

# Destroy What Destroys You

Volume 1



Essays on Abolitionism & Intimate Authoritarianism  
by Lee Cicuta

## *Introduction*

Pictured on the front of this zine is a burning bed in reference to Francine Hughes, a survivor of thirteen years of domestic violence before she eventually liberated herself by killing her abuser as he slept. On March 9, 1977, Francine's abuser Mickey physically assaulted her, refused to allow her to feed their children, berated her to quit school, and when she refused, he forced her to burn her own schoolbooks. Francine called the police, they came, did nothing to help her despite Mickey making a threat on her life in front of them, and left. After the police left Mickey forced Francine to cook him dinner, raped her, and then fell asleep. After he was asleep, Francine got up, put her three children in the car, poured gasoline over Mickey as he slept, and lit him on fire. Knowing that if she left him alive, he would fine her and make good on his promise to kill her himself.

It is common practice to put battered and distressed victims on the cover of works that focus on domestic violence, and it is a tradition I will not partake in. Experiencing the trauma of intimate violence is undeniably part of the survivor experience, but so, too, is resistance. From something as seemingly small as breaking one of our abuser's rules in secret to acts as insurrectionary as setting them on fire.

I became an abuse survivor early, before I could even speak. Throughout my childhood and multiple times in my adulthood I have found myself the focus of someone else's project of coercive control. Yet, it was only after leaving my abusive marriage in 2019, when I picked up theory on abuse for the first time, that I ever began to feel capable of understanding it. Since then, I have researched and theorized extensively on domestic violence. While I am not under the impression—as my writing here will make clear—that merely understanding abuse is sufficient either to protect oneself or to escape it, I do see it as a vital resource for both nonetheless. Simply having the language to describe the tactics and values shared between otherwise very different abusers (what does an abuser who exerts control via manipulation and an abuser who stalks their partner have in common?) has been invaluable to me. It is a gift I hope to share with every survivor I can.

*Destroy What Destroys You, Volume One* is the first of what will be a growing series of my essays on domestic violence (what I refer to as intimate authoritarianism) and abolitionism.

In *Is Punishment Carceral Logic?* I examine and refute a common misconception about abolitionism and carcerality: mainly, that the central characteristic of the carceral system is its use punishment, thus framing a spectrum of possible consequences for harm as all inherently “carceral.”

*Against a Liberal Abolitionism* expands on some of the critiques made in the previous essay, and explores liberal influence on abolitionist politics. In this piece I challenge the tendency in liberal abolitionist discourses to frame Transformative and Restorative Justices as the only valid abolitionist strategies rather than tools among a necessarily diverse array of tactics.

In *Our Abuser's Humanity* I examine the tendency of people to respond to the anger of abuse survivors with exhortations to remember the humanity of their abusers, even going as far as to tell survivors not to use the term "abuser" at all because it dehumanizing. I critique this rhetoric, examine the logic beneath it, and argue that the person in most need of humanizing in an abusive relationship is not the abuser, but the survivor.

*Why Don't They Just Leave?: Entrapment as the Context of Abuse* is an another essay that explores and refutes a common abuse apologia refrain: the belief many people have that the issue at the center of an abusive relationship is the victim's refusal to leave. The truth, I argue, is that the inability of the victim to leave is what *characterizes* an abusive relationship.

*Intimate Authoritarianism: The Ideology of Abuse* is the first essay in which I introduce the term "intimate authoritarianism," the value system underlying all abuse. I connect my conceptualization of intimate authoritarianism to the logic of authoritarianism in

general. Here I explore how vulnerability to abuse is socially constructed and how intimate authoritarians regularly refer to and work in tandem with larger systems of oppression to further undermine and co-opt the agency of their victim.

Lastly, in *Tactics for the Fight Against Abuse: Learning from Anti-Fascism*, I offer a framework for understanding how to best confront abuse in ways that reject liberal abolitionism by learning and taking from tactics and strategies deployed by anti-fascists such as deplatforming, distributing community warnings, and engaging in direct physical confrontation.

You have my full permission to distribute this zine where and as you'd like. You can find to-read, print, and other files of this zine at <https://ko-fi.com/butchanarchy> where you also have the option of donating to an ongoing survivor fund.

## *Is Punishment “Carceral Logic?”*

As conversations about the possibilities of abolition continue to proliferate — and as they are at the same time co-opted and distorted by liberal politics — it may help us to take a moment to be clear about the distinctions between liberatory accountability and what many refer to as “carceral logic.”

Already many of us have borne witness to the way that accusations of engaging in “carceral logic” are weaponized against the very people that abolitionism is meant to center. Survivors asking for accountability from their abuser have been met with a distorted abolitionism as a response. “No, you cannot ask for any consequences for the harm done to you, because that’s carceral logic and we are abolitionists.” I have spoken to many a survivor who has walked away from such an encounter either feeling hopeless about the possibility for accountability or with a feeling of guilt that even the act of asking for it makes them no different from the carceral system. This, it should be needless to say, is not what true abolitionism looks like.

A primary issue seems to be that abolitionism has been distorted to such a degree that many people believe that, to be an abolitionist, one must reject anything that could be construed as

punishment. The prison system is a system of punishment, so the logic goes, and so abolition should mean the absence of punishment.

One problem with this formulation is that it shows a deep misunderstanding of both the breadth, depth, and purpose of the carceral system. Prisons are not systems of punishment. Punishment certainly plays a star role, and it remains beneficial to examine the ways many often conflate justice with punishment, but ultimately the carceral system is about *control*. The carceral system does not simply dole out punishment: it takes away the agency of the people it targets. It rips them from their context and totally closes off any possibility for the expression of personal agency and accountability. It is a system of total surveillance, of excess and constant brutality, and the populations most targeted by it are also (not at all coincidentally) disproportionately the people the State most wants to exert control over. To reduce it to simply a mechanism of punishment is to concede to the State that the reason they lock people up is as they say it is: only for as a punishment of crime, rather than as a mechanism of social control and the continuation of white supremacy. Additionally, to be so crudely reductive, to draw equivalencies between survivors asking for accountability to harm done to them and a torturous carceral system, is to do a great disservice to survivors *and* the incarcerated people who have suffered or are still suffering the consequences of true carceral logic.

Another issue we come across with making carceral logic synonymous with punishment is that people have wildly different conceptualizations of what constitutes as punishment. Is socially cutting someone out of a group punishment? Is stopping being someone's friend punishment? Are reparations punishment? "If you punch a Nazi isn't that punishment which is carceral logic which makes you just like police!?" This idea of what constitutes carceral logic is ultimately vulnerable to the question of what constitutes punishment, because a very easy argument can be made that *any* consequences for harm are punishment. Definitionally, many of them are! Punishment is a response to an offense that decreases (or at least seeks to) the likelihood of someone repeating that offense. Both throwing someone in a cell and withholding access to a space from someone until they've been accountable to harm they've done qualify, but they're clearly not the same.

