

ON TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE, PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL ACCOUNTABILITY, AND HOW WE SHOULD RELATE TO ABUSERS AFTER LEARNING ABOUT THEIR VIOLENCE

SO YOU SUPPORT SURVIVORS :) BUT DON'T HOLD THEIR ABUSERS ACCOUNTABLE.

A FEW DISCLAIMERS :

I do not claim to be the sole arbiter of how transformative justice is performed. TJ (transformative justice) demands nuance, and this zine is not an exhaustive resource when it comes to dealing with every situation.

These ideas are not my own: TJ was created by and for Black and Indigenous communities so that they could make their spaces safe without relying on the processes of the state. My purpose in making this zine is to uphold BIPOC-formed methods of transforming communities as superior to our society's current punishment process and to accessibly relay my understanding of this topic to those that my platform can reach. I encourage readers to do more research on TJ past reading about my personal thoughts on the process, and have included a list of resources at the back of the zine.

At every step, TJ's primary goal is to center survivors, protect them at all costs, and honor their wishes in every decision that is being made about the community. Since the topic of this zine is how we relate to abusers in our communities after we learn about their violence, it talks a lot more about abusers than survivors. In no way do I mean to decenter survivors, and want to be clear that no matter what I say in the following pages, if the survivor in your particular situation doesn't agree with my thoughts, then the zine should be thrown out. If you are aiming to implement principles of TJ, your job first and foremost is to listen to the wishes of the survivor.

INTENT:

I wrote this zine after leaving a community in which people congratulated themselves for their commitment to "feminism," and then told me I was overreacting when I expressed distaste for the fact that they were still close friends with a man that stalked me. I know situations like this happen all the time, so my intent in writing this is to both share what I know about what true accountability looks like, and to call out those that claim to support survivors, but don't walk their talk by participating in accountability processes. I ask that readers show up to this work ready to be critical of themselves and their communities.

DEDICATION:

This zine is dedicated to survivors whose communities told them they were overreacting when they asked for accountability to be taken. It's possible to be in community with people that make you feel safe and valued, and I sincerely hope that you find exactly that. Fuck the gaslighters.

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TRANSFORMATI

the process of addressing violence without creating more violence.

believes that every person and community has the ability to be transformed. nobody is a lost cause.

the goal of TJ is not to punish, but to get to the root cause of violence within individuals and communities so that those people + places can be transformed into spaces where violence is no longer enacted.

aims to disrupt our thinking that justice = punishment. this process demands that we decolonize our minds enough to create justice without relying on the violent methods of colonizers.

is inherently pro-abolition of policing, the criminal "justice" system, and the prison industrial complex. TJ recognizes that these systems terrorize communities + do nothing to make spaces safer.

VE JUSTICE...

is survivor centered at every step. the survivor gets to decide what "accountability" should look like for their abuser + community.

is not passive, it's all about leaning in to hard conversations + being willing to disrupt and change our communities + personal relationships so they are truly safe spaces. this may involve mending relationships, but it may also involve severing them.

doesn't always end with abusers being forgiven. TJ demands that abusers take accountability for their violence + do the work necessary to prevent perpetuating harm. such action does not require forgiveness to have taken place.

recognizes that abuse never occurs in a vacuum. TJ demands that everyone in community with an abuser takes accountability for the role they played in enacting violence themselves and/or creating an environment in which abuse could be enacted.

NO REMORSE!

Let's make sure we're starting from the same place: though abusers are human beings that are capable of transformation, they do not deserve pity and sympathy. They will be held accountable, not handed empathy, after they have committed violence. Sad they lost friends? Sad they got dumped? Sad their life was turned upside down? None of it would have happened if they hadn't wreaked havoc in their communities. It doesn't matter how hard they've had it in the past. There is no excuse for harming others, and we will have no remorse as we demand they step up to take accountability. Before you jump to defend an abuser's honor, remember that the reason they're being held accountable is because of choices that they made and could have prevented. You look goofy defending people that actively chose harm and are now having to deal with the consequences of their actions.

QUESTIONS THAT GUIDE THE TJ PROCESS:

Transformative justice requires communities to come together to have hard conversations about how violence entered their space, and how they are going to prevent it from happening again. This involves the community wrestling with these ideas as a group, as well as individual members of the community doing the personal work of interrogating their own actions.

