

The Liberatory World We Want to Create

Loving Accountability and the Limitations of Cancel Culture

by Aja Couchois Duncan and Kad Smith

Our histories are filled with music, dance, ceremony. And, too, our histories are filled with violence, starvation, captivity. But we are not our trauma. We experience trauma, yet we are infinitely more powerful than the harm done to us. And the just and liberatory world we want to create will not be birthed from our unhealed wounds.




*There is no end to this love
It has formed your bodies
Feeds your bright spirits
And no matter what happens in these times of breaking—
No matter dictators, the heartless, and liars
No matter—you are born of those
Who kept ceremonial embers burning in their hands
All through the miles of relentless exile
Those who sang the path through massacre
All the way to sunrise
You will make it through—*

—Joy Harjo, from “For Earth’s Grandsons,”
An American Sunrise



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LOVE, A FORGOTTEN TONGUE



In *Measuring Love in the Journey for Justice*, Shiree Teng and Sammy Nuñez “call upon love as an antidote to injustice.”¹ But too often in our equity-based systems-change work, love is a forgotten tongue. Even in contexts where Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are leading organizations, networks, and change efforts, our engagement can be marked by competition, judgment, adversarialism, and distrust.

Coming, as we are, from centuries of land theft, enslavement, genocide, and systemic inequities that threaten our daily ability to survive, let alone thrive, it is understandable that we are angry—righteously so. And yet, the world we are seeking to create together requires that we move beyond anger to harness the transformative power of love.

In Ojibwe, one word for love is *zhawenim*: to show loving-kindness. It is a transitive animate verb, which means it is an action done by one to/with another. It is relational. Love is not something that is hidden somewhere, waiting to be found. It is something we create together—something that must be cultivated and practiced.

MEDICINE TO HARVEST

One of the many ways systemic injustice works is through the story it teaches us to tell ourselves: A story that locates responsibility within individuals for the effects of settler colonialism, enslavement, extractive capitalism, and U.S. global domination. This is how we, as BIPOC people, can become defined by the trauma that we, our families, and our ancestors have experienced.

As James Baldwin reminds us, “History is not the past, it is present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.”²

So the question becomes: What do we carry and how do we carry it? Our histories are filled with music, dance, ceremony. And, too, our histories are filled with violence, starvation, captivity. But we are not our trauma. We *experience* trauma, yet we are infinitely more powerful than the harm done to us. And the just and liberatory world we want to create will not be birthed from our unhealed wounds.

In *My Grandmother’s Hands*, Resmaa Menakem describes how white-body supremacy “doesn’t live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies.”³ This is why any effort to advance racial equity-based systems change that addresses other intersectional forms of oppression must be an act of community care, one that centers our collective well-being—the well-being of our bodies, our hearts, our spirits. What is needed is to acknowledge trauma, honoring its impact while striving to relinquish its stronghold. It is through this effort that we claim our strength, our purpose, our aggregate power to transform the world.

There are many different somatic and energetic practices that can support us in healing trauma—both on our own and together. So, we have a great deal of medicine to harvest. What is necessary is that we all tend to this important work for the sake of ourselves, our communities, our vision of a just and liberated world. It is also critical that our social change work centers healing and inner work as a fundamental aspect of all our efforts collectively. (For an in-depth discussion of why this matters and what can be made possible as a result, please read “Toward Love, Healing, Resilience & Alignment: The Inner Work of Social Transformation & Justice” by Sheryl Petty, Kristen Zimmerman, and Mark Leach.⁴)

Without careful attention to how we want to be together, what we do together will be nothing more than the replication of centuries upon centuries of harm.

CANCEL CULTURE

Cancel culture is a phrase that is relatively new to our shared lexicon.⁵ It is a term that describes a phenomenon many of us can loosely identify in shape and form, but struggle to explicitly name what it is and isn’t. “Canceling” someone was most prominently brought to our collective

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consciousness through online engagement in the twenty-first-century public squares of Twitter, tumblr, and Facebook. It served as a way to bring attention to behavior that could broadly be deemed reprehensible, abhorrent, or just generally disagreeable. Often, it has been used in jest. Over the past five years, however, the act of canceling someone has risen to such cultural significance that our last three sitting presidents have remarked on the role in which it is influencing how we engage with one another. For better, or for worse?

In July 2020, movement theorist and visionary adrienne maree brown wrote a blog post titled “unthinkable thoughts: call out culture in the age of covid-19,” in which she interrogates the practice of publicly calling people out.⁶ For some, there was immediate resonance in brown’s words; for others, feelings of frustration, as they felt her blog didn’t adequately highlight the seismic disadvantages survivors of harm, abuse, and oppression are often confronted with as barriers to their healing. This blog post later evolved into the book *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*, which brown wrote in order to add the much-needed nuance and context that critics of the original post had suggested were missing.⁷ In the book, she writes, “I have felt a punitive tendency root and flourish within our movements.”⁸ And she worries about what she perceives to be an inability to draw distinctions, as well as a lack of knowledge regarding “how to handle conflict or how to move towards accountability in satisfying and collective ways.”⁹ It is a must-read for anyone attempting to make meaning of the promise of practices around embracing public accountability while also honoring the need for a humane disposition when seeking atonement, justice, and reconciliation.