In truth, the difference between carceral logic and liberatory accountability is not the presence/lack of punishment. Rather, the difference lies in how much power the person who has done harm has. Carceral logic aims to strip them of their personal power, while liberatory accountability processes require that they take *ownership* of that power. That is, ultimately, what accountability is: taking responsibility for your power as well as for the consequences of your use of it. Recognizing your own agency in having made a choice that resulted in harm, facing the people



you hurt, giving them answers and apologies, and claiming your ability to do differently. This is what the carceral system does not allow. It strips people entirely of their agency, requires of them no meaningful repair process, and locks them in a cell where they are ritualistically abused by the State. This is a process that heals no one, nor was it ever even intended for healing or repair. It is a system only of control.

Liberatory accountability processes, on the other hand, demand something incredibly difficult for people who do harm: acknowledgement of their own power, their own responsibility to the harm they do with that power and their obligation to use that same power to make amends. Taking that responsibility also means acknowledging and respecting the consequences for the harm they do. If I truly take a harm I've done seriously, if I genuinely see it *as harm*, then I also will respect that the person I harmed may need to put more boundaries up between us to feel safe again. If the harm is more extreme, I will see the steps the surrounding community takes (closing my access to certain spaces, demanding my participation in ongoing accountability processes, etc.) as important responses to re-establish safety where my actions ruptured it, even if those responses are painful or uncomfortable to me. Absent of these consequences, the people most adept at doing harm while maintaining community support have free reign to continue perpetuating cycles of harm that will reverberate through years

(often generations) to come, and survivors flee into solitude because there are no communal norms in place to provide them any real or trustworthy sense of safety. This is, in fact, the status quo of the world we live in now.

The real distinction between carceral logic and liberatory accountability is that one process violently strips someone of their humanity and agency, while the other demands that people who do harm take full command of their humanity and agency to atone for that harm and become better members of the community in the process. The carceral system says: “You are a criminal and you deserve to be subject to constant harm and control because of it.” Liberatory accountability says: “You are a person who chose to do harm, we believe in your capacity to choose to face the consequences of that harm and do what you can to repair it.”

## *Against A Liberal Abolitionism*

In the explosion of interest in the topic of abolitionism during and after the explosive summer of 2020 its meaning and purpose has become distorted in its trek through the popular imagination. The topic of Transformative/Restorative Justice also increased in popularity, and as a result many people even conceptualize TJ/RJ as being one in the same with abolitionism as a political position. While this essay is not intended as an outright dismissal of the importance TJ/RJ practices, it is an examination of why they have risen to prominence and a challenge to the idea that they represent the totality of an abolitionist politic.

Abolitionism, as I will use it here, is a position that is dedicated to destroying apparatuses of domination (prisons, police, borders, the State itself) as well as a commitment to addressing harm without the use of those apparatuses. This position in action can indeed look like encouraging rigorous accountability processes in the face of harm, but that is not, and cannot effectively be, the only expression of it. A commitment to abolitionism can also look like getting a group of friends together to go beat down a local rapist rather than calling the cops. It can look like distributing information to all community members about an unrepentant abuser and shutting them out from social spaces where

vulnerable people are, or even running them out of town completely. It can look like organizing to attack and break down networks of fascists so that every member of that network experiences constant rejection, shame, and isolation everywhere they go. Abolitionism is a political position, and all of these different ways of enacting it represent different tactics to address harm: all fit to their unique context, the capacity and resources available to those who want to address harm, the type of harm, the needs of the victims, and the willingness (or unwillingness) of the harmer to be accountable and change.

The truth about harm is that there will never be a one-size-fits-all solution to challenging it. In fact, it is the very idea that there can be such a solution (prison) is what abolitionism is positioned against. Yes, accountability and change should always be an option, should always be an open door through which people who do harm can walk, but if we have no other options besides that we will very quickly find that many people do not fit the neat mold that we wish to shove them into and we will discover that we are repeatedly coming to a dead end of our own making. Some people will be challenged for harm they have done and refuse to see it as wrong or unjustifiable. Some people have built their entire sense of self on an identity conditioned by domination, a feeling of superiority, and a frank disregard for others whose concerns they have categorically deemed “lesser.” Are we then meant to remain

helpless to intervene on the harm they perpetuate because they are not interested in our invitations to be accountable?

Our goal is not for every single person to feel comfortable and validated, our goal is to end cycles of harm. Fundamental change in the people who enact harm is by far our preference, but lacking that we understand that our responsibility is then to reduce or destroy their *capacity* to continue to enact harm on others. We don't just sit on our hands and hope we can eventually convince them to change at the same time that their enacting of that harm continues to work in their own interest because they're surrounded by people who think consequences for harm is the same as throwing someone in prison.

I do not believe that abolitionism being seen as equivalent to Transformative/Restorative Justice practices is at all an accident of miscommunication, but rather an expression of stubbornly liberal values distorting the political project of abolition to be less threatening, centered only on "non-violence," unconditional forgiveness (but please don't ask us who tends to be excluded from this forgiveness anyway), and total, slate-cleaning stories of personal redemption. If we can't put people in prison where we don't have to really see or reckon with what is done to them, we certainly don't want to have to be responsible for challenging them ourselves! Rather, we want to believe that everything can be solved in the marketplace of ideas. Anyone who is racist,

abusive, a fascist, a rapist, etc. must not really “know” what they’re doing, and so once we give them the “right” education they will fall in line and we will all be one happy community where there is no conflict and no one has to have (or hear about) any bad feelings.

This is also, I believe, in part because of the way that the prison system has been largely and incorrectly defined as a system of punishment, rather than a system of control. I have explored and explained the distinction in more depth in my essay *Is Punishment Carceral Logic?* but it will do us well to at least touch on the subject here. Abolitionism is not a political framework against the very idea of punishment: it’s a political framework against prisons, police, and the State. These are material structures of control that limit people’s autonomy and ability to take real responsibility for their actions. To reduce them only to punishment accepts the State’s message about the purpose of prisons: that they are punishment for harm. They are not. Prisons exist as a tool of *control* (which absolutely includes the use of horrible punishment) to attack anyone the State deems a threat to its sovereignty, or anyone who it would be beneficial to the State’s image (and thus a crucial aspect of the maintenance of its sovereignty) to bring the might of the criminalization system down upon.

