

A World Without Walls

Stopping Harm & Abolishing the Prison Industrial Complex

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In exploring what life could look like once we abolish the prison industrial complex, one of the first questions we almost always run into is how to address harm without policing, surveillance, and imprisonment. Fortunately, many of us in the U.S. are already establishing principles and practices for confronting harm and violence that do not rely on policing and imprisonment.

The Abolitionist posed five questions to several organizations leading this work throughout the U.S.—Creative Interventions, Communities United against Violence (CUAV), Challenging Male Supremacy Project and Philly Stands Up. These organizations are developing practices, principles, and terms that directly respond to the need to develop abolitionist strategies of responding to harm. The work of these groups illustrates that abolition is not only possible, but practical, necessary, and within our grasp.

What is the role of community accountability/transformative justice in abolishing the prison industrial complex? How do we make accountability systemic or community-based rather than focused on individual people or harms?

Morgan Bassichis, CUAV: Building up transformative ways of dealing with harm is one piece of a larger cultural transition from a way of life that values profit to a way of life that values life. We are not developing a replacement for police or prisons or a one-size-fits-all fix, but instead infusing our communities with skills to create resilient, honest, loving relationships.

As our movements struggle to redistribute resources and dismantle violent institutions, we have the opportunity to imagine how we want to be with one another. Real accountability—doing what we

say we will do, and being able to get back on track when we get off—is a chance for us to show ourselves we don't need the kind of phantom "security" that we're told is just around the corner

of one more prison construction, police expansion, immigration law, border wall, home alarm system, criminalizing policy, or expelled individual. We are reorganizing our communities around a value of support. We envision families, friend groups, neighborhoods, organizations, workplaces, classrooms that have solid skills and capacity to support one another, particularly in the wake of violence or conflict. All of these places will have more access to healers, but also everyone will think of themselves as people who can foster healing where they live, work, organize, and play. This requires (re)building core skills: witnessing and sitting with each other's feelings and experience without jumping to resolution; affirming one another's survival; helping each other tap into resilience; figuring out and expressing our requests and boundaries that produce more equitable ways of relating to one another. We will understand we are all surviving violence—state, economic, community, intimate, cultural—and that all of our bodies, spirits, and emotions deserve compassionate care. As we practice compassionate self-awareness more and more, we will foster relationships and communities capable of dealing with challenges of all kinds.

The PIC wants us to believe that police, prisons, and surveillance are necessary to maintain the social order. What could "safe spaces" or "safety" look like, and, more importantly, how could we sustain them once the PIC is abolished?

Bench & Jenna, Philly Stands Up: As it is now, safe spaces tend to function as bubbles designed to stave off folks without anti-oppression politics or to respond to people who have perpetrated assault and have not been accountable. Although necessary, the establishment of safer spaces often feels watery, fraught, and tenuous. Safer spaces do, however, ask participants to act with awareness and intention around harm, violence, and risk. How do we transform these temporary spaces into a lasting framework for what we can and do expect of each other? PIC abolition is about reformulating safety so that instead of policing difference in the name of safe communities, safety means celebrating, acknowledging, and working through and with difference, all while holding self-determination as a central organizing principle of the world we wish to create and inhabit.

Since our current models of safer spaces can sometimes replicate the policing and surveillance we need to dismantle, it is critical that we find ways to creatively build community with each other without connecting our safety to somebody else's exile. Part of this work means cultivating a culture of talking to each other and having high expectations for how we treat each other. Transformative justice highlights the need for placing at the center of our political practice a dedication towards developing (re)new(ed) modes of communicating with each other that are grounded in abundance, accountability, and love. Our movements and our political and personal relationships cannot afford to

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continue down the road of "call out culture," where we overemphasize the role of critique at the expense of generative political conversations that allow for growth. Creating abolitionist visions of safety, then, is about challenging ourselves to understand liberation as collective and accountability as community-wide.

