

The Desire to Heal: Harm Intervention in a Landscape of Restorative Justice and Critical Resistance

By Stevie Peace

Note: This article was inspired greatly, as many writings do, by the organizing it addresses and the people 'doing the work.' The author would especially like to thank Critical Resistance organizers Melissa Burch, Rachel Herzing, and Kai Lumumba Barrow for lending their time to an interview and additional follow-up questions; their thoughts and intimations run deep here, and in some places they have been directly quoted. The analysis of Restorative Justice Community Action comes directly from the author's personal experience, which has also taught him much over the months. The opinions and statements shared here are the author's alone, and do not reflect nor speak for Critical Resistance or Restorative Justice Community Action as a whole.

Our Story is Trauma

In the fall of 2006, a man approached me in the late evening, shouted “CHINK!” and bashed my head open with a U-bolt bike lock. I was 23 years old at the time. I’m often tempted to consider this to be merely a case of Vincent Chin redux, since the circumstances of my assault—a young Asian-American victim, a stranger as the perpetrator, the trappings of a hate crime, the bludgeoning of the head—are remarkably similar, save one difference: Vincent Chin was killed, and I survived. The significance is not lost on me; indeed, with each day I may still write, still walk, still be present and sustain, the significance rarely ever escapes me. And yet, the more time passes and the more I dwell on it, the difference between Vincent and me—or Sean Bell, or Sanesha Stewart, to name a few—seems less and less apparent. For if Vincent had lived—lived in spite of a baseball bat cracking his skull half a dozen times, mind you—he would have surely found his resulting ‘life’ of exceeding trauma, fear, and despair to be questionable, at best. My own recovery, full of these miserable musings, has similarly made me wonder whether dying, as Vincent had, would have been preferable (i).

That such a large number of us—larger than we even suspect—have lived with and survived one or multiple incidents of violence is clear. What is profoundly unclear is what we mean by ‘living’ or ‘surviving’ in the aftermath of violence. To know—to really, clearly, affirmatively know—that one has suffered harm(ii) at the hands of another human being is a terrible knowledge. That one is expected to continue on an uninterrupted trajectory of life in spite of this knowledge is dangerously absurd. That one should heal simply from long expanses of time, distance, ‘comfort’ or ‘normalcy’—none of which erase the terrible knowledge—is equally bizarre. Yet these expectations have remarkable staying power. I gave myself over a year, 1000 miles from New Orleans—the site of my assault—and inexhaustible amounts of comfort and normalcy living in Minneapolis/St. Paul, and all it took was an attempted robbery in March 2008—by a stranger, with the threat of violence, all the same markings—to remind me that I have not healed. As I sat on my bed later that night, shaking uncontrollably, seized once again by the possibility of an early, violent death, I realized that I had not even attempted to heal in the first place.

The absence of the individual’s desire to heal is not accidental. For we, as a people, a culture, a community, a society, we have also known great harm. Faced with this reality, our ‘answer’—if we can call it that—is to continue on. Surely some of this comes from the uniquely American myth of inevitable progress and our capacity for selective amnesia. Much of the motivation is also avoidance, for as any collective can tell you, working with the harms of racism, patriarchy, gender-normative hegemony and classism within a community while struggling against them outwardly is ferociously

difficult. Yet I submit that the roots of our dysfunction are far more systemic and historical than we care to admit. One need only begin tracking a partial list of scars—the genocide of American Indians, the killings and enslavement of African-Americans, the systemic rape and lynching and torture of both groups, the Trail of Tears, the Mexican-American War, the Civil War, the Jim Crow era, the purge of Chinese immigrants in the West and subsequent Asian exclusion laws, the ongoing beatings and killings of striking workers, the two World Wars, the internment camps, the Cold War and the McCarthy era, Vietnam, assassinations, counterrevolutionary tactics against Black Liberation groups, the killings at Attica (to say nothing of the enormous environmental damage exacted the whole time)—and we realize that whatever anguish we feel today in the wake of 9/11 and its disastrous military-industrial aftermath is but a continuation of what has come before. This is our story, then: trauma, ingrained over generations, with little to no chance of recovery. We are inheritors of a society rent asunder.