We are not against prisons simply because we have an altruistic sympathy for all who get caught within it, or even because we have a distaste for any kind of punishment, but because *prisons do not work to address harm*. Many have come to abolitionism through less threatening means than having to reckon with violence: often through talk of how many people are imprisoned for drug crimes rather than violent crimes, or for political suppression, or were wrongly convicted, etc. They come to abolitionism through a sense of sympathy with people who they think should not be imprisoned or have not even done anything wrong at all. This is not a bad thing, but it does not make for principled abolitionism that can stand up to situations less neat and comfortable for us to contemplate. If you are an abolitionist because of sympathy, what do you do when you (inevitably) come across a person who has done such heinous harm that you cannot even attempt to find that sympathy for? When you are shown someone who has done a violence so horrendous that any form of punishment will seem too mild in the face of that violence, how well will your abolitionism hold up when the State wants to throw them in a cell to rot for the rest of their life?

Feelings of sympathy and empathy for the incarcerated are good and important to have, but they will not hold up your abolitionism on its own. Abolitionism does not simply articulate that innocent people are in prison, or only that the punishment in prison is too harsh and traumatizing (even though we can and should point to

both of these things as well). We are abolitionists because we know that there are no “right” people to put in prison. Not because we are pacifists who believe that our moral responsibility to turn the other cheek to harm, but because prisons do not do what we are told they are meant to do. They do not stop harm, they compound it. That is our foundation, and it is that foundation that allows us to continue to be abolitionists regardless of what villains the State might hold up as being representatives of people justifiably incarcerated. It’s why we can see fascists be sent to prison and not cheer on the process, because we know that they are not being sent anywhere where they “can’t hurt anyone else,” but that they are being locked in spaces with incredibly vulnerable people who will be the new victims of their violence. We know that people sent to prison are ritualistically abused by the State while also being robbed of agency to change. We know that prisons are enclosed, inescapable cultures of extreme violence where utilizing harm is the only way many can survive the experience, and that when they emerge again into their communities their capacity to do differently or build trusting relationships is often deeply damaged. We know that prisons are not built to address harm, but to advance and protect the systems of capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, settler-colonialism, and more under the *guise* of addressing harm. We know that victims are ignored, retraumatized, and discarded by the criminalization system that pretends to act on their behalf. We



know that our communities are not, nor ever have been, safer for the existence of police and prisons. We know that if we destroyed these apparatuses of control, we would at the same time *expand* our own capacities to respond to harm in meaningful ways that fit to the context of that harm.

This essay is not to dismiss the importance of building up communal processes of accountability that allow us to address harm in ways that allow for genuine transformation of those who have done that harm. Far from it. Rather, my point is to draw attention to the underlying reasons why one tactic of addressing harm has been uplifted as not simply the preferred tactic but in fact the *only* tactic we are ethically permitted to deploy in the face of harm. Is it not telling that the conversation of abolition has been co-opted so strongly by liberal values that anything beyond nicely asking an abuser to volunteer to engage in an accountability process is accused of being one-in-the-same with State violence? Is it really so revolutionary to throw up our hands and say that there's "nothing more we can do" about a serial rapist in our community because they declined our invitation to be radically transformed? What we have here is not radical abolitionism, but a reconceptualization of liberal "non-violence," which always means expecting non-violence on the part of the victimized, complicity and willful ignorance on the part of bystanders (who get to let go of any uncomfortable moral mandate to act so long as they are least preform asking for

“accountability”), and unfettered violence of those who can amass enough power to get away with it.

Accountability and transformative change is absolutely our preference, and a door we would like to always leave open, but it cannot be our only option. It cannot be seen as the only possibility abolition has to offer for the victimized. Abolitionism can and does include processes of accountability, but it also must include other tactics that can work to reduce people’s capacity to harm in instances where harmers refuse to engage in that accountability. We must embrace the reality that our shared social world is complex, and that not a single one of us can fully know the solution to every problem ripped away from its context. That harmers, victims, and their shared histories are equally complex. That it is a disrespect to that complexity to claim that our holy words and rituals will solve all ailments and that all other methods of combating harm are inherently heretical and worthy of excommunication. We must, ultimately, do a much more rigorous exploration of the liberal values and ideas we have yet to examine within ourselves and that we have (perhaps sometimes unknowingly) smuggled into our radical abolitionist politics.

## *Our Abuser's Humanity*

Often when survivors of abuse speak out against our abuser's behavior and control, we are approached by seemingly well-meaning people who exhort us to "remember" our abuser's humanity in the process, even going so far as to tell us to not use the term "abuser" at all, but person-first language like "person who abuses" just to make crystal clear to all who hear us that we put our abuser's humanity first. Anything less is, in their argument, counterproductive to creating change, because what is needed for change is to center the abuser's "healing" from their own abusive behavior.

There are a great number of frustrating and harmful aspects to this line of thinking, and foremost among them is the assumption that prioritizing an abuser's humanity is something that will challenge their abuse, rather than the very thing that upholds it. Far from being people who need reminding of their abuser's humanity, survivors are actually intimately connected with the reality of it, and it is that connection that has facilitated our entrapment in abusive relationships of all kinds. Our understanding of our abuser's humanity, our compassion for them, our usually incredibly deep understanding of their context and history that led them to become the person they are now, our

acceptance of the myriad of excuses for their abusive treatment of us (ex: their traumatic past), are often key components to what keep many of us in abusive relationships. It is finally being allowed and encouraged to be in touch with *our humanity* and our anger at the way it is undermined and dismissed by abusers that allow us to dream of and strive towards escape.

Survivors are *intimately* aware of our abuser's humanity. It is our abusers that deny *our* humanity. When you tell survivors to quiet our rage, to go back to accepting all manner of excuses for abuse, you are ultimately advocating for us to return to the conditions of the abuse itself. You're telling us to elevate our abuser's humanity above our own. Our abuser's past trauma matters when we challenge their abuse, but our own past trauma never does. Our abuser's feelings and comfort take precedent, ours are sidelined.

When people paternalistically tell us to remember our abuser's humanity, it becomes very clear that they have spent little to no time supporting survivors of abuse, as so much of our healing process is learning to accept that regardless of how good our abuser sometimes seems or how hurt they've been in the past that there's no excuse for us to be treated that way. When we actually get to the point where we can say "that was abusive and it is inexcusable" it's because we've done an incredible amount of work unlearning the messages forced into us by our

abusers. Messages that held their desires as paramount, while casting us in the role of subvariants to their whims.

Further, we must challenge the assumption that calling someone an “abuser” is something that calls their humanity into question in the first place. Do the people who assert this have such a strong aversion to using other nouns to describe people? Must we call cops “people who police”, landlords “people who collect rent”, and bosses “people who coercively extract labor value”? Does neglecting to do so indicate that we don’t think cops, landlords, or bosses have human lives not fully encapsulated by these labels, or that we think they are incapable of becoming something different by waking up tomorrow and quitting their job? Surely not. In fact, a part of the utility of these labels doesn’t lay in negating humanity, but in being able to point to a social position a human being takes on that characterized by a dominating relationship over others. We call someone a landlord rather than “a person who collects rent” because while there are probably many other things that person is in the world, we’re *specifically* talking about the exploitative power they hold over others and, in doing so, make that power visible.

