Review of
The Revolution Starts at Home

brownfemipower

The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities, edited by Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, began as a zine. It met with such enthusiasm and high demand that it was eventually transformed into a full-fledged anthology. A collection of testimonies, essays, and interviews, The Revolution offers groundbreaking insights into how various activists have identified the problem of interpersonal violence in their communities and the strategies they used to confront it.

The core idea in Revolution is that “the movement” to end violence against women “became a network of social service providers and legal system advocates,” a collection of services and responses that came to rely on the nation/state, itself a perpetrator and benefactor of gendered violence (p. xiii). This movement model failed to address all the forms of violence encountered by women and sometimes exposed survivors to more violence by the nation/state. Revolution documents the efforts of groups whose focus has been on developing community accountability models that empower communities to develop strategies to heal and transform violence. This unique collection also recognizes that interpersonal violence can emerge in activist groups that are attempting to resist violence. The editors highlight responses to violence within activist groups, reminding us that the “revolution begins at home.”

The collection begins with a brilliant historical analysis of queer and trans organizing within the San Francisco-based Communities United Against Violence (CUAV). Morgan Bassichis reminds readers that there is a rich political history of linking organizing against interpersonal violence with collective resistance to state violence. She highlights the importance of using many strategies and skills in multilayered antiviolence organizing. Key elements in the development of CUAV’s organizing agenda and long-term liberatory political goals were storytelling, direct action, and learning how to do consensus voting at meetings.

Other essays showed this commitment to multiple strategies and long-term solutions. The authors of “It Takes Ass to Whip Ass” are/were sex workers, and their solutions to violence (carrying baseball bats, deescalating situations with humor or sarcasm, or relying on your girls) reflected familiar approaches used in

* BROWNFEMIPOWER is a writer, blogger, and media justice activist.

142 Social Justice Vol. 37, No. 4
the working-class neighborhoods I come from. Working-class solutions to violence are rarely emphasized in antiviolence work. Instead, survivors are expected to “take the higher road” or learn a new skill costing time and money that working-class people do not have.

“The Secret Joy of Accountability” spotlights the survival skills of survivors—an underemphasized resource in antiviolence organizing—and the liberatory potential of survivor accountability. Perez-Darby challenges herself and other survivors to ask: “What would it look like to take responsibility for the complex choices I made in a grounded, centered, and accountable way?” By the end of her essay, I was teary eyed with relief. She avoids simplistic, blame-driven, Dr. Phil-style approaches to examining survivors’ “accountability” in the context of their experiences of violence. By defining “self-accountability” as “an internal process where each of us examines our own behaviors and choices so that we can better reconcile those choices with our own values,” Perez-Darby argues that our job as organizers is to “create environments that support people in their efforts toward self-accountability.” What kind of impact could we make on interpersonal violence if we were to support survivors, who receive a steady stream of messages that they are not worthy of respect, to resist by making choices to center self-accountability rooted in self-love?

“What Does It Feel Like When Change Finally Comes? Male Supremacy, Accountability, and Transformative Justice,” written by Gaurav Jashnani, R.J. Maccani, and Alan Greig of the Challenging Male Supremacy Project, shares Maccani’s personal observations as a facilitator between survivors and the person who abused them (who was also his friend). Maccani’s reflections note the denial, anger, and discomfort he felt when learning about the abuse, as well as the practical problems of finding the time to meet with the person who had committed abuse, who could exhibit testy attitudes. Ultimately, the results of the accountability process were ambiguous. As Maccani notes, the abusive person showed a lack of urgency for the process, extending it for two and one half years. The facilitators thus found it difficult to distinguish between empathizing with and enabling him. According to Maccani, survivors were satisfied with how the process played out. As a survivor of violence myself, such a long period of trial and error reveals the deep challenge that this work poses for all of us.

A common response I receive when suggesting the need to address interpersonal violence in ways that do not rely on the police, prosecution, and prisons is an exasperated, “Well, what should we do instead?” It is as if creating something different automatically fails for being too abstract, unimaginable, or naive. The Revolution Starts at Home addresses this concern head on, showing that communities are actively wrestling with real-world solutions to violence in meaningful, practical ways that center the needs of survivors—and are finding success. The Revolution Starts at Home is a bold, creative, and inspiring collection of stories that brings to mind Arundhati Roy’s notion that another world is not only imaginable and possible, it is being built at this very moment.