It is hard for any of us to even comprehend this history, this Narrative of Trauma written as much on our bodies as in our lines of thought. Yet comprehend it we try, if we are serious about healing; for our history does not let go, and we also hold fast to it. Our harms gather before our eyes in heavy, ominous piles, and once we take it in unflinchingly, a question arises: what are we supposed to do with all of this? How do we live in the aftermath? And all at once the Narrative of Trauma rushes in, rendering us catatonic. One would be hard-pressed to call this recurring paralysis ‘living.’(iii)

What interests me, then, is how people choose to *engage* harm, what they do with the heavy festering piles that aren’t going anywhere. I don’t believe the answer is as straightforward as committing to the social justice-radical-liberatory-anarchistic-antioppression-movement work paradigm full-on. Such work is essential; it demands an end to the harms suffered by the oppressed at the hands of oppressors. Yet it is one thing to demand an end to harm, and it is quite another to bear the brunt of harm when one’s demands are ignored. The work for healing justice carries many bruises. So how do we intervene on harm, how do we address it as both long-term organizing and everyday resistance? How do we develop a *harm intervention system* as part and parcel of our struggles? Nothing in the resolution of this predicament is obvious, but I maintain that the stakes could not be higher. A society, community, or culture unable to intervene on harm will simply not allow its individuals to heal.

Harm Perpetuation: The Prison-Industrial Complex and the Normalization of Violence

The political reality that we need to honestly address is that we do, in fact, have a ‘harm intervention’ system already in place. True, this system was not designed by us (at least, not *most* of us); truer still, it is not ‘ours for the taking’ if we wished to utilize it in our efforts to intervene on harm. But its existence is beyond evident, not only in its institutional composition, but also *imposition* through its practitioners and agents, its ideology and culture—its inseparability from individual lives and the ‘commons’ created by individuals. In the event of an assault, robbery, rape, domestic abuse, threat on one’s life, community disruption or even the *possibility of harm*, there is but one and only immediate recourse for intervention presented to us: get on the phone, dial 911, and bring in agents of the state.

It is not surprising that a great many people and communities, entirely cognizant of this (non)-option, do not follow this basic and near-universal procedure when the need arises. Just a few entanglements with the police, courts, protection agencies, and all other arms of the ‘criminal justice’ system are enough to convince us: it just isn’t worth it. More profoundly, it’s simply unreasonable: why should a rape survivor report their immense harm to an agency one neither knows nor trusts; why should a robbery victim turn to a court whose only concern is the robbery perpetrator; why should a young Black man, a sex worker, or a recent Latin@ immigrant request assistance from people that already assume them to be ‘criminals’? Yet whether or not we welcome intervention, refuse it, or find some other means towards it, the ‘criminal justice’ system remains the default. As such, trying to envision ideas of a ‘safe community’ or a ‘community free of harm’ without the system’s rendering of it (that is,

without all the coded race and class markers) is exceedingly difficult. Traced in *all* our lives—our norms, our standards, our relationships, our changes and flows—is the jagged thumbnail of this massive, consternating force.

There is a general consensus on the Left that the ‘criminal justice’ system is primarily an Orwellian moniker for a substantive ‘criminal injustice’ system. Yet both of these terms are entirely inadequate for such a complex, changing state-apparatus. The ‘criminal justice’ system is, at its heart, a harm intervention system. The intervention takes many forms—harm dispensation (policing and surveillance, especially of communities of color), harm accentuation (solitary confinement), harm cultivation (the prison boom, growth of detention centers, and prison privatization are just a few sources), and harm administration (the death penalty). Where harm exists, the state intervenes and exacerbates: it is a *harm perpetuation system*. Perpetuation of any kind, of course, can’t happen in the United States without profit, material and immaterial; it is not a system we are witness to so much as a *prison-industrial complex*, a term first coined by Critical Resistance and increasingly gaining acceptance. Its development in the 1970’s coincides with the advent of governmental ‘counterinsurgency’ tactics, the rollback of civil rights achievements, and the stunningly quick beginnings of the mass incarceration of Black men. The prison-industrial complex is a supernexus of capitalism, racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, one that currently boasts over seven million direct ‘participants’ with an upsettingly diverse portfolio (its fastest growing prison population is women of color). It criminalizes every historically oppressed people in American history, and makes serious money off of them as well. That the United States has the largest imprisoned population in the world—over 2 million as of today—is due primarily to the enormous growth of prisons to house them, as well as the increased involvement of contracting companies that thrive off of them. We ignore the complex at our own peril.