Referring to someone as an abuser doesn’t dehumanize them any more than calling someone a landlord does. What it *does* do is allow us to speak about an exploitative power imbalance and point to where the power lies, and it is my assessment that this is

the real problem many people have with the term “abuser.” To call an abusive person an abuser isn’t to erase all the other aspects of their humanity. Not any more than calling ourselves survivors does that of us. We are talking, specifically, about an exploitative relationship that often remains invisible. When people advocate for person-first language instead, they are working to keep the reality of abuse unseen and unanalyzed.

Abuse is not individual pathology. It is not a tragic mistake. It is a system of power all on its own, structured to constrain, exploit, and co-opt the agency of the victim(s). There are abusers. They hold power. And they benefit from people being afraid to say so. They benefit from people continuing to enforce the conditions of the abuse by keeping focus on uplifting the abuser’s humanity rather than restoring a sense of humanity and value to the survivors from whom it was actively stolen. They benefit from people flinching back from pointing to the power relation that keeps abusers empowered as it steals and co-opts the power of their victims. Further, it denies the reality of the abuser’s own agency in the relation. Denies that, just like the boss, the cop, the landlord, they continue to make the choice to prioritize their own desire for sovereignty and power over others and thus could, at any time, decide to do differently.

Do survivors need your reminders that our abusers are also human? No, we do not. We know it intimately, for seeing and

prioritizing our abuser's humanity is the very task they used abuse and coercive control to shape us to perform. What we need is to be given space and support to make visible the power relation that oppressed/continues to oppress us. We need your affirmations of OUR humanity. We need your solidarity in challenging *anyone* who calls it into question in the first place.

## *Why Don't They Just Leave?"*

### *Entrapment as the Context of Abuse*

When faced with the stories of physical and sexual violence, manipulation, gaslighting, and coercion that survivors tell from their experiences within abusive relationships, many people's first question frequently seems to be "why didn't they just leave?" And, indeed, with a limited understanding of the overall context that forms abuse, victims remaining with their abusers seems unimaginable. After all, if someone walked up to you on the street and called you a worthless piece of garbage, or slapped you in the face, you would not be inclined to share their company any further, so why do abuse victims appear to accept horrific treatment time and time again without leaving?

At root of this question is a fundamental misunderstanding of abuse that we must correct before we explore any further. Abuse is *not* determined by individual instances of violence or toxic behavior, nor do individual instances of violence or toxic behavior automatically mean abuse. Abuse is not simply whenever someone insults you or treats you badly: it is a broader relational context that limits your ability to resist, challenge, or leave someone who treats you badly. Many people understand



abuse as the more extreme, individual incidents of violent behavior they tend to hear more about, but it is, in reality, the context of entrapment, in which the victim's agency and autonomy are reduced, constrained, and coopted in order to empower the abuser that forms an abusive relationship.

An abuser is not comparable to a stranger who walks up to you and insults you or slaps you in the face, even if their apparent behavior in a particular moment is the same, and the options available to you in the moment of your assault are not the same as the options available to an abuse victim. The stranger does not know you, has no means to compel you to remain for another slap, and has little power to control your reaction to them. The abuser knows their victim on an intimate level, often has buy-in and often even significant trust and rapport with their victim's friends, family, and/or workplace. They know where they live, and may even live in the same place. They know their insecurities. They know their vulnerabilities and how to leverage them. They often do not start the relationship with a slap as the stranger did, but instead build (often at a rapid pace) connection and dependencies with their victim before slowly introducing more overt tactics of control that they then use the existence of prior moments of connection to excuse and justify.

In his book *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women In Personal Life*, Evan Stark defines abuse not as individual incidents of

violence, but as a system of coercive control more akin to prolonged attacks on liberty (like kidnapping and hostage taking) than it is to other incidents of physical assault: “The most important anomalous evidence indicates that violence in abusive relationships is ongoing rather than episodic, that its effects are cumulative rather than incident-specific, and that the harms it causes are more readily explained by these factors than by its severity.” (13) The stories of abusive violence that emotionally rock you and lead you to ask “why would anyone stay after *that*?!” are certainly a feature of the abusive context, but as long as you remain focused only on them you will remain unable to find the answer to your question.

Put simply: not being able to leave an abusive relationship is a *symptom* of being in an abusive relationship, not its cause. An abuse victim is not continuing to experience abuse because they refuse to leave, the abuse is creating a context in which the victim *unable* to leave. There are various tactics, overt and covert, that can come together to create this context — emotional manipulation, physical intimidation, social isolation, financial control, control over children, control over housing, weaponization of the State (ex: threats to report an undocumented victim to ICE), etc. — and which ones are used frequently and which ones do not even play a role is unique to both the abuser and their victim. This is why understanding abuse

as an *overarching context of entrapment* is vital to understanding the situation abuse victims find themselves captured within.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that not only is leaving an abuser an extremely difficult task (it takes, on average, 7 attempts for abuse victims to leave their abuser and remain separated from them) but it is also a highly dangerous one. Of abuse victims who are murdered by their partners, up to 75% of them are murdered *at or after* the moment they leave the relationship. Abusers seek to gain and maintain control over their victims, and when they see their victim attempting to escape that control, their response is frequently deadly. “Just leaving” is very rarely as simple, or as safe, as outside observers would like to believe.

Asking “if they’re being abused why don’t they just leave?” assumes that there is another reason, usually some personal failing, that causes the victim to stay in an abusive relationship, but the actual answer to that question is “they don’t leave because they are being abused.” Indeed, it may be far more productive to begin asking by the *abuser* doesn’t leave or allow their victims to leave, because the answer to that question has a much greater capacity to shed light on the abusive context as a whole.

The abuser doesn't leave, or allow their victims to leave, because they are personally *empowered* by the abusive context. They mobilize all the resources and strategies at their disposal to maintain coercive control over their victims because doing so allows them to extract value for themselves (whether that value is emotional support, sexual satisfaction, domestic labor, or simply the gratification of having power over another person) from their victim at the expense of their victim's autonomy. They use their intimate knowledge of their victim, outside cooperation of family, friends, and coworkers, whatever privileges given to them by larger social systems, and control over material resources to steal that victim's agency.

Situations of abuse are situations of entrapment. Victims of abuse have their ability to act reduced, constrained, and coopted by their abuser. It is not a matter of choice; it is a matter of domination and control that is compounded by a larger system that both justifies it and supplies structures that make it possible.