~ COMMUNAL

- How can we stop the current incidence of violence, ensure the survivor's safety, and create justice in this situation?
- Taking the survivor's wishes into account, how can we hold the perpetrator of this violence accountable? How does the survivor want us as a community to hold *each other* accountable?
- How do we transform the conditions that allowed this to happen so that violence isn't enacted in our community again?

PERSONAL ~

- Have I personally enabled the current incidence of violence, been a passive bystander, or otherwise contributed to making this community unsafe? How can I take accountability for my role in these things?
- What do I need to further educate myself on in order to do this work?
- What structures or support will I put in place to ensure that I am not shirking any of the responsibility I have to address this situation?

A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

Transformative justice recognizes that abuse doesn't exist within a vacuum; abuse is learned, enabled, and perpetuated by systems of people. Thus, TJ calls us to take a hard look in the mirror when we find out that abuse crept into our communities. It would be easier to put all the blame on the one person that directly enacted violence, but we would never get to the root of the issue, and never actually oust violence from our spaces. This process involves the community coming together to decide how to create a safe space as a group, but it also involves each individual looking at their own actions and taking personal accountability for the ways in which they have stood in the way of ensuring the safety of everyone involved. Here are a few things that *you* need to sit with if you have been in communities where abuse has taken place:

SILENCE IS VIOLENCE!

Your lack of action when it comes to holding abusers accountable makes you complicit in their violence and perpetuates an unsafe environment. If you haven't done anything to ensure the safety of survivors, you haven't done anything to disrupt the violence that they faced in your community. Refusing to take a stand on an issue that survivors have no choice but to confront shows your unwillingness to stand in solidarity with them. TJ is not a passive process: it demands that you pick a side and stand your ground there.

...IT'S WEIRD THAT YOU FEEL EMPATHY FOR ABUSERS

If you feel empathy for people that are having to deal with the consequences of being abusive, you need to ask yourself why you're able to muster such a feeling in response to their violence. Some questions to sit with: why do I feel sorry for them? Is it because I have been in a similar situation and am hoping I never get called out the way they have been? Is it because I don't understand why what they did was a big deal? Is it because I can see myself doing something similar in the future, and am hoping that if I pay some empathy forward, I won't get it as bad as they have? Long story short: if you're finding any sort of empathy for abusers, you need to ask yourself if it's because you are or have been abusive as well.

IF AN ABUSER LIKES YOU, YOU PROBABLY HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING TO HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE

If you feel safe around abusers, and your first instinct when they are accused of violence is to defend their honorable intentions, you should think twice before saying that you stand in solidarity with survivors. If you feel safe and sure that a known abuser would never inflict violence onto you, it's because you have aligned yourself with them in a way that has positioned you to be *protected* by their power, rather than *threatened* by it. Ask yourself how you have become so palatable to an abuser that you're able to *get along* with them. Recognize that feeling safe around someone like that means you have aligned yourself with them, rather than standing in solidarity with their survivor. You should be standing *opposite* the perpetrator, not cozying up to them.

HOLDING AN ABUSER AC INVOLVE PARTYING FRIDAY NIGHT!

Abusers do not have to be ostracized from loving relationships for the rest of their lives; in fact, the whole point of transformative justice is to make sure that abusers transform themselves enough that they *can* give and receive love in healthy ways. In order for this process to work, abusers *can't* be completely abandoned; leaving someone without support is a sure way to push them to become even more jaded, violent, and unwilling to take accountability. However, it's critical to understand that there are limits when it comes to what is appropriate and what isn't when you are holding someone accountable.

When you have recently learned of someone's violence, your job is to make sure they are fully committed to their accountability process in a way that honors the wishes of the survivor.

COUNTABLE DOESN'T WITH THEM ON A

Holding someone accountable doesn't involve inviting them over to take shots on the weekend, laughing with them over a weekday lunch, or crafting a social media post about how great they are. None of these things put an abuser in a situation where they will be focused on transforming themselves; they are distractions from the accountability process. Being in an abuser's space in a way that supports them through this process might involve initiating conversations about the toxicity of their community, giving them a ride to therapy, or calling them out when they aren't fully leaning into their accountability work. Abusers can and should have access to a support system, but they don't need an invite to this weekend's party. Repeat after me: nothing changes if nothing changes. By that, I mean that if you're chumming around with an abuser while their survivor is still trying to process the trauma that they've experienced, you need to read the room and ask yourself about how your refusal to change the way you relate to an abuser is perpetuating their violence and distracting them from taking true accountability.