But there is another, much more serious consequence of what passes for our ‘harm intervention’ system: the normalization of violence. One could argue that, as the history of the United States both domestically and internationally shows, violence has always been normal; its founding was predicated on violence, its rise as a nation also through violence, its operations in the world only as a result of violence. And yet there is something disturbing, even suffocating, about where our normalization has turned: not so much who is committing the harm and who is being harmed (groups that have remained fairly steady over time), but rather that the prison-industrial complex financially depends on (and thus works toward) *increasing harm unendingly*. There is something more, too: that as the complex grows more efficient at compounding violence, we are witnessing harm as an element of the social fabric. And even more: that our Narrative of Trauma is the *only* narrative we intimately know. More still: that harm is now synonymous with our humanity. This insidious conclusion is a real one; it is no wonder that so many activists (myself included) have insisted, at one point or another, on suffering harm needlessly, often dangerously, as a means of expressing solidarity with everyone else who has been harmed (involuntarily, in their case). That so many of us on the Left have embraced the slogan “Don’t Mourn, Organize!” as our general attitude to harm should give us pause. We might start to seriously challenge the normalization of violence by considering how to mourn *and* organize all at once.

The struggle to respond to our harm perpetuation system with *actual* harm intervention is a daunting one. Yet there are precedents, for the organizing of harm intervention has already been addressed in a number of movements; specifically, the AIDS activism of the 1980’s, the Black reparations movement, the restorative justice movement, and the work of prisoners’ rights and prison abolition groups are just a few of the pioneers in this arena. Harm intervention has increasingly been a focus in migrant workers’ organizations, and has been applied in groups targeting sexual violence, domestic abuse, and violence against women of color. Despite the wide and varied exploration of these interventions, engagement with harm is not a ‘movement among movements.’ Instead we have a landscape of harm interventions, each project unique and prominent, but still quite separate and autonomous. Each is preoccupied with

similar political flows and processes that mark much of contemporary organizing—‘undoing’ (removing sources of oppression) and ‘becoming’ (arriving at new ways of living and organizing our lives). What differentiates these projects from the rest are a few guiding recognitions: that harm is not just violence or consequence of oppression, but also a *political act*; that trauma is a *political state*; and healing, therefore, is *political resistance*.

The Landscape of Harm Intervention: Two Works in Progress

Eleven years ago, a small number of neighborhood organizations in Minneapolis, Minnesota came together to explore the possibility of launching a restorative justice program. One year later, thousands of activists, former prisoners, academics and community members came from around the country to Berkeley, California for a conference, entitled “Critical Resistance to the Prison-Industrial Complex.”

The resulting organizations from these gatherings have sustained up into 2008 and have shown no signs of stopping. Restorative Justice Community Action, now a nonprofit, operates in 18 Minneapolis neighborhoods and is still expanding. Critical Resistance, a national organizing body, has local chapters in Oakland, Los Angeles, New York City, Washington DC, New Orleans, Chicago, Baltimore, Tampa/St. Petersburg, and Gainesville. Though disparate in myriad ways, they are both well-established on the map of harm intervention, and thus warrant some examination into how they have sustained over time, what their work looks like, and what challenges lie ahead. I’m particularly interested in these two works in progress for another reason: each has chosen, very deliberately, to center their struggles against harm in relation to and in response to the prison-industrial complex. This does not mean, as we’ll see, that their approaches are similar.