## *Intimate Authoritarianism:*

### *The Ideology of Abuse*

For far too long have radical communities and their discourses treated domestic violence and abuse as external from the considerations of revolutionary struggle. Abuse is seen as simply an interpersonal issue, springing from individual pathology which we must address by correcting certain behaviors and teaching better communication skills. The intervention tools of choice are frequently limited to restorative or transformative justice practices, with the ultimate aim of protecting and maintaining the abuser's place in the community, often at the cost of survivor safety, participation, and empowerment. There is a fear that ousting abusers and challenging them as adversaries to revolutionary struggle rather than as wayward members of it will ultimately weaken us collectively, because, after all, they are still our comrades.

What we fail to see, within this framework, is that abuse is not individual pathology. Abuse is not an unfortunate mistake. Abuse is the form that systematic oppression takes on an interpersonal level. It is an agent of patriarchy, ableism, capitalism, and white supremacy. It is **intimate authoritarianism**, and must be resisted

just as strongly as we endeavor to challenge authoritarianism on a structural level. Until we do so, the logic of authoritarianism will continue to run rampant within our movements, alienate the most vulnerable among us, and weaken our ability to fight authoritarianism on a larger scale.

### **What is Intimate Authoritarianism?**

Put simply: intimate authoritarianism is the logic of authoritarianism — the enforcement or advocacy of obedience to authority at the expense of autonomy — applied on an interpersonal level. It is the belief that there are certain people in one's life that it is acceptable (and often encouraged) to harm in order to gain power and control over them. While all abusers subscribe to and act within the values of intimate authoritarianism, they are less aberrations from the common belief system than they are people who take mainstream messages about love, power, relationships, parenthood, and the family — that many people to varying degrees accept as true — to their logical conclusions. Intimate authoritarianism as an ideology proliferates throughout our entire society in much the same way that other forms of authoritarianism do, even though not everyone capitalizes on its values in the same way.

About romantic love we are taught that we will receive a romantic partner who can and *should* fulfill our every need and fantasy, and

that it is acceptable to do whatever necessary to find and bind that person to us so that they can serve as the fulfiller of our every wish. We are taught that in pursuance of that person, it is acceptable to stalk, threaten, coerce, manipulate, and harass, so long as it is, in name at least, done “for love.” We are taught that jealousy and possessive behavior is an important expression of our love. We are taught that when the people close to us do not fill their role as wish-fulfillers well enough that we are justified in responding to their perceived failure with punishment and manipulation until they submit to our demands to our satisfaction. We are taught to turn interpersonal connections into private property relations, and there is a host of ready-made justifications at our disposal to excuse any number of abusive acts so long as they are done in service of keeping our “property” under our control, whether they are a romantic partner, a child, an elderly parent, or even a close friend.

By virtue of our closeness to someone, the kind of relationship we have with them, many of us are taught and come to believe that we are granted some kind of authority over them, and common social practices within our communities as well as state institutions like that of marriage and the family affirm that authority.

## Intimate Authoritarianism in Practice

There are many more people who see forms of structural authoritarianism (ex: fascism, neoliberalism, capitalism) as justified than there are people who manage to use that ideology to bolster their own power, and the same is true for intimate authoritarianism. Not everyone who believes intimate authoritarianism is justifiable ends up becoming an abuser in the same way that not everyone who believes using harm to gain and maintain power and control over an employee, tenant, or prisoner is justifiable ends up becoming a boss, landlord, or cop. Rather, the ideology of authoritarianism proliferates throughout all social groups in such a way that some gain authority through it, others remain complicit with that authority in ways that bolster their own power and status to varying degrees, and still others are made the primary victims of that power and have their agency constrained, reduced, and co-opted by those who wield the power of authority. This brings us to the important question: *who* uses the values of intimate authoritarianism to successfully become an abuser and *how* do they do it?

Among domestic violence researchers, there has been, for decades, heated debate about whether or not abuse is a gendered phenomenon. Statistically, there are far more women in need of support in fleeing situations of domestic violence than there are men. However, studies that measure the use of interpersonal



violence (emotional and physical) find that people of all genders tend to use violence against their partners at almost identical rates. The typical approach amongst domestic violence researchers tends to be to land on one “side” of the issue (abuse is a gendered issue vs. all genders are equally abusive,) my research and experience as a queer abuse survivor has led me to a different conclusion.

Abuse is *not* separable from systems. It is, in fact, in large part created and reinforced by them. Abuse, as we explored above, is itself is a product of ideology — intimate authoritarianism — and it is the logical conclusion of many of the mainstream messages we all receive about love. We are all taught that an intimate partnership is the key to our success, and also reflects that success. We are taught that love is possessive, and the more possessive someone is the more they love you. We are taught that we can expect that there is a “soulmate” out there made specially for us, who will meet all our needs, and fill our every desire. Romantic relationships are depicted as sites for fantasy fulfillment, not necessarily mutual connection, respect, or freedom. Further, these expectations are not taught in a gender-neutral fashion. We are taught that a woman’s “place” in a relationship is one of subservience. Women are expected to do all of the reproductive labor of the household, provide emotional support, and fulfill men’s sexual desires on demand, and that anything less is nothing but a failure of duty that should be met

with punishment. These ideas are not just on an interpersonal level, but are enforced by broader structures: as evidenced by attacks on reproductive rights and women's marginalization in the workplace that forces them into economic dependence. Social expectations enforced by community/family/friends combined with material conditions that make economic independence virtually impossible, women go into relationships already disempowered.

This is but one perspective of a much larger picture. Women in general are more likely to experience the entrapment that characterizes abuse than men, but so too are people of color, youth, disabled people, queer people, trans people, and poor people. This is because the overarching message we all receive in a society characterized by hierarchy, domination, and authoritarianism is who it is acceptable to victimize. Whose pain most people are comfortable to ignore. Who is vulnerable, and how to use power over them to empower oneself. This certainly includes women, but not only women. We receive these messages from many directions, and they are enforced by the coercive control of the State that privileges some social groups at the expense of others, that allows and encourages certain people to be dominated and controlled so value can be extracted from them to enrich the lives of the powerful.

Abuse, contrary to popular belief, is not characterized by individual acts of violence, but rather is the context of many different tools of control utilized by the abuser. If abusers could *only* mobilize individual acts of violence, they would meet with far less success in keeping their victims entrapped. However, abusers mobilize a vast array of tools within and outside of the relationship. They refer to the dominant ideology of intimate authoritarianism — which their victims also grew up surrounded by — to justify their actions. They use the support of community members like family and friends to gaslight their victims into disbelieving their own experience. They frequently rely on larger systems — like that of the family that awards them private property rights over their spouse or children, reproductive control, threats of calling the police or border control, economic privilege, systemic transphobia, racism, homophobia, ableism, etc. to make their victims afraid to challenge them, and more — to help enforce their control at home.

The most successful abusers are those who can leverage interpersonal, ideological, systemic and communal factors to gain coercive control. The more access one has to leveraging these factors, the easier it will be for them to gain and maintain coercive control over another person. It should be no wonder, then, that the people most successful at doing so are those who are most empowered by the authoritarian status quo, and that those most victimized are similarly those most disempowered by the system.