So do abusers ever get to have friends again?
@angelicaross said it best: the admission price for community is accountability. Abusers can re-enter community when they've taken accountability and are able to have healthy relationships with others. Until then, relationships with abusers shouldn't be casual, as you'd be letting them into community spaces before they've done the work to earn their place there. The reason that abusers have been asked to leave community to work on themselves is because they have acted in ways that made their communities unsafe. Until they have done the work to transform themselves enough to prove that they can sustain friendships and romantic relationships without hurting others, then they can't be in those relationships. That's it! If people cannot be in loving relationships without hurting others, then they don't get to be in those relationships in the first place.

Nothing changes if nothing changes!! You cannot transform a community when you're doing the same shit as usual. In addition, someone that has enacted violence in a community should never feel entitled to gain access to that space again, no matter how much work they've done. Some communities may be open to welcoming abusers back after they've transformed themselves, but TJ doesn't necessitate that.

All that being said, abusers eventually rejoin community, whether that be a community they were previously a part of, or a new one that they seek out. The process of an abuser reentering community is one of intentionality, both of the abuser and the community they are entering. If we stuck to a "do the crime, do the time" philosophy, we would simply let abusers come back to communities after they've been exiled for x amount of time, and continue on with business as usual. But that wouldn't be transformative! Such a mindset reinforces our colonized ideas about punishment, and lets communities continue to perpetuate that systemic violence, instead of changing to become spaces in which such issues never arise.

Abusers moving into community looks different depending on the situation, but here are a few things to keep in mind as you figure out how to move forward...

ON BRING ABUSERS BACK INTO COMMUNITY

THIS PROCESS MUST BE SURVIVOR CENTERED

If the survivor says that they don't want their abuser to come back into their past community then that's it. Period. Just because the abuser has transformed themselves does not mean that they are entitled to have their space in old community back. A common misconception about transformative justice is that its end goal is forgiveness. This is not the case. TJ leaves space for any and all emotions to exist for as long as they need to. Survivors do not need to forgive their abusers, and they can stay furious at them for the rest of their lives if they damn well please. The goal of TJ is not to make up for violence enough that the community can go "back to normal."

The goal is to transform the community into a space in which violence cannot dwell. The survivor gets to decide what needs to happen for that to be true.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS NEVER STOPS

Abusers have to live with their actions as long as their survivor does. This means that they need to continue taking accountability, making sure that they are no longer enacting or perpetuating violence, and being open and honest about how they are working to transform themselves. Truly transformed communities treat TJ as a set of values that demands they *always* be asking questions to ensure the safety of their spaces (whether known abusers are in them or not).

ABUSERS BACK

YOU CANT HAVE ACCOUNTABILITY W/O TRANSPARENCY

Upon entering any new community, an abuser needs to be transparent about their past mistakes. Those new people deserve a safe space just as much as the abuser's last community did, and to deny them information about why the abuser is showing up at their door would be to enact violence yet again.

INTENTIONALITY REQUIRES LITERAL INTENTIONS TO BE NAMED

Abusers need to re-enter community with an accountability plan in place for the foreseeable future. This might look like planned check ins every few weeks to discuss where everyone is at, or setting specific standards for how the abuser is expected to behave in the community. Be concrete and actionable - perhaps you as a community demand that the abuser discloses their past violence to new partners by the end of the first date. Maybe the abuser needs to text someone in the community after every therapy session just to tell them that they went. This can look like all sorts of things, as long as specific intentions are being defined and instituted.

ACCOUNTABILITY IS A COMMUNITY PRACTICE

If you are bringing an abuser into your community, *you* and everyone else in that community needs to commit to continuing to do the work of holding accountable and making sure that your community as a whole does not become a place where violence can exist unchallenged. All communities should do this work, but the fact that someone who has been previously violent is in your space means that you need to be all that more vigilant. Nobody can take accountability alone, and that means you need to be ready to engage in that process with them. If you aren't willing to put in that work, then you shouldn't be assuming the risk of bringing previously violent people into your space.

Transformative justice requires people to put in a lot of work, and some people aren't going to be willing to do it. You deserve a community that is just as dedicated to these processes as you are:

If you are someone that isn't willing to take accountability, you shouldn't keep inserting yourself into the spaces of those who are trying to do that work. Just say you aren't willing to lean into this process and go perpetuate violence elsewhere.