Morgan Bassichis, CUAV: Generations of white supremacy and capitalism have deeply distorted our collective understanding of "safety". The PIC teaches us that "safety" is a commodity—something that we come to believe can be given, taken away, valued, or devalued. And we internalize and embody this understanding—"you make me feel unsafe, that's an unsafe neighborhood, we need someone to keep us safe"—as if safety is something that is done to us. We might instead think about "safety" as a self-generating process over time that is impacted by external conditions but not dictated by them. We will not look to people, spaces, policies, or institutions to "make us safe" but will instead look to the resources that rest in ourselves and our communities that can decrease our vulnerability to harm and increase our ability to make grounded choices that will foster our wellness. Some of these

resources include being able to have loving, direct conversations, being able to ask ourselves and others open-ended questions instead of assuming we already know the answer, and being able to center ourselves in intense times. We will see fostering safety as a shared practice that we are all in together, not a destination or set recipe. We will come to understand safety less as a product and more as localized experiments in interdependence.

Once we abolish the PIC, we will need to continue to address the trauma the PIC has caused our communities. What are some strategies and approaches we can use to respond to this trauma & promote mental, physical, and emotional health?

Bench & Jenna, Philly Stands Up: After the PIC is abolished we must fight off the silences that are often ushered in after collective or individual trauma by finding ways to productively fold the memories of trauma and consequences of it into the ways stories are told and collective remembrances are made. We can learn from our empowered legacies of trauma and build cultures of resistance out of the oppressions that have afflicted us. It is important to name, celebrate, and sometimes mourn the tools of survival that those most directly targeted by the PIC have developed. Equally necessary is cultivating the discernment to determine when those survival strategies—such as not being able to communicate our needs or trust others—are obsolete and need to be put to rest. There is so much to learn by asking how we got here. These inspiring and often tragic legacies that ground us in our own vibrant history of struggle cannot be overlooked when we live in a world free from prisons.

RJ Maccani & Gaurav Jashnani, Challenging Male Supremacy Project: We need to cultivate resilience, our capacity to bounce back from trauma and oppression. This could come in the form of talking, singing, praying, or dancing together. What are our ways of coming together

that feed our resilience? What are our ways of coming together that are getting in the way of our resilience?

On a societal level, a big piece would also be prioritizing well-being over productivity, such as none of us having to put all of our energy into work just to make ends meet. If we still have something like a state, what would collective reparations look like for victims of the PIC? Perhaps fully subsidized healing and health care for all formerly incarcerated people? Whether these questions are theoretical rather than practical only has to do with our capacity to carry them out, because they are most certainly practical concerns.

Felipe Hernandez: The strategies we use supporting imprisoned people to heal by reconnecting with their histories and spirituality are strategies we can use to reconnect and heal once we no longer have prisons at all. We call this cultura programming—our connection to Mother Earth, our connection to our indigenous history. We take that cultura—the art, music, history—and bring that to folks who have been really disconnected, not only physically, but mentally & spiritually. We create a

shared sense of spirituality inside the walls in order to bring back that power Native brothers and sisters had, that they continue to have but has been removed from them. We make art, draw pictures, or identify where we come from. It's almost like magic sometimes when you see a young person drawing a picture that has to do with Aztec history. It awakens something they probably have never tapped into. It draws back memory and feeling.

Growing up in a really harsh community we aren't taught to show love, understanding, compassion because that dictates destruction in a way. So we support folks from tough communities by asking them: Do you find yourself a spiritual person? Do you have compassion for others? Do you have compassion for Mother Earth? Where do you want to take your spirit? We're opening those doors for people who have never really looked into that. Our programming really comes down to basic reconnection, realigning with where we come from: How do I sit on the floor and touch the ground for the first time again?

Once we abolish the prison industrial complex, what processes or strategies can we use to respond to serious harm, including murder, rape, and assault?

Morgan Bassichis, CUAV: To respond to high levels of harm in ways that are not derivative of the PIC, we must first and foremost let go of the notion that there are "good" and "bad" people—that people who murder, rape, and assault people are "bad" and that people who don't are "good." We all harm people and are harmed ourselves, in different contexts and conditions and with different levels of power behind us. Accepting this does not minimize violence but actually empowers us to be able to face violence clearly. We can support the wellness of people who have been seriously hurt. We can witness their grief, rage, and sorrow and resource their healing. We can support people who have hurt others to address the real issues underneath their actions, with both people's dignity intact. When dealing with high levels of violence, our impulse is to want to fix and save and resolve. This jumping to resolution can rob people of feeling, which is critical for healing. Although it may not sound the most satisfying, sometimes the best thing we can do is listen.