Restorative Justice Community Action (RJCA) makes its mark on the landscape through *harm reparation*, focusing specifically on the safety, livability, and health of communities. Police, courts, and probation offices refer citations for ‘livability offenses’ (‘victimless crimes’ that still have pronounced effects on communities, such as soliciting prostitution, littering, graffiti, urinating in public, and noisy assemblies) to RJCA, who then screens them out for citations only in the neighborhoods the program serves. The coinciding offenders, should they choose to accept RJCA rather than pay a fine or go to court, are placed in a ‘community conference,’ a facilitated circle that includes offenders and members of the community where the offenders were cited. The community conference is an intervention; as the circle proceeds, offenders are held accountable for their actions, community members are able to express how the offenses harm their neighborhood, and all participants work together on how each of the offenders can ‘make things right,’ a plan which, if successfully completed, usually results in the dismissal of their cases.

The form of intervention used by RJCA is common to other restorative justice programs. ‘Restorative justice’ is itself a very old concept, predating the punitive system of ‘criminal justice’ by many centuries; its premise is simply that ‘crime’ or ‘harm’ (however a society defines it) is a violation of people and relationships, and therefore ‘justice’ is the righting of wrongs against people, the ‘restoring’ of relationships. (This is a direct contrast from conventional ‘criminal justice’, which holds all ‘crimes’ to be violations of the State and the law.) Indigenous peoples throughout the world practice restorative justice as their primary harm intervention system, to much success and acclaim; however, restorative justice’s application, conception, and place in the Global North—enjoying particular popularity in the United States, Canada, and Europe—is a very new phenomenon, and the relative ‘success’ of this mass appropriation of indigenous culture deserves some close scrutiny.

Firstly, it must be pointed out that restorative justice has not exactly functioned as a ‘movement’ in Minnesota. The state is well-recognized as a forerunner in restorative justice, one that other states look to as a model. This is only partially due to clamor from its citizens, organizations and nonprofits; mostly, *the Minnesota Department of Corrections* spearheaded restorative justice. As its primary

vehicle, the Department of Corrections secured funding, institutional support, and government backing in creating hundreds of restorative justice programs—most of them operating directly from the different arms of the ‘criminal justice’ system. RJCA’s place as one of the few community-based restorative justice programs in Minneapolis/St. Paul is particularly important, but it does not erase the overwhelming presence of restorative justice within the control of the state. Naturally this raises the question of cooptation, for even though Minnesota leads the nation in its seemingly ‘progressive’ embrace of restorative justice, its ‘criminal justice’ system also is one of the national leaders in racial disparity among its prisoners. (Minnesota had the worst record of disproportionately incarcerating Black people in the late 1990’s, right when RJCA first formed.) Of course, RJCA’s response to this is to reach a high volume of offenders and keep them out of the system; yet it’s impossible to say what effect, if any, the program has on Minnesota’s larger handling of its ‘criminals.’

Additionally, the significance of how RJCA is situated in relation to the ‘criminal justice’ system cannot be overlooked. From the program’s vantage point, the source of harm is not the prison-industrial complex, nor its many oppressive forces; it is the offenders themselves. The victims are community members affected by the offenses, and no one else. That each ‘offender’ committed a ‘harm’ that impacted a ‘victim’ is very real, and not in itself problematic; yet the absence of a larger power analysis in this scheme is glaring. RJCA has sustained itself over the years in large part because of cooperation with elements of the ‘criminal justice’ system, yet this cooperation demands an acceptance of the terminology, definitions, and notions of ‘crime’ that end up reifying the current system, not cultivating alternatives like restorative justice. The power analysis is needed beyond RJCA, and Minnesota too, since so many of the restorative justice initiatives that pervade the United States have seemingly ignored the reality that the Global North was built, and still is built, on systemic harm and violence. Taking this into account, one is right to wonder whether ‘restorative justice’ is an accurate moniker for the many programs that claim the name; indeed, if the purpose is to ‘make things right,’ the question inevitably arises as to just how ‘right’ things were beforehand. Without these questions, the normalization of violence goes unchallenged.