If you want to be in spaces in which accountability is demanded and TJ is an agreed upon set of values, then you deserve those spaces. Don't compromise for people that are going to hinder you doing that work.

Again, transformative justice is not passive and does not exist to mend any and all relationships. It often involves severing relationships and making big changes in your community. This is a hard process, but an important one. I've learned a lot about moving away from community, and want to provide some affirmations for you if that's what you're headed towards:

SO YOUR COMMUNITY IS REFUSING TO TAKE ACCOUNTABILITY...



It's ok to grow apart from people when those relationships are no longer serving you the way they once did. You can honor and value the love that existed between you and someone else and also decide the going forward, you both need something else.

It's also ok to grow apart from people and be frustrated that you invested time and energy in relationships that harmed you and did not share your values.

You shouldn't get down on yourself for not getting along with everyone. In fact, you should be worried if you do. What does it say about you and what you stand for if you're palatable to everyone?

Having enemies is ok. If you are standing for something, there will inevitably be others standing in opposition.

It's possible to grow apart amicably, but it's also ok for things to end in heated fights. You can not and should not expect yourself to be completely composed in situations in which you have been hurt and your values have been threatened.

You deserve community that doesn't treat your boundaries as burdens.

Your community should be excited to learn and grow with you, even if that means challenging their pre-existing notions of how to relate to each other.

TOWARDS ★ TRANSFORMATIVE COMMUNITIES ♡

I unintentionally fell into my last community, and have promised myself that I will never let that happen again. How lame! - To simply end up sharing space out of coincidence, instead of doing each other the honor of intentionally cultivating meaningful relationships and spaces. I'm now embarking on the process of building new community with intention, boundaries, and a deep commitment to accountability. Some questions that have been guiding my process:

★ WHAT VALUES MUST BE PRESENT IN EVERY MEMBER OF MY COMMUNITY?

I deserve to share space with people that understand me and are committed to centering the same values as we learn and grow.

HOW WILL I PROTECT THE EXCLUSIVENESS OF MY COMMUNITY? ★

Boundaries must be specific to ideas, not people. It doesn't matter who they are, how long we've known each other, or what their intentions were. My boundaries are hard lines that nobody gets to cross. I believe that it is impossible for a space to be safe if just anyone is welcome there. Thus, I have no interest in being in a community that isn't exclusionary.

HOW WILL I BE PROACTIVE ABOUT CREATING SPACE THAT IS TRULY SAFE?

The transformative justice process shouldn't wait to be started until someone is accused of abuse. Never again will I enter a community that isn't committed to these values and processes from the get-go.



TIME TO PICK A SIDE

Transformative justice is not a quiet, indifferent, let's-all-just-get-along process. TJ exists to do the hard work of leaning in to conflict and making space for any and all emotions that exist there. I personally have a lot of anger in me about the ways I've seen those around me respond to attempts to be held accountable. Many truths can exist: I wrote this zine to talk about how transformative justice is healing AND to get some shit off my chest. I wrote it because I want people to see that intentional accountability is beautiful and important AND because I needed to call out the bullshit I see people trying to pull around me, specifically at my college. One of the reasons I think that transformative justice is so powerful is because it allows all of these emotions to exist without trying to repress or resolve them in any way. So, I'll leave you with my unrepressed, unresolved anger about the ways in which many of my peers refuse to hold abusers accountable:

Recently, I've been perplexed by the number of hoops that people will jump through in order to justify their connections to abusers. In some instances, it even seems like spinning the web necessary to support their logic takes more work than taking accountability would be. What really gets me heated is when these people proudly flaunt their "I stand with survivors:)" ethic to the rest of the world, though their day-to-day actions beg to differ. This is incredibly violent, as it allows them to get the clout for being perceived as a social justice warrior, when in reality, they are perpetuating the patriarchy that they claim to care about smashing. I would like to give these people the benefit of the doubt and say that perhaps they're doing this because they don't know how to handle these situations ethically. Though it isn't our fault that we don't know certain things, it is completely our responsibility to educate ourselves enough to prevent perpetuating harm. Thus, no matter these people's intent, the impact remains the same; their refusal to lean into accountability processes is violent and oppressive.