Mimi Kim, Creative Interventions: We are building our capacity to create community principles, skills, and institutions that not only respond to violence but also prevent and intervene in violence in all of its stages. Violence does not usually begin with serious levels of harm. It begins with signs or smaller violations that, if unchecked, lead to larger violations. We have to come up with processes of intervention that can address violence at its small stages – not zero tolerance approaches that slam people with punitive measures or ban them from spaces immediately, which often encourage people to go underground rather than stop violence. We need measures that are appropriate to the level of harm and that have more possibilities that we can all address and stop violence as we see it occurring.

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Felipe Hernandez: We need to bring the responsibility for our actions back to our communities. We need to show responsibility for people who are serving time to get back into society and as a community have these folks

come back and be supported, to have services, to have places where they can go get answers and healing. Where people can come in and say, "Hey, we need some type of family intervention. My son and my husband don't know how to talk to each other. Is there anyone who could help them talk to each other?" or "I heard you speak about struggling with this earlier, and it's a similar thing for me. How did you get through it?"

We need to act with the understanding that every person is a valued member of our community and is responsible for what goes on in our community. I grew up in Los Angeles during a very difficult time of LA history with the crack epidemic, sky-high murder rate, violence, and other things. The only reason I survived was because I did have that supporting community. We had the neighbors that were involved in our lives: that addicted person in the corner; the so-called "gang member" that was supposedly nothing but trouble. It was our community and that person that kept me out of trouble. He took the responsibility and said, "I don't want you following my footsteps."

If I'm invested in my community, and I'm working and living in and with my community, it makes it harder to just turn my back and say it's not my problem. It is my problem and it's going to be a bigger problem if I don't do anything about it. We need to answer to the people we grow and live with and the people we harm.

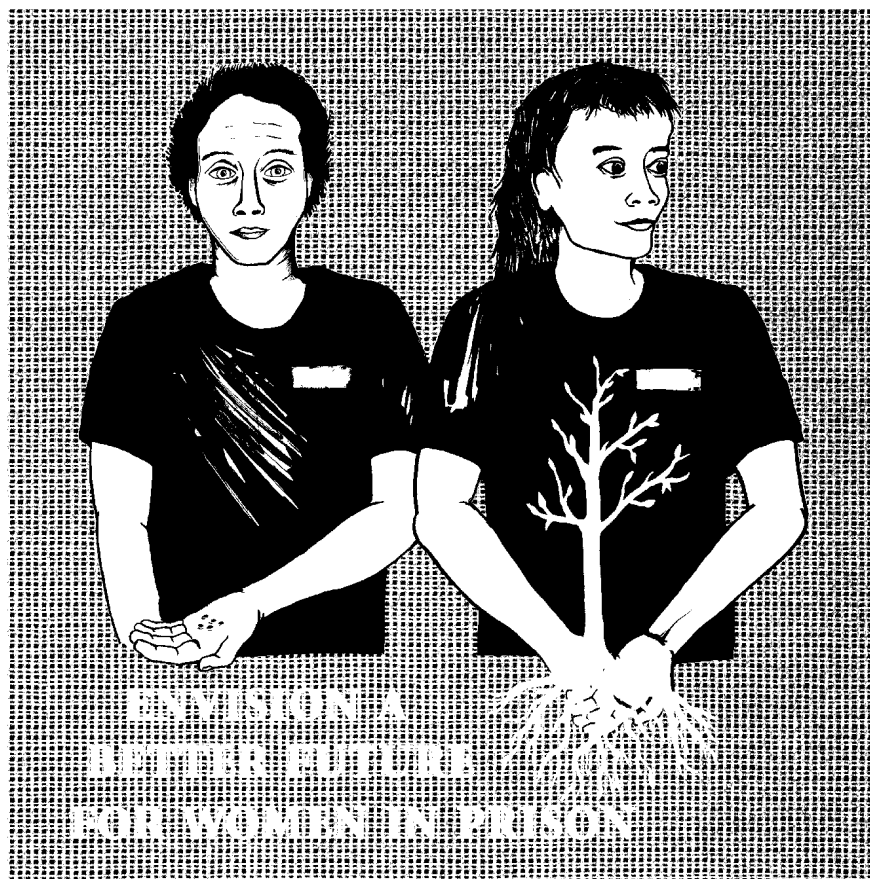
Bench & Jenna, Philly Stands Up: When the structures that perpetuate violence have been dismantled, we imagine the levels and frequency of interpersonal harm will be at a much

