritage women in London. They are different because they refuse to become professionalised in the way the rest of the sector has for funding. They take on the fight for survivors and they fight against the state. I've been working in domestic violence for 10 years and there is no other space like it in the UK.

At a recent protest organised to stop Hackney Council from evicting Sistah Space from their space, the police attempted to arrest a white woman. The Sistah Space CEO asked the protest to move into the road, where the crowd prevented an illegal arrest, and the police were not able drive after the woman because the protest blocked them. How many CEOs of charities would do that? That isn't "expertise," its solidarity and a willingness to take risks. Yes, people working in the sector have accumulated certain knowledges but siphoning that off as "expertise" that can only be gained through employment or expensive training downgrades survivors and allows the state to co-opt our work. When they siphon off our collective knowledge into paid "professional" and unpaid "lived experience," they co-opt our work and make us beholden to the state, and in the worst cases handmaiden of the state.

Yara: It's important to name here that shifting away from the state brings up so much discomfort. So many of us are so used to fighting austerity and demanding more money that to say we actually don't want the state feels uneasy. Latin American Women's Aid (LAWA), for example, was decommissioned by Islington Council because of the Coalition Government's cuts – which was this huge act of racist state violence and had to fight to continue to be funded. Specialist Black and minority ethnic (BME) refugees, like LAWA, and groups like Sisters Uncut have spent half a decade demanding more financial support from the state because this has felt like our only option (Imkaan, 2015; Sisters Uncut, 2019).

But we also know the state is the source of so much of the violence we're fighting. So then the demand becomes: dear government, please fund us, so we can continue spending money fighting you. We want our council to fund us, but we also have to keep fighting the council all the time on the phones to get housing benefits paid properly to migrant women. Being beholden to state and charitable funding forces services into respectability and neo-liberalism; for example, if you are a BME, migrant-run service and what you're getting is short-term, project-specific funding, that means that all you can offer your staff – who are BME, migrant women, that is to say part of the community you are serving – are short term project-specific contracts. In many ways therefore this same service ends up contributing to the economic precarity they know puts their community at risk, which in turn only reproduces harm in the long term.

Melanie: In the wake of Black Lives Matter uprisings and the discourse which followed around defunding police departments across the world (Elliott-Cooper, 2020; Kaba, 2020), there is a huge opening and need for TJ alternatives in general and for GBV in particular. One current live debate in the TJ movement is about scaling up and institutionalisation. TJ grew up in part in the ashes of the anti-violence movement's co-optation and holds onto the memory of how seeming success can actually spell long-term failure. So TJ has always been local, contextual, and experimental. Yet the DIY, self-organised nature of the work often leaves it inaccessible to many who need it and unsustainable to those who hold it. If we are going to make TJ accessible to an entire neighbourhood or city, we need sustainable, community-based infrastructures that avoid both the policing-light functions of much government social work and the domestication of the non-profit industrial complex, which keeps organisations risk-averse and deradicalised so as not to offend their funders.

I have seen the dynamics Aviah attested to in the US and to a lesser extent in Germany as well, where professionalisation of the anti-violence sector erodes the movement. In the face of the co-optation Aviah described, I want to make a call for us to become a movement

again, to get radical in the sense of getting to the roots. And the roots of sexual violence are systems of power, so we need to move away from the individualist framework Kamillah mentions, a rights-based liberal framework that has not served us well. As my Berlin comrades would say, we don't want a bigger piece of the pie, we want the whole bakery. So how do we skill up and scale up without imitating the corporate structures of capitalism reflected in non-profits?

In my ongoing PhD research (Brazzell, 2021b, para. 30), I talk about this as “scaling out’ instead of scaling up.” Instead of consolidating resources vertically into a single, large credentialing institution that concentrates power, this model (of scaling out) stays humble by spreading TJ skills in a horizontal, rhizomatic way. TJ scholar and practitioner Mimi Kim talks about this in the language of “regeneration,” an organic vocabulary rather than “the neoliberal corporate context [of] copyrights, trademarks and standardizations” (see Brazzell et al., in press). Importantly, there are anti-violence services pivoting towards TJ work despite the limits of the non-profit sector. Aviah’s example of Sistah Space is a fantastic one. Additionally, I want to lift up the work of API Chaya, an organisation in Seattle that addresses GBV in South Asian, Pacific Islander, and broader immigrant communities. API Chaya supports community members to do TJ work themselves through a 45-hour training programme after which the organization refers cases to the trainees. What I really love about this model is that the mentors and the cohort of trainees are paid, so people are resourced to do this work, but they are not being professionalised because they don't become staff members and their TJ work stays within their community. What I see in the API Chaya programme is that community wisdom is valued, alongside the recognition that communities also need coaching and training. I also see transformative work framed not as a service but as mutual aid and community care.