Yet these overarching challenges of political composition, positioning, and autonomy do not warrant a complete write-off of restorative justice. Several unusual and promising aspects of RJCA’s work are worth mentioning, most notably the people it serves. The program has enjoyed astonishing success appealing to hundreds of community members, many of whom are far outside the radical/Left spectrum that most organizers have adjusted to. For community members, ideology matters little compared to more recognizable tenets: it gives a victims a voice they otherwise wouldn’t have, it holds offenders accountable much better than the ‘criminal justice’ system would, and it serves as a tool for restoring community codes of respect and dignity—an essential, if not entirely sensible, response to harm’s denigrating infusion into our lives and relationships. Through their participation in RJCA, community members became practitioners of restorative justice, as both a goal and process; this has led to other methods of everyday resistance, as participants look beyond the narrow scope of ‘crime’ and start finding ways to create safe, supportive communities that can turn to each other when harm arises, instead of notifying the police. Learning an entirely different way of addressing harm and applying it in all parts of their lives, community members have opened up the possibility of healing. For many, the feeling is transformative. These changes cannot be divorced from their particular context; all the same, we might learn a great deal from the promising outcomes of this attempt at harm intervention.

Critical Resistance (CR), on the other hand, has an entirely different political composition. Its primary goal is *harm reduction*; its chosen site of struggle is the prison-industrial complex, in all its manifestations. Recognizing the complex’s failure to address harm, as well as its ‘criminal’ operations of perpetuating and exacting harm on oppressed peoples, CR demands the abolishment of the prison-industrial complex; the allusion to ‘abolition’ is intentional, out of a recognition that previous

generations had worked to abolish the system of slavery, not reform it. CR's intervention strategy is mostly three-pronged, focusing on decarceration (reducing the prison population), ending prison building (reducing the amount of prisons and jails), and alternative practices (reducing reliance on the prison-industrial complex, including prisons and policing). Through this reduction work, CR organizes to stave off the booming prison industry, decrease its capacity and presence, and eventually force its quiet exit into nonexistence (or irrelevance).

This direct response and resistance to an enormous oppressive apparatus like the prison-industrial complex is not significantly different from the approach of other social movement organizations. From the perspective of harm intervention, however, the work is exceedingly difficult and continuous, yielding few victories and transformations—a marked contrast from the ease of RJCA's intervention efforts. CR's sheer survival—one that will be marked this year at CR10, a tenth-anniversary celebration and strategy session—seems the most remarkable feat of their existence. Part of this comes from a very horizontal structure: that is, there is no 'national organization' so much as there are local chapters that compose it. Each chapter wages campaigns that are unique to their specific region; CR national staff provides assistance, but otherwise allows autonomy in the chapters' organizing efforts. There are also no national CR campaigns. This might seem problematic, given the national nature of the prison-industrial complex, but organizers with CR are adamant that grassroots struggle and local coalition-building simply wouldn't work well in a 'national organization' defined by hierarchical relationships. The flexibility and complexity of the resulting work has also encouraged new dialogues and revisions to CR's conception of the prison-industrial complex and the ways to resist it. Through national gatherings every few years, chapters share their changing analyses, sharpening their critical frameworks. Organizer Melissa Burch said these discussions are instrumental for "redefining the problem" of the prison-industrial complex: "That kind of intellectual work that has translated into a difference in how people actually organize on the ground is one of the main things that we've worked on and that we've accomplished." Added Kai Lumumba Barrow, a fellow CR organizer: "We're not moving with one set of answers. We're moving with critical questions."

CR's other primary source of grounding and support is the remarkably headway it's made in redefining the prison-industrial complex and the terms of harm engagement—especially in relation to the Left. Granted, there is no Left consensus on the need for prison abolition—that day may still be a ways off—but CR's ability to influence the discussion has increased dramatically over the years. Much of this derives from their coalition-building efforts. Whether seeking amnesty for Katrina prisoners or fighting to stop the opening of new prisons in California, CR has found a multitude of organizations to join them, and the mutual respect and trust built over time has been encouraging. Rachel Herzing, another CR organizer, remarked, "I don't feel that we've had to make very many compromises politically in terms of how we do our work," and the statement applies to both the prison-industrial complex they face as well as the groups they work with. One consequence of CR's respected reputation is a drawing in of voices frequently ignored and silenced by the state, communities, and many social movements: the prisoners themselves. For Kai, it is more than a matter of representation: "We see ourselves as accountable to those who are directly impacted by the [prison-industrial complex]: prisoners, former prisoners, family members of prisoners, people who are most often policed."