We live in a moment where everyone and their mother is a "feminist." So much so, that I tend to think that word has lost most of its meaning. I could write a whole other zine about how if our goal is liberation of all peoples, we need to have a more nuanced conversation than "feminism" can provide, but to close *this* zine out, I want to tie it all back to the title and remind you that you can say the word "feminist" 1000 times a day, but that doesn't mean you give a shit about changing the patriarchal power dynamics that abuse perpetuates (to be clear, abuse is perpetuated and experienced by people of all genders; the patriarchy is involved because of the hierarchy and fear necessary to wield power over someone, not because all abusers are inherently male).

It's easy to sit around the dinner table with some of your pals and talk about capital S "Survivors" as an entire group. It's easy to quote the right writers and sound like you know your shit. BUT, if real survivors in your life don't feel safe around you or your community, you need to think for a minute before you pat yourself on the back for standing in solidarity with them. I know people who are working towards degrees in gender studies and have explicitly invalidated my experiences with abusive men. The contradictions would be hilarious if they weren't so violent.

Many of us are familiar with the term "performative allyship" when it comes to race. The same concept can be applied to this issue. You can read a new book about abuse and assault every week, repost every infographic on Instagram, even write a dissertation on the sociology of abuse, and still treat survivors like shit! And that's performative allyship that will never actually do anything to end the abuse that runs rampant in our society. TL;DR You can talk a big talk about how much you understand oppression, but if you aren't willing to back that up by holding yourself and those around you accountable to not perpetuating and normalizing abuse, you don't get to go home with the ally of the year award.

I believe that many truths can exist at once, and that most situations deserve to be treated with nuance, but the issue of whether or not you support survivors of abuse is not one of them. I have attempted to walk you through the transformative justice process from a place of love for community and a fierce will to protect its sacredness, but at the end of the day, I cannot demand that you give a shit about what I have to say. I can only encourage you to lean into the hard stuff and not let yourself shirk the responsibility that you have to protect survivors and the rest of your community. I can only warn you that attempts at remaining in a gray area when it comes to whether or not you support survivors do not go unseen. I can only hope that you give enough of a shit about survivors that you're willing to take the action necessary to support and protect their communities.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

This zine aims to start a conversation about how we as community members should interact with abusers in ways that hold them accountable. This is only one topic under the umbrella of transformative justice. As you begin having conversations with your community about how to implement principles of TJ, I encourage you to spend some time reflecting on these questions as well:

It is possible to be both a survivor AND an enabler of violence. For some survivors, holding abusers accountable can be very re-traumatizing. However, other survivors may be completely capable of taking part in this process. This demands a very nuanced discussion. How will we as a community hold each other accountable to participating in these processes as fully as we can? How will we ensure that everyone is stepping up to the best of their ability, but nobody is being expected to do work that is further harming them?

Every discussion of transformative justice demands nuance based on the power dynamics that are present in the specific community working through these processes. This includes power dynamics inherently involved in interactions between people of different races, genders, sexualities, classes, abilities, ages, and other identities. Have we as a community taken these things into account as we've made plans to hold each other accountable? How are we intentionally working to undermine these power dynamics?

Transformative justice demands abolition of policing, the criminal justice system, and the prison industrial complex. What do we as a community need to research in order to understand these issues and the ways in which they intersect with TJ? How are we committing ourselves to being accomplices to these movements?

RESOURCE FOR FURTHER LEARNING

"So You've Sexually Harassed or Abused Someone: What Now?" by Ijeoma Oluo

"Transformative Justice: A Brief Description" by Mia Mingus

The Critical Resistance - Incite! Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex, 2008 reflections
(<https://incite-national.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/CR-INCITE-statement-2008discussion.pdf>)

TJ Workbook by the Virginia Anti-Violence Project & Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance:
<https://www.vadata.org//media/My%20Transformative%20Justice%20Workbook%202020.pdf>

Beyond Prisons, episode "Transformative Justice & Pod Mapping"

The Activist Files, episode 12, "Transformative Justice in an Era of Mass Criminalization, Mariame Kaba and Victoria Law"

Envisioning Queer Justice Podcast, episode "Nuancing Restorative Justice"

Unlocking Us with Brené Brown, episode "Brené on Shame and Accountability"

<https://batjc.wordpress.com/readings-media/> (Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective)