Working with those who cause harm – how can we do this transformatively?

molly: Arguably one of the knottiest of issues when thinking through how to do creative and TJ work which sits away from carceral systems and structures is how we can do this work with both survivors and also abusers and harm doers. There are broad, big, and sticky questions about how we should direct our energies and also how we can hold onto everyone's humanity, without pushing forgiveness onto survivors or their supporters.

From my own experiences, and as Melanie will attest to shortly in greater depth, working with those who have caused gendered harm – especially when we are also supporting survivors of this harm – is incredibly tricky. This is in part because in this work there is often a tendency to put those who commit gendered violence “over there,” and rarely do those doing work with survivors want to do work with those who commit harm. This comes from the very real need to protect survivors from further harm, but also from our own desires to not work with those who have caused harm; something that at times stems from wanting to believe that those who perpetrate GBV are far removed from the people in our own lives. This is something I felt often when doing frontline work where, with the benefit of hindsight, I can say that I often wanted those who had been abusive to the people I supported to be locked up somewhere I wouldn't have to think about them, somewhere where I could pretend they were just a bad person, because although I frequently told professionals whom I delivered training to that not all abusers and harm doers are monsters I was also deeply and emotionally invested in the idea that they were.

Importantly, the consequence of this type of thinking is othering and dehumanising of those who have often experienced harm themselves; for as Mariame Kaba and Danielle Sered tell us, “no one enters violence for the first time having committed it” (Gruber, 2020;

see also Kaba & Young, 2021; Kaba et al., 2021). This section will consider the responsibility we all have for doing this work and also question what it means to do work with harm doers and abusers transformatively and creatively whilst also centring survivors.

Kamilah: Abolition work, which is work that is rooted around “the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment” (Kaba & Hassan, 2019, p. 13), is complex and what this means in practice for survivors is very much under-discussed, and even more so in relation to therapeutic practice. There appears to be a fear of challenge, discussing alternatives to the justice system and even having a discussion with survivors about what they need and imagining what justice looks like for them personally. It feels like the trajectory over the years has been “report to the police, no don’t report to the police,” the end. Whether consciously or unconsciously organisational politics and practitioner politics have been imposed on survivors, leaving very little room for healing that is not aligned with a particular brand of feminist and empowerment theory.

Of course, creative transformational practices outside of the criminal justice system aren’t comfortable. However, what we know as practitioners and as members of society is that violence continues to happen regardless of prisons; in fact, prisons only embolden harm. We also know the justice system does not prevent sexual violence.

All this opens up questions around how we work with survivors who want to go through the traditional justice route. For me, I think that there is something about knowing that when you’re working with survivors, you’re holding that space for where they’re at however wide it may be. However, and arguably more importantly, you’re also being aware of the realities of the violence the carceral system creates and the fact that there are alternative ways of working for ourselves as practitioners.

For many survivors, it can be very much about preventing what happened to them from happening to anyone else. So the question thus becomes – how do we work with abusers and harm doers in ways which are not rooted in punitivity and which actually prevent more harm? Within the work that I do, I often wonder about the concept of collaboration and community healing. Harm isn’t one directional. These kinds of discussions are hard and complex; however, so often organisations and members of the therapeutic community pretend that they cannot happen – but they can and they must.

Melanie: Working with those who cause harm is just so delicate. To put it in perspective, I always come back to INCITE! (2008) and one of their affiliate organisations, Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA), which developed the concept of community accountability and described it as having four parts. These include: 1) changing community values and practices, 2) changing the structure and the conditions that make violence possible, including state violence, 3) survivor self-determination and support, and 4) accountability and transformation for people who cause harm.

It is important to keep all these pieces in mind, because when people speak about TJ, sometimes they focus on the work with harm doers and overlook the other three components. I understand why. There are more nefarious reasons for this, like harm doers sometimes being very good at making everything about them, hogging resources, or manipulating a process. And there are more understandable reasons: of the four parts of community accountability, work with those who cause harm is often the one we have the least practice with, and it is often a place that is loud because pain and harm are still happening there.

However, sometimes it is essential to zoom out and remind ourselves that we can still be successful, even if we choose not to work with those who cause harm. This may be because those involved have decided that they do not have the resources or the capacities for working with perpetrators. Some may do harm reduction work around the harm doer to prevent others from getting hurt without actually directly engaging that person.