In our nonprofit sector, we are often confronted with making sense of the widespread translatability of cultural moments and forces. We don’t have to look far to see how cancel culture informs the way in which we experience everyday interactions on the Internet and in real life. The emergence of cancel culture has given way to the mainstream media’s

ability to capitalize on its age-old motto, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Our relationship to being entertained has transformed, with the very notion of what fandom requires of us having evolved over the last few years: “Fans” and supporters of the curators of culture are now confronted with constantly revisiting who deserves the gift (and, as many might say, curse) of celebrity, and who doesn’t. More directly, it’s flavoring the way we work through conflicts, tensions, and transitions within our organizations.

A part of what makes exploring cancel culture so fascinating is understanding how it’s a byproduct of our larger culture, and how it has become a subculture in and of itself. A culture can most simply be broken down into the beliefs, values, norms, customs, and knowledge shared by a group of people. So, what happens when our values are shaped by a desire to cancel one another? What happens when our beliefs are directly or indirectly influenced by who we understand to be cancelable and who not? It leads us to a place that is not new at all but rather all too familiar.

A culture that positions us and requires of us the ability to cancel one another is a direct descendant of centuries of colonization. Imperialism and colonization have thrived on “us vs. them” categorizations for several hundreds of years.¹⁰ To be canceled or not to be doesn’t leave us with much room for understanding the nuance and complexity of human morality and interactions. It is a cultural force that assigns us clear roles: prosecutor and defender. The prosecutors hope to find affinity in justifying the need for cancellation, and defenders find refuge in staunchly denying that any wrongdoing or harm has occurred. Pick a side: the issue is black or white; you’re either right or wrong, good or bad. And there is often no charted path forward suggesting that perhaps multiple truths can be present at once.

It is a phenomenon that can swiftly be weaponized by those with power and influence; and, conversely, it may leave many of us wanting more when it is positioned as a liberatory tactic. Why? Because it all too often fails to leave us with

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direction or some guided sense of what to do about the more systemic challenge at the root of the behavior, beliefs, or actions we wish to disrupt. What is the lesson to be learned for those who are canceled? The term “canceling”—through linguistic origin alone—may invoke feelings of abandonment, disposability, and an abrupt “ending” of sorts that doesn’t provide a path toward redemption and atonement. For those seeking healing or accountability, has cancel culture permanently transformed the motivations that enter our hearts and minds, or is it primarily reactive in nature? If it is reactive, where do we turn for the visionary motivation we so desperately need when we are constantly overwhelmed by all there is to react to?

Cancel culture has not received mainstream legitimacy because it is innately transformational; it has become commonplace because it pairs neatly with a vast tool kit of oppressive strategies but can be practiced while masquerading as a liberatory tactic.

The unintended consequence of cancel culture being such a directive phenomenon is how it largely pushes us to anchor ourselves in uninspiring notions of what accountability and responsibility should and could look like. If we truly hope to commit ourselves to tearing down the dominant culture that prevents us from arriving at a liberated world, we would be well served to unpack how the legitimization of a cancel culture requires us to pull from ways of interacting encoded through centuries of designed divisiveness and a retributive thirst for blood sport.

BUILDING A BRIDGE TOGETHER— ONE ANCESTOR, ONE BONE, ONE LIGAMENT AT A TIME

After so many centuries of oppression, it is easy to see how seductive the power of canceling another might be. But reparation does not repair if all we are doing is disposing of one another.

In their recently published article “Into the Fire: Lessons from Movement Conflicts,” Ingrid Benedict, Weyam Ghadbian, and

Jovida Ross outline the ways in which we “enact subtle and gross forms of anti-Blackness, white supremacy, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, and other structural oppression [to which we would add *settler colonialism* and *Native erasure*]. This overlays with our unprocessed trauma and habitual coping strategies, and they ricochet off of each other to create interpersonal tangles that can blow up organizing teams and organizations.”¹¹

These toxic ways of being with one another reflect and reinforce the larger toxicity in our society. But we cannot create a better world by reproducing the poisons of the current one. We must recognize, disrupt, heal their effects, and transform them in order for us to bridge from our current state to a just, loving, and liberated world. In order to do so, we need to draw on inner work and healing practices to both replenish ourselves and cultivate our individual and collective resilience. For example:

- *Tapping into an awareness of our divine connection.* Individualism has wreaked havoc on ourselves and our relationship to the divine, to source, to the wellspring of spiritual connection. Whether we find resonance with the teaching from physics that we are not separate or even solid, or from spiritual traditions that help us to develop a relationship with god, having an awareness of our divine connection is core to replenishment and resourcefulness.
- *Honoring the sacred.* Honoring the sacred looks very different depending on our cultural backgrounds and learned practices. Essentially, we are recognizing and celebrating the profound gift of everything and everyone, expressing gratitude, and honoring our interdependence.
- *Cultivating compassion for all beings.* We all suffer, and we all make mistakes. While power and privilege have huge implications for the consequences of mistakes, we can still witness human error—our own and that of others—from

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a place of compassion. Compassion doesn't mean a lack of accountability or that there aren't consequences when we cause one another harm. Compassion means recognizing that we are all doing the best we can in the moment, even if our best is sometimes awful.