TransformHarm.org

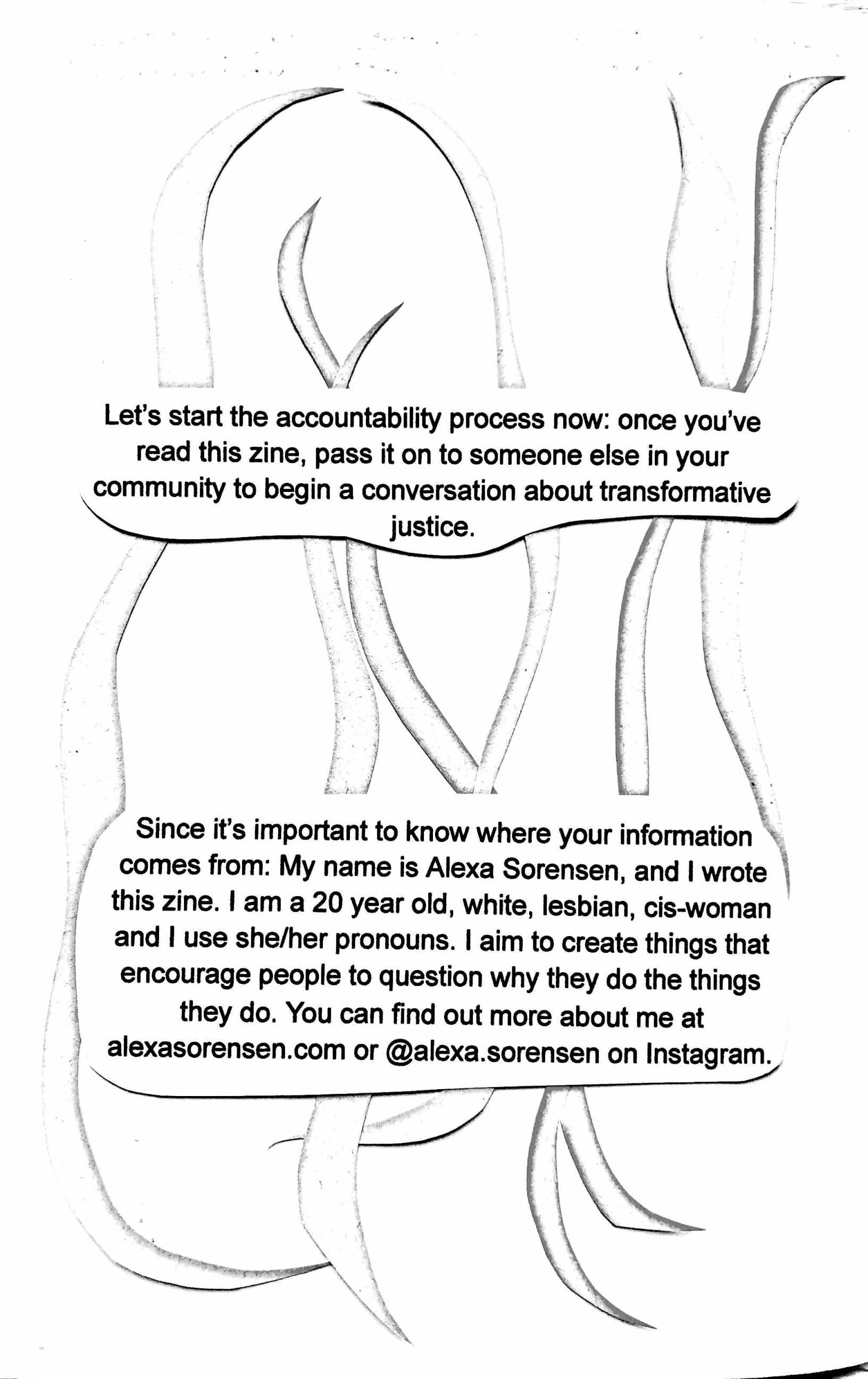
LeavingEvidence.wordpress.com (blog by Mia Mingus)

Project-NIA.org

articles

podcasts

resource hubs



Let's start the accountability process now: once you've read this zine, pass it on to someone else in your community to begin a conversation about transformative justice.

Since it's important to know where your information comes from: My name is Alexa Sorensen, and I wrote this zine. I am a 20 year old, white, lesbian, cis-woman and I use she/her pronouns. I aim to create things that encourage people to question why they do the things they do. You can find out more about me at alexasorensen.com or [@alexasorensen](https://www.instagram.com/alexasorensen) on Instagram.