Similarly to RJCA, CR appeals to harm victims and remains victim-focused. It's just that CR, with a solid power analysis and eye for the bigger picture, has a different idea of both the 'offender' and the 'victim.' What the state considers an offender, CR recognizes as a victim; the distinction comes out of CR's understanding that most 'offenders' are oppressed peoples that the prison-industrial complex laps up in order to survive and keep growing. This doesn't deny that 'offenders' committed harm; rather, it compares the harm they exacted to the compounded harm exacted on them by the complex. CR also questions our definition of 'crime' and 'harm,' not only in terms of highly disproportionate sentencing

for certain ‘crimes’ but also in terms of whether these definitions sync up with communities’ perceptions of harm. The refusal to accept the prison-industrial complex’s terminology prompted me to ask Rachel what she thought of restorative justice, which in most of its manifestations in the Global North did not refuse the terms that served the state. Rachel was swift in her reply: “Restorative justice has been so completely co-opted...we at CR don’t use it as a model.” Torn between RJCA’s hampered but significant successes and the brutal reality of restorative justice that Rachel emphatically reaffirmed, I considered the difficulty of avoiding cooptation, and wondered what would exactly be the role and importance of ‘alternative practices’ in all harm interventions tied to the prison-industrial complex (since it’s clear that, of the three prongs, this one is decidedly murkier than the other two in CR’s organizing).

CR has developed well compositionally, and its continued autonomy both within its chapters and in relation to other organizations (including the prison-industrial complex) is a promising sign for years to come. Such grounding is crucial, for the work will assuredly not get any easier. The prison-industrial complex got an abruptly huge boost after 9/11, due to increased consolidation, the advent of homeland security, the building of detention centers and more surveillance and policing—signs of an encroaching military state. The complex is also wising up to CR and the prison abolition movement, finding ways to continue growing in spite of anti-prison campaigns. “They’re continuing to build prisons even as we’re throwing up more road blocks,” noted Rachel. As CR works towards outsmarting and out-organizing their colossal enemy in this exhausting struggle, one might be hesitant to ask where the lines of healing begin in this scheme. Perhaps it comes with successful battles in particular zones, betraying gaps in the prison-industrial complex’s armor. Perhaps it develops out of a different restoration—the restoring of prisoners back to their families and communities, the restoring of communities after the shroud of heavy policing finally abates. Perhaps, given the stark circumstances, this is simply a question that must be asked later, a question that will resurface once we know for sure if the arc of the prison-industrial complex can be stalled and reversed, or if it will continue on its long, agonizing, and violent ascent.

What Would it Mean to Heal?

A great amount of interest, analysis, and unexpected thoughts have stemmed from the question that preoccupies the Left of today: “What would it mean to win?” This discussion is an encouraging sign. It is, however, not the only discussion we need at the moment.

At the 2007 National Conference on Organized Resistance in Washington DC, I found space in a packed room to listen to three woman of color organizers speak about their post-Katrina experiences and challenges.(iv) All three were from New Orleans; one had returned, one was in the Bay Area, the other in New York City. I had spent less than two months back in Minnesota at this point, and only four months had passed since my assault. Yet I remained committed to the struggles of the Gulf Coast, and was eager to hear of any new developments in the work in my absence.

Then, seemingly out of the blue, when panelist Maya Dempster was asked of the greatest difficulties in her current work, I heard this:

There was never a time we had to actually cry over our city... We just kept running, kept going, kept going and all of a sudden it was a year had passed and we were still moving, still trying to find housing, still trying to just live. Those things were interrupted greatly. Life has not returned to normal, there is no sense of normalcy. We’re still not OK.