This framework can help us make sense of those abusers who are not cis men (you don't have to be a cis man to be an intimate authoritarian or to leverage enough kinds of power to entrap someone else), without having to deny the reality that abuse is characterized by power, and thus that the groups more frequently abused will tend to mirror the groups who are most disempowered in authoritarian society.

Abuse is highly contextual exactly because we all have *vastly* different kinds of power and vulnerabilities within the system, which is why the way abuse plays out can look so different from relationship to relationship. But it *a/ways* includes utilization of oppressive systems. Abuse is not independent from systems of oppression; it is an intimate expression of those systems. Abusers are agents of oppression, empowered by its utility, and they should be responded to and challenged accordingly.

### **Anti-Authoritarian Response to Abuse**

Taking into consideration that abuse is authoritarianism on an interpersonal scale, and is itself bolstered by larger structures of authoritarianism at the same time as it enforces those structures in intimate life, we can now understand that abuse can no longer be seen as something apart from the struggle for liberation. Abuse is another front on which we must fight the enemy of domination and control, and to do so we must oust the logic of intimate

authoritarianism wherever we find it, even (and especially) when we find it lurking within ourselves and our comrades.

I believe that we must move away from our dependence on restorative/transformative justice to address abuse and towards a similar set of tactics that are used in anti-fascist work. In anti-fascist work we prioritize destroying fascists' capability to carry out harm, not their rehabilitation. Individual fascists are of course welcome to choose to radically change (and there are plenty of people who will help them with that), but it can't be our central goal. This is because the reality is that most abusers (like fascists and all authoritarians) are not interested in changing, no matter how many emotional appeals you make. They get (or expect to get) something out of being abusers (power and control), and they see the harm they do as entirely justified. Additionally, we have distinct limits on our available resources and it makes little sense to funnel so much of our energy into trying, and rarely succeeding, to save the souls of the people who are currently enacting the most violence.

Our priority in anti-fascist work and anti-abuse work is to leverage what resources and skills we do have at our disposal to end cycles of harm and to interrupt/destroy people's ability to enact that harm. It *must* be survivor centered. It must recognize the structural and ideological nature of abuse as intimate authoritarianism, and we need to shape our response with that

reality in mind, rather than continuously defaulting to treating abuse as an unfortunate expression of individual pathology.

## **Conclusion**

Both abusers and the State work to create a narrative of inevitability, and act on the same core logic of authoritarianism, even as their scope may differ. The victim of the abuser or the State is constrained, their agency co-opted, their horizon of choice limited, and value is forcibly extracted from them to empower authoritarians. Under our current system, they are made to feel as if there is no escape and that their only hope lies in the gradual reform of their captor. They are both systems of domination and control, enabled not only by the actions of those who hold and wield authority (abusers, politicians, etc.) but also by a larger social system of complicity from people who, regardless of the values they claim to hold, value order over justice.

Liberation from either, then, does not demand we appeal to the better natures of authoritarians nor even the masses of people who act in complicity with their violence, but that we open up possibilities to build survivor autonomy and learn to trust in the power of their agency. It demands, similarly to anti-fascist work, that we attack the ability of authoritarians to organize their power.

Survivors (whether of State or interpersonal abuses) cannot find relief nor freedom in struggling within the very confines authority has set before us. It requires a breaking out. A trust in our own choices. A desire to build something different outside of that system of control. A rejection of simplistic reform that leaves many of us languishing under the control of others. And, ultimately, the ousting of authoritarian values and the destruction of *every* social system of domination.

It ultimately suits abusers' and the State's ends that we limit ourselves only to their reform. All that it ultimately accomplishes (if it accomplishes anything at all) is a more benevolent form of power and control that still steadfastly denies us any real expression of agency. We don't need a more benevolent authoritarianism. We need to determine the trajectory of our own lives. To labor and care because it is something we wish to do, a gift we want to give, a path we are eager to explore, instead of being forced to expand someone else's wealth and power.

## *Tactics for the Fight Against Abuse:*

### *Learning from Anti-Fascism*

#### **The Size of the Problem**

We live in a culture of abuse. With acknowledgement that these numbers are insufficient due to underreporting: more than 60% of adults in the so-called United States have experienced at least one ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience) and a quarter of adults have experienced three or more ACEs. Over 33% of women and 25% of men have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Systemic marginalization and oppression increases one's vulnerability to intimate violence: disabled women experience intimate partner violence at a rate 40% higher than non-disabled women, 45.1% of Black women and 40.1% of Black men have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetimes, 43.8% of lesbian women and 61.1% of bisexual women have experienced intimate partner violence at some point in their lifetime, 26% of gay men and 37.3% of bisexual men have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime, more than half (54%) of all transgender people have experienced some form of intimate partner violence, immigrant women experience domestic violence at 3 times the national



average, and low income women are five times more likely to experience intimate partner violence than wealthier women.

Abuse, the logical conclusion of intimate authoritarianism, is not only rampant in our society, but it is the fabric that holds much of the hierarchy together. For far too long have radicals considered abuse to be an unfortunate, but sadly inevitable, expression of individual pathology, rather than as the territory of political conflict and oppression that it is. I have challenged this myth about abuse in more depth in previous essays, and so will instead focus this essay on expanding upon my call for radicals to apply the same logic and tactics we leverage against fascists to the intimate authoritarians we find afflicting our movements.

### **The Limitations of Reform**

Liberals frequently oppose anti-fascist tactics like deplatforming and physical confrontation on the grounds that it would be, according to them, more effective if we took the time to speak to fascists and win their hearts and minds over to our cause. Most radicals dismiss and laugh off as liberal bullshit the idea that we should pour our energy into the reform and redemption of people who are organizing to steal our autonomy and our lives, and yet can turn to survivors of abuse with the same liberal demand to prioritize saving the souls of our abusers at the expense of our safety and the effectiveness of our anti-abuse political project.

This is at least in part because many radicals continue to understand abuse as something that happens outside of politics, a result of individual pathology to be corrected rather than an expression of an authoritarian values system to be confronted.

What results from treating abuse as something to be reformed on the individual level is not dissimilar from what results when we treat fascism as something to be reformed on the individual level: there are some fringe cases of fundamental change, a larger portion of perpetrators that learn to change their language or methods while maintaining their authoritarian values (usually resulting in a shifted or expanded capacity to do harm, not less), and a majority of cases where little to no change happens at all, all at the cost of an extraordinary amount of time and resources.