- *Centering presence and awareness.* The only change that is possible is change that happens in the present. And in order to be agents of positive change, we must be present and aware. We must be breathing. We must have both feet touching the earth. We must be able to hear the murmurings of the wind.
- *Re-yoking our bodies and spirits.* We are spirits having a human experience. Both our bodies and our spirits must be in cooperative connection in order to participate in the change we came here to create. This means knowing we are more than our mortality; we are working generations backward and forward.
- *Oxygenating, moving, and nourishing our human forms.* Without attending to the nourishment, breath, and health of our bodies, nothing but distress, dis-ease, dissimulation are possible. Liberation requires our vitality, whatever that looks like in our different human forms.

It is only when we have strengthened ourselves and our collectives that we can really engage in the essential work of transforming our world. As Tarana Burke reminds us, “Our humanity, our individual and collective vulnerability, needs and deserves some breathing room.”¹²

LOVING ACCOUNTABILITY—AN ANTIDOTE

The healing and inner work lays the foundation for us to be and act from our fully resourced selves—to be rooted in what bell hooks defines as a *love ethic*. “Domination cannot exist,” hooks writes, “in any social situation where a love ethic prevails.”¹³

Coming from love, being rooted in a love ethic, does not mean we, as BIPOC social justice leaders and activists, are accepting systemic oppression. Rather, it means we are not continuing to “reshape the same tools that we use to dismantle the ever changing systems.”¹⁴ We cannot rely on strategies of resistance to chart a path to liberation. Coming, as so many of us do, from movement work, there is a tendency to show up in a fighting stance, to focus only on what is wrong, to distrust everything and everyone. But liberation does not come from adversarialism; it comes from connection and loving accountability.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer explores the wisdom of lichens. She writes, “Some of earth’s oldest beings, lichens are born from reciprocity. . . . These ancients carry teachings in the ways that they live. They remind us of the enduring power that arises from mutualism, from the sharing of the gifts carried by each species. Balanced reciprocity has enabled them to flourish under the most stressful of conditions.”¹⁵ Our conditions are indeed stressful; attention to our connections, to our mutualism and interdependence, is essential not only for our survival but also for our ability as BIPOC people to thrive.

The sacred nature of our connection does not preclude conflict, disagreements, misunderstandings, hurt feelings. We affect one another. It is important that we understand the impacts we are having: what we are doing and how we are being and what effect it is having on our collective change efforts. At the most basic level, it is about giving and receiving feedback, about holding one another to our best possible selves. We deserve that. It is why we are trying to change the world. *We know a better one is possible.*

Our mutuality flourishes when our love ethic is strong. And our love ethic is nourished by the practice of loving accountability. Loving accountability means we are learning together, and that we are risking vulnerability in service of creating authentic connection and a better future. If we refuse to take risks, and if we attack others to protect ourselves, we are

avoiding being held accountable to the collective. And without collective accountability, we cannot work together to create a meaningful, equitable, just society.

The practice of loving accountability consists of honest and authentic communication, vulnerability, and the willingness to hold each other accountable for our impacts—beyond just words. If a collective value or guiding principle is repeatedly violated by someone, and no amount of communication and support can interrupt it, then loving accountability instructs us in employing meaningful consequences—not as punishment but rather as ensuring the health of the collective through meaningful boundaries. Not rigid structures, but something firm and porous as skin. Without attention to healthy boundaries, our espousal of values and group agreements are just words—and what holds us together ceases to exist.



*Our breathing is sacred because energy that connects us
is older than the structures we are unlearning and
will persist beyond the imagination of this species.
The energy moving through us, as air and so much more, is eternal.
I call it love. Thank you for the love moving through you.
With every breath.*

—adrienne maree brown,
Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation

Mia Birdsong describes accountability as being “about ourselves in the context of the collective”:

It’s seeing the ways we cause hurt or harm as actions that indicate we are not living in alignment with values that recognize our own humanity or the humanity of others. It’s about recognizing when our behavior is out of alignment with our best selves. . . . Accountability is also about recognizing and accepting that we are necessary and wanted. It’s understanding that when we neglect ourselves, don’t care for ourselves, or are not working to live as our best selves, we are devaluing the time, energy, and care that our loved ones offer us.¹⁶

Loving accountability supports our ability to make meaningful and transformative change *together*. This means tending to our genuine connection, coming from a place of deep curiosity, and being and acting from a wellspring of love.

NOTES

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