Her answer stunned me. It seemed inconceivable to me that, among the daunting and frustrating challenges of post-Katrina recovery, ‘not having time to mourn’ would be one of them. The possibility never entered into my head during my 15 months in New Orleans. And yet, in a horrible flash of clarity, I understood it was *the* challenge of the hour. I remembered how I had barely given myself four days of

recovery before I was back in busy mode, doing my work, attending meetings, trying to hunt down a place to stay each night after having been evicted prior to my assault. Though I had survived, I had not reflected on what I had lost; though I was clearly not OK, I still did not give myself time to mourn. It was a voluntary decision. For Maya and hundreds of thousands of others, there was no decision. The difference, and its significance, was not lost on me. Maya's words haunt me to this day. And the struggle, the 'fight to win,' is not the only concern occupying my mind.

More and more, we are answering the question of what it means to work, to fight, to resist. We are even beginning to examine what it means to 'win.' We have not yet asked what it means to heal.

The question of healing has weighed heavily on me for some time now, in all its permutations. "How do I heal? How will I know when I'm healing? Is there an endpoint to healing? Do I heal continuously simply by the act of living? What if healing is impossible?" It is astonishing, when one stops to really consider it, that countless spiritual leaders, gurus, church officials, psychiatrists, counselors, therapists, musicians, artists, writers, and even politicians have contributed an endless array of thoughts on the subject, and yet healing remains the same ambivalent nebula that no one can easily decipher. Perhaps, as bell hooks laid out so clearly in *All About Love*, it is time to unpack our assumptions and perceptions and establish a new, multi-faceted, and abruptly high standard for what we want. Love, according to hooks, isn't just commitment, intimacy and trust; it's also community, solidarity. Love is political.(v) So may it be here; perhaps the crux of healing confounds us because we have yet to truly address its political dimensions. Where that discussion goes is beyond the confines of this article, yet we would do well to go at it all the same.

And then there is the landscape—the harm reduction work of Critical Resistance, the attempts at reparation at the core of restorative justice, other mountains, mesas and plateaus scattered over the prison-industrial complex bedrock that we all dejectedly stand on. As we look out at the full breadth of the horizon, it seems clear that the last thing we desire is an old-school upheaval, the replacing of our 'harm intervention' system with another, more 'just' (but equally blanketing and bleak) system. And where would we stand when our jackhammers have finally decimated the ground? Thinking beyond the metaphor for a moment, would we be willing to tear down *any* oppressive system if we lacked the accountability, trust, dignity and faith to support us? Movements around the world are only now starting to honestly grapple with this dilemma. Harm intervention has a place here; it is more than an organized 'undoing' of oppressors or a 'becoming' of communities. At its heart is *renewal*, a capacity and commitment to restoring what can be restored, mourning what has been lost, engaging what is at stake—all this in spite of harm. In doing so, we work with our History instead of being subject to it. We acknowledge harm while developing 'desire' for healing. We honor our Narrative of Trauma while flowing through it into the entirety of our creative potential. That is: *we intervene so that we may live*.

Much of what is suggested here is still conjecture. It is just as well; given the necessary autonomy and locality of most harm intervention efforts, the results of such work will doubtless spawn more conjecture—"asking more questions than answering," as Kai from Critical Resistance puts it. As such, the question of "What would it mean to heal?" smacks of a certain universality that might also need to get broken down. If harm intervention provides structure, context, and clarity to healing, then wherever one positions oneself on the landscape determines, in part, the definition, magnitude, process, and expression of healing. When the building of a detention center is successfully halted, or a New Orleans resident is released from wrongful imprisonment, or a neighborhood establishes community accountability practices, or an offender apologizes to a victim, the consequences are clearly varied; and yet a similarity exists, subtle, felt but not seen. I am often impatient to see where these tremors lead. I also know that with each day I walk, each day I write and sustain, I can also wait.