Batterer Intervention Programs (BIPs) are programs that seek to rehabilitate individual abusers through various methods, many of them informed by feminist analysis of abuse. The purpose of these programs is to teach abusers skills for nonviolent communication, understand and regulate their feelings, and resist from acting on their desires to control their partners or family members. While these programs sound like the perfect tool in theory, in practice their impact on abuse leaves much to be desired. While they often do reduce recidivism as measured by the State (and only modestly), survivor reports indicate no decrease in abusive behavior. This suggests that BIPs may change some abusers, but

most either get nothing from these programs or learn how to be abusive in ways that will lessen State involvement while still resulting in power and control over their victim(s).

For Restorative Justice interventions on abuse there is even less data than there is for the success of BIPs, but the same dynamics can be seen when they are treated as the sole acceptable intervention on abuse. Rarely do we even see them applied with any sort of real vigor, as typically all the abuser has to say is that they want to be “accountable” and many in their community will declare that as Restorative Justice Completed! However, even when a full process is attempted, it can often serve to reestablish the abuser’s credibility in the community while their survivor is retraumatized by the process and the abusive dynamics of the relationship are replicated. The survivor is pressured to attend talks with the abuser, sideline their own needs and boundaries in order to center their abuser’s redemption, and accept that the goal is ultimately to restore the conditions that the abuse originally sprung from (the abuser is “restored” to their original social position within the community). Because Restorative Justice processes are largely designed with the intention of addressing the harm that springs from a single incident (a robbery, a singular physical assault, etc.) it is a process frequently unequipped to address abuse, which is not the result of a singular incident of harm but of a broader context of entrapment and

control over time and is an expression of the abuser's core values system.

While an abuser or a fascist coming to understand their values system as reprehensible and in need of rejecting, thus ceasing to be an abuser or fascist, is the best case scenario we can hope for, organizing our energies towards that end will never be adequate in responding to the violence they do nor does it serve to protect those most vulnerable to their political projects of control and domination. Our resources are limited and the threat is immense and growing by the day. What is required of us is to understand that the authoritarianism expressed by abusers is as dangerous and reactionary as authoritarianism expressed by fascists. To understand that, in fact, the authoritarianism of fascists and the authoritarianism of abusers have their roots in the very same values system and work together as forces of oppression. With that understanding our goals in bashing back against abuse need to be informed by what tactics are most effective in establishing safety for survivors and in disrupting abusers' ability to gain and maintain power.

### **Deplatforming**

Abuse does not happen in a vacuum. As I've discussed in other essays, abuse occurs in a context. The context that entraps victims can and frequently does include a myriad of interpersonal tactics

employed by the abuser that play off of communal and structural contexts that enforce that control. Frequently, effective abusers have institutional or other forms of social power, are well liked and held to high esteem, have access and sway in many different spaces their victims are disempowered in. Abusers who have any kind of significant social platform can and do leverage that platform to find new victims, to find allies, to maintain control, to silence survivors who would otherwise speak out, and to punish those who do attempt to challenge them.

As with fascists, deplatforming an abuser is a necessary and effective tactic. While, like with fascists, it does not stop an abuser from being an abuser or fundamentally change their values system, it is a significant form of harm reduction that can limit the scope of the harm they can enact, their access to past and present victims, their access to new victims, their ability to rally their allies, and their ability to organize against their survivor's interests. Deplatforming can look like running abusers off social media, out of their positions of power, out of community spaces, and more. Abusers show their willingness to leverage what power they have to control and co-opt the autonomy of others; therefore, disarming them of that power can increase community safety, survivor autonomy, and establish anti-abuse social norms that puts every other abuser or potential abuser who witnesses it on notice.

## **Community Warnings and Call Outs**

When anti-fascists uncover the identity of a fascist the next step is to release their information — name, face, relevant activity, location, history, etc. — to the public in the form of a community warning. Beyond posting this information online, anti-fascists find other ways to make those around the fascist aware of their identity and beliefs, like, for example, calling their workplace, flyering their neighborhood, alerting their friends and family, etc. This has many different purposes that work towards the end of reducing the power of fascists, their ability to advance their political projects, and helps to make being a fascist an untenable and unappealing option.

These tactics can and do work to similar effect against abusers. Alerting the community properly can result in a significant hit to the abuser's ability to continue quietly collecting, abusing, and discarding victims. Flyering their neighborhood, calling their job, alerting their colleagues, friends, current partners, potential partners, etc. can even cut abusers off from some of the means they use to keep their victims entrapped such as their ability to leverage their economic power or social standing. As with fascists, it also communicates a strong message that being abusive results in a relentless attack on ones power and general peace of mind: a threat that — if consistently

demonstrated to be true — depicts most abusers' worst nightmare.

## **Confrontation**

While many liberals decry any use of violence that is not State-sanctioned, most radicals recognize that violence is simply another tactic that gains its moral weight from the context in which it is used. As nice as it would be for us to be able to use the tactics detailed above and see the fascist threat disappear, we are well aware that physical confrontation and violent resistance is necessary to push back the fascist threat. When fascists organize and work to build their power, anti-fascists are there to communicate just how dangerous being a fascist can be for one's health and well-being.

While the above tactics are useful in reducing fascists' capacities to organize and harm, reliance on nonviolent tactics alone is untenable. Some fascists are undeterred by attempts at deplatforming and are empowered/entrenched enough in their movement that community alerts do little to stop them. If we were not prepared to meet these fascists with violence, we would be leaving those most vulnerable to them open to attack. We know that fascists who are unopposed do not slink home in disappointment as some liberals like to claim. Instead, fascists who are unopposed and unafraid build power and do not stop

building that power until they come up against a hard edge of resistance.

It is the same logic with abusers, even as some may balk at this suggestion. While some abusers may be deterred by the tactics above, many keep a grasp on much of their power and are entrenched enough in a surrounding community of allies and apologists that deplatforming and community alerts are insufficient to the task. The traumatizing nature of experiencing abuse should be and *is* reason enough for violent resistance against abusers, but it seems important to take a moment to remind the reader that abuse does not always end in a mutual parting of ways of abuser and survivor. Each year approximately 4,000 women die because of domestic violence, and up to 75% are murdered *after* the relationship has ended. Women are more likely to be killed by an intimate partner or family member than by any other person. On a communal level: 68% of mass shooters have a history of domestic violence and 59% of mass shootings are directly tied to domestic violence (at least one victim of the shooting was a partner or family member of the shooter) and 20% of victims in domestic violence related murders are “corollary victims” (friends, family, bystanders who intervened, etc.) Successfully challenging abusers is very literally a matter of life or death for many.



We need to make being an abuser as hazardous as we endeavor to make being a fascist. Deplatforming and community warnings are useful tools but when they fail us or are inadequate to the task we need to not be restricted only to nonviolent methods. If an abuser will not do the work to reject their values system, will not step back from their positions of power, will not be deterred by social pressure, physical pressure becomes a necessity. Abusers need to be made afraid for their physical safety. Like with fascists, it needs to be demonstrated to them consistently that showing their faces in public and building their power can and will be responded to by force. Social norms need to be established that send a message to every abuser and potential abusers that abuse is not a safe activity for them, especially if they hope to keep all of their teeth.