Mimi Kim, Creative Interventions: Although healing may be a different experience and process for any one of us, we as communities are responsible for creating alternative spaces to support the process of healing. The act of communities coming together to take interpersonal or intimate forms of violence seriously can in and of itself make healing more possible. For many survivors the fact that support is not available is doubly traumatic. We have to be available to support survivors immediately and long-term. Support can look like emotional care; believing survivors; offering material support such as companionship, housing, transportation, financial support; allowing them to go through the full process of grieving and healing. It also includes the process of supporting full accountability from the person or people directly responsible for harm. It means that communities have to understand our own role in creating conditions that may allow harm to happen, to tolerate it, or even to actively support it. We have to practice our own forms of accountability and take action to change it.

RJ Maccani & Gaurav Jashnani, Challenging Male Supremacy Project: We can establish sufficient support mechanisms so that survivors don't have to deal with supporting accountability/transformation for the person who harmed them unless they want to, and so that they can choose to do so in ways that are healthy for them.

Morgan Bassichis has been a staff member at Community United Against Violence (CUAV) since 2007. Founded in 1979 and based in San Francisco, CUAUV supports low-income and immigrant LGBTQ survivors of violence to create individual and community wellness. Morgan is also a volunteer with the Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP) and an organizer of Transforming Justice. Morgan can be reached at morgan@cuav.org. / Jenna Peters-Golden has been a member of Philly Stands Up! for four years and counting. Jenna makes art, makes trouble, and is a trainer with the AORTA collective. / Bench Ansfield finds political home with Philly Stands Up! and adores their job as a flower farmer. / RJ Maccani & Gaurav Jashnani work with The Challenging Male Supremacy Project, which was launched in New York City in 2008 to build transformative justice responses to heteropatriarchal violence through group work with male/masculine-identified activists and organizers, by supporting community-based responses to violence against women, queer and trans people, and children, and through media-based projects such as the DVD & discussion guide produced with Bay Area-based partner organization, generationFIVE, "Paths of Transformation: Men's Digital Stories to End Child Sexual Abuse." / Felipe Hernandez currently lives in

Watsonville, CA and works with Barrios Unidos, an organization in Santa Cruz County working to prevent and curtail violence by reclaiming and restoring the lives of struggling youth while promoting unity amongst families and neighbors through community building efforts. Felipe brings his passion for peace through liberation and experience of having grown up as a street-based youth in Los Angeles to his work as a mentor to young men in juvenile hall. / Mimi Kim is a long time anti-violence organizer and advocate. Working in the domestic violence sector for over 20 years, Mimi co-founded Oakland-based Shimtuh: Korean Domestic Violence Program of the Korean Community Center of the East Bay in 2001. Mimi has also worked consistently in developing community accountability models and in 2004 founded Creative Interventions, a community resource dedicated to establishing community-based approaches to addressing a range of violence. She has written extensively on domestic violence, community-based violence intervention, and has advised on community accountability internationally.



ART BY LYDIA CRUMBLEY, JUSTSEEDS COLLECTIVE

smaller scale and will look radically different than they do now. When conflict and serious assaults/violence do happen, we can use a model of Transformative Justice that is rooted in building close community, naming positions of power and oppression, and using creativity and honesty to fuel accountability in an effort to empower the survivor(s) to claim and feel justice and offer the person who perpetrated harm a means to make appropriate restitution.

Once we abolish the prison industrial complex, what could supporting survivors of violence look like?