And who can say, assuredly, that we need wait forever? Who knows when the right mix of elements could yield a *mass intervention*, unforeseen and unexpected? We might worry less about time and

consider more our own fortitude. Do we dare to undo, renew, and become our bodies? Our lives? Our entire understanding of organizing? Do we dare to flow out of Narratives of Trauma? Do we dare to substitute, in short, our sturdy, forlorn landscape for something slightly more liberating?

i Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese-American man from Highland Park, Detroit, was killed in June of 1982, outside the club where he was holding his bachelor party. His killers, two white autoworkers who had accused Chin of driving them out of work, were fined and put on probation. The lenient sentence spawned outrage and massive organizing in Asian-American communities nationwide; Chin is now widely known as the most prominent victim of anti-Asian violence. Sean Bell, a 23-year-old Black man from Queens, New York, was killed in November of 2006 just outside a club, *also* where he was holding his bachelor party. Five undercover police officers fired 46 times at Bell and two others. Three of the officers were charged in the killings, and in April of 2008 found not guilty. Sanesha Stewart, a 25-year-old Black trans woman from Bronx, New York, was stabbed to death in February of 2008. The man who killed her claimed a “trans panic” defense—namely that the shock of discovering her gender identity drove him to end her life (despite the fact that the two had been intimate for several months). The trial for her assailant is still pending.

ii I use the term ‘harm’ throughout this article; it is a very cautious, yet very deliberate choice. When taken in the proper contemporary context, ‘harm’ certainly does not capture the essence of our unfortunate situation, and naming things for what they are—violence, war, destruction, devastation, annihilation, genocide and the like—is one of our more crucial tasks, in a vocabulary besieged by euphemisms. But unlike this frank terminology, ‘harm’ avoids the reification of the Narrative of Trauma; that it is both noun and verb, action and consequence, allows us to engage with ‘harm’ as endpoint, startpoint, and flow, not a frozen state of being. Additionally, terms such as ‘pain,’ ‘injury,’ or ‘imbalance’ are avoided here; though such language is common in the restorative justice arena, I want to maintain the reality of *infliction*, of *encounter* between individuals, where one *does* to another. ‘Harm’ carries this connotation, irrespective of its use.

iii Though I am not nearly as well-versed in the words of Foucault, Negri, Freire, and other on-point writers as I should be, I know that much of these musings on harm, trauma, and healing are inspired by James Baldwin, whose acute analysis and honesty opened up new worlds of thinking, some of which are still opening, and some of which have yet to open. I recommend a close reading of many of his works. His early recognition of the necessity of healing, confounding as it is, is best illustrated in *The Fire Next Time*; also, in *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin highlights the dangers of the Narrative of Trauma in his searing criticism of the ‘protest novel’ and the doomed characters these Narratives produce, such as Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*.

iv The workshop—“You Can’t Kill the Spirit: A Forum with Three Woman Organizers from New Orleans” was presented by the Catalyst Project, a San Francisco Bay Area-based white antiracist center devoted to political education and movement building.

v bell hooks seems to be the equally-radical-yet-extremely-hopeful antithesis of James Baldwin. *All About Love* is just one of her inspiring reads, and is worth a very close reading.

2 Responses to “The Desire to Heal: Harm Intervention in a Landscape of Restorative Justice and Critical Resistance”

1.  jon hanzen Says:
[October 8, 2008 at 6:00 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

To Stevie Peace and or Others' whom are involved with 2008 Whirlwinds Talk and Discussion events:

Hello- my name is Jon Hanzen. After viewing a flyer pertaining to an upcoming event of Whirlwinds in Oct. 23rd at The Black Rose in Portland Oregon I visited this website to learn more about the organisation and inquire about participation. And as I plan to attend the upcoming Whirlwinds Talk and Discussion in Portland on Oct. 23rd. I am interested in presenting a topic prior to or during the event to open up for discussion.

After privately philosophising and analysing related topics on alternatives to our current state of affairs as related to a Global Crisis and Environmental degradation I have theorised a possible model for reformation, based on sustainability principals. It is this "viable model for sustainability and reformation" that I would like to present, as well as listen to and participate in others presentations and discussions.

Please feel free to respond to and e-mail me with any comments on this as an offer to engage me in Topics of interest in Human Ecology, Sociological Reformation and Proactive solutions to a world in crisis. Thank you Sincerely Jon Hanzen

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