If we do decide to work with folks causing harm, one obstacle is the rigid moralistic, individualised binary of evil perpetrators and innocent survivors that the carceral system operates on. The carceral model is one of separation and isolation. This is true at the level of subject construction, where the perpetrator and the survivor are fixed, mutually exclusive identities, rather than behaviours or experiences that change over time. And this is true at the level of the carceral method, the goal of which is to keep people apart: put the perpetrator in prison and the survivor in a women's shelter or refuge (which can mean a double separation not only from the perpetrator but also from their community).

While a perpetrator/survivor binary may be a helpful assessment tool for making sense of a specific situation of interpersonal violence, when we start to look intersectionally at not just interpersonal violence, but other layers of institutional and structural violence, the rigid perpetrator/survivor duality can become blurrier (Pusey & Mehrotra, 2011). We can recognise that both survivors and perpetrators may be surviving lots of different forms of violence, some of which they also recirculate. People who cause harm have often themselves experienced harm and trauma, which can become part of the source of their harmful behaviour. For example, some data indicates that children who grow up exposed to domestic violence are more likely to commit intimate partner violence as adults (Abramsky et al., 2011; Ehrensaft et al., 2003). This is an explanation, not an excuse for harmful behaviour, and it can help inform a more effective intervention with a person causing harm.³ We have to find ways to hold this complexity without allowing harm doers to play different forms of violence against one another in a divide-and-distract strategy that helps them avoid accountability for their actions.

We also must hold what Connie Burke and Shannon Perez-Darby and others from the Northwest Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse in Seattle have written so beautifully about – how survivors may also use violence, both as part of their resistance and survival and as collateral damage to their loved ones when surviving abuse. We have to acknowledge this reality in order “to meet survivors in the full, messy, broken, heroic, petty realness of the actual choices that survivors have made” (Creative Interventions, 2012, p.73, s. 5.6). If we do not, then we run the risk of upholding a fantasy about survivors that no one can live up to, particularly not marginalised survivors. One based on a racialised myth of innocence and reserved for “women who are both racially and behaviorally non-threatening and do not engage in self-defense, self-medication with controlled substances, commercial sex, gender non-conformity, lesbian sexuality, and other deviation from gender norms” (INCITE! & FIERCE!, 2008). This is the kind of fantasy that does not expand but contracts our imaginations.

Conclusion

Melanie and molly: As we hope this chapter has made evident, frustratingly, there are no easy answers or solutions in this type of creative, transformative, non-carceral work, and this can feel both uncomfortable and scary.

In thinking of what we want from the world we live in, we came back to one overwhelming conclusion: the dream that one day we have TJ centres with spaces for survivors to heal and for people who cause harm to change. While we may wish for these spaces, or containers, to be far apart from each other, we also know that the reality is that abusers and survivors are often living in the same community and still influencing each other's lives. A creative, non-carceral TJ praxis asks how we might see this shared community not as a liability but a strength. It asks how we might keep people in the community – not forcing survivors and perpetrators to maintain a relationship but activating community relations around them – to leverage social connection rather than punitive isolation as a force for change.

In the opening of this discussion in September 2020, we began by asking people to lean into any potential discomfort that arose from our call to let go of the criminal legal system, and in reading this chapter we would urge you to do the same. No one writer or thinker will possess all the answers and this chapter does not claim to either. Instead, we encourage those thinking of doing creative, transformative work to lean into the unknown. For while, as Ejeris Dixon notes, “we can’t return people to their lives before trauma or violence and that realization can be devastating” (Dixon, 2020, p. 206), each of us believes that the possibilities of transformation away from some of this devastation are limitless if we begin to move away from carcerality.

Notes

- 1 For a summary of the distinctions between conflict, harm, and abuse, see adrienne maree brown (2021, p. 13).
- 2 “Guerrilheiras” literally means women fighters, and in this case fighting against Brazil’s military dictatorship (1964–1988).
- 3 When efforts to humanize people who cause harm upset people in the mainstream anti-violence movement, I encourage them to explore their assumptions about responsibility and agency. If we think violence removes our agency and therefore our responsibility as people, that model is problematic because it privileges the oppressor classes as the only ones with real capacity for agency and responsibility and positions the rest of us as victims. For more on this and an abolitionist alternative, see Melanie Brazzell’s contribution to *Abolishing the Police*, edited by Koshka Duff (2021, pp. 161–178).

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