### **Three Way Fight**

Anti-authoritarians understand that the conflict against fascism is a three way fight: we are in conflict with both the State and with non-State reactionary forces, including those who experience aspects of State repression or even perform some forms of anti-State sentiment. Some wish to collapse the State and other reactionary forces into a solid and singular enemy, and while it is true that State and non-State reactionary forces are not entirely separate or unrelated enemies (far from it), it is reductive and dangerous to deny the multiplicity of authoritarian projects that

exist within the political arena, or the possibility that they may conflict with each other while still remaining our enemies. Fascists who parrot populist language and say ACAB are not our allies. They are people who seek out more political power with which they can inflict their authoritarian values on others. This means, as anti-fascists, that we are in a three way fight with both the established system of power — the State — *and* with non-State reactionaries that seek to build their own power and advance their political goals. From this position we can recognize all calls to ignore or even work with fascist militias positioned against the current State, all enemy-of-my-enemy logic, as the counter-productive and dangerous rot that it is. We have enemies in more places than just the machinery of the State, and ignoring the reality of the threat they pose to vulnerable people and movements for liberation in general can only happen at our peril.

As there can be fascists who see the authoritarian State as their enemy, so, too, can there be abusers who see the authoritarian State as their enemy. One does not have to have consistent anti-authoritarian values to be against the system as it is. In fact, the source of some people's rage at the authoritarian system as it stands is not the fact that it oppresses others and robs them of their agency, but instead their feelings of entitlement to power over others that the system keeps from them. Like fascists, intimate authoritarians may indeed position themselves against the current system in order to build power for themselves, but

that does *not* automatically make them vital members of the struggle against authoritarianism.

Many radicals who would scoff at the idea that we need to ignore or even make room for fascists who claim they are anti-State because of our supposed “common enemy” frequently turn to survivors with the very same argument: that to oust our abusers would compromise “unity” or otherwise weaken us in our struggle against more powerful enemies. The reality remains, however, that authoritarianism, domination, and control are not the sole property of the State, nor — as evidenced by fascists who attack the State — only advanced by its mechanisms. A fascist ignored or accepted in an anti-authoritarian movement becomes a fascist with unfettered access to countless vulnerable people they intend to disempower and control. An abuser ignored or accepted in an anti-authoritarian movement will do the same. Our fight is not unidirectional. It is against all forces that wish to constrict, co-opt, and wipe out the autonomy of others. Our strength comes from our consistent rejection of those values and our willingness to meet them in battle on *any* front they may appear. Were they go, we go.

### **Centering Survivor Autonomy**

The conditions of abuse constrict and co-opt the autonomy of the survivor. Thus, challenging those conditions adequately requires

taking actions that expand and honor the survivor's autonomy. While I have outlined effective tactics and practices that can be leveraged against abuser power, this is ultimately the most important and central component to responding to abuse.

The survivor is the expert in their own needs. They have been, or are still, entrapped in a situation where someone (or multiple people) has denied their needs as worthy of consideration and rejected their self-knowledge as silly, ridiculous, naive, or worthy of punishment. In the fight against fascism, we center (or at least *should* center) the needs, vulnerabilities, and perspectives of those most affected by the fascist project, and so must we with survivors when we work to challenge abuse. A survivor has been living in the conditions of abuse and knows the intricacies of those conditions, the tactics of their abuser, their level of safety, what methods may work to regain their autonomy and which ones would further endanger them better than any outside observer can. This means that, even when we have a toolbelt full of tactics to deploy against their abuser, we must follow the survivor's lead, instead of being yet another person who denies them their agency. They know their context, and each survivor's context is ultimately unique to them. If they reject a tactic for their situation, that rejection must be honored.

There is more that can and must be done to center survivor autonomy than just dealing with abuse on a case-by-case basis,

just as we resist fascism on a broader scale than attacking individual fascists. Among these is something difficult to quantify, but vital to practice: keeping an eye to power and how it functions among us. What are the mechanisms in your community that an abuser has leveraged to their advantage? The centralized power structure in an organization? The ability to perform to social scripts and niceties that gives them social power denied to the people unable to do so? Do people in your community generally believe that controlling behaviors (looking through a partner's texts, stalking, extreme jealousy and restricting friendships, etc.) are romantic? Is hitting, screaming at, degrading children considered acceptable? Who didn't believe the victim, and for what reasons? Just as we work to resist fascism on a broader level by putting in the time to understand it as an ideology, seeing its place in our political system, becoming aware of what people have at stake in organizing for it (building their personal power), and then challenging it in each of those arenas, we must also do so with intimate authoritarianism.

Centering and building survivor autonomy as a political project has material demands as well as ideological ones, just as anti-fascist work does. Fascist and abusers are empowered in our society, even if mainstream culture occasionally provides lip service of rejecting them. They leverage systems that *already exist* in a hierarchical society in order to build their own power. Building survivor autonomy, then, requires we work to bring the

systems that create hierarchy (cisheteropatriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, capitalism, the State!) crashing down at the same time we also build ways of being that do not depend on the hierarchy to function, this can and already does appear in the form of mutual aid. Survivor networks are filled with survivors providing what mutual aid we can to one another: a place to stay, help moving, defense against a dangerous abuser, childcare, etc. Imagine, for a moment, an anti-authoritarian movement that saw abuse as an important territory for both resistance and mutual aid. How might that loosen the contextual nets that keep so many survivors entrapped? How many more people would see our projects as sites of potential liberation, rather than yet another place they become vulnerable to abusers?

As lovely and important as that image is, as an anarchist survivor I feel compelled to end this essay with bared teeth rather than open arms. We live in a culture of abuse, and it is apparent to most survivors that many people are more content to flow along with the social status quo than to challenge abuse when it is inconvenient for them, no matter how many times they posted #believesurvivors during the MeToo movement. The rehabilitation of our abusers is frequently of far more concern than our wellbeing or autonomy, because to challenge the former and expand the latter always requires a massive upheaval, a total rejection of the social and material context that created the abuse. In other words: a revolution. As a survivor of childhood and

intimate partner abuse, I demand nothing less than that revolution. I demand upheaval. I demand an anti-authoritarian movement in which all authoritarians — anyone who believes it is acceptable to restrict, co-opt, or destroy someone else's autonomy for their own power and gain — are acknowledged as what they are: our political enemies.

The image features a central grey rectangle containing the title text. This rectangle is set against a black background. Stylized, white, flame-like patterns with black outlines rise from the bottom and sides of the central rectangle, framing the text. The flames are composed of multiple parallel, wavy lines that create a sense of movement and heat.

# Towards a Militant Survivor Insurrection

By Lee Cicuta of @butchanarchy