

Say It Like You Mean It: Critical Response Intervention Through a Community Accountability Model of Apology

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ABSTRACT: There is power and meaningfulness that the act of apology can hold for those with experiences of sexual violence who wish to receive an apology from the perpetrator of the violence committed against them. The perpetration of sexual violence does not occur in a vacuum; there is a communal context in which sexual violence is perpetuated. This paper asks: how can a critical response intervention based in a community accountability model of apology present a transformative alternative to conventional models of perpetrator apology that do not adequately support those who have experienced sexual violence? I argue that the communal context needs to be placed in conversation with the act of apology by a perpetrator of sexual violence, not as a means of dispersing the weight of wrongdoing away from the perpetrator but strengthening the need for keeping perpetrators accountable by adopting a community accountability model of apology.

In 2019, the American playwright V (formerly known as Eve Ensler) published a book entitled *The Apology*, in which V speaks to her experience of sexual violence perpetrated by her father. Central to V's perspective sharing in her work involves explaining her relationship to the idea of apology for sexual violence and how she struggled to accept the fact that her father never apologized to her, even though that is what she greatly wanted to have. V's perpetrator died over thirty years ago, but her yearning for an apology for her experience of sexual violence has continued. Her work has interrogated this desire for an apology as someone who has experienced sexual violence. However, not just any apology; rather, an apology that precisely aims to confront the profound harm enacted by a perpetrator of sexual violence and honours the needs of the victim (Bioneers, 2019).

It is from this basis of V's work that I recognize my own fascination of the power and meaningfulness that the act of apology can hold for those with experiences of sexual violence who wish to receive an apology from the perpetrator of the violence committed against them. V's experience is important to note at the premise of this work as it is indicative of the few published voices that start and end with the longing for an apology. This article aims to consider why there are considerations in an apology for sexual violence perpetration that need to be made beyond this conventional end point in this conversation. I recognize that the perpetration of sexual violence does not occur in a vacuum; there is a communal context in which sexual violence is perpetuated. Communal context, or community context, refers to the immediate physical location and the network of individuals that surround both the perpetrator and victim of sexual violence. As such, this paper asks: how can a critical response intervention based in a community accountability

model of apology present a transformative alternative to conventional models of perpetrator apology that do not adequately support those who have experienced sexual violence? I argue that the communal context needs to be placed in conversation with the act of apology by a perpetrator of sexual violence—not as a means of dispersing the weight of wrongdoing away from the perpetrator—but towards strengthening the need for keeping perpetrators accountable by adopting a community accountability model of apology. This argument will be made in response to the central question of this paper by utilizing scholarship concerning three dimensions of a community accountability model of apology: first, understanding the communal context as a site coded by sexual violence perpetration and therefore an involved part of apology; next, contextualizing the ongoing need for meaningful perpetrator apology to victims of sexual violence; lastly, bringing into conversation the community context as a transformative medium through which a perpetrator is held accountable by ensuring that an apology is issued. This paper will then contend with two counterpoints: firstly, the fear that a community accountability model of apology may replicate the shortcomings of a restorative model of community-based justice; and secondly, that too much weight is placed on the influence of an apology when alternative methods of support should be considered instead for people who have experienced sexual violence. My responses to these points will lead to the recognition that the model forwarded in this article overcomes the shortcomings of a strictly restorative model and develops an approach that aligns with those seeking an apology, instead of suggesting a blanket solution for diverse types of sexual violence support.

By better understanding the role of the communal context in relation to the perpetration of sexual violence in community spaces, the responsibility

placed upon the community and its people to respond to a culture of sexual violence can be clarified. This understanding can help elucidate how community members can keep perpetrators accountable within the communal environment. In a 2002 article, scholar Sherene Razack shares the experience of Pamela George in 1995, a Saulteaux woman who faced sexual violence and was murdered by two white male perpetrators (p. 123-124). The perpetrators faced minimal culpability for their actions under the Canadian legal system (p. 126). Razack posits this to be a result informed by their racial and colonial spatial relation to a community space where their violence could be hidden and protected, termed by Razack as a “respectable space” (p.127), which is seen as the perpetrators disclosed their involvement to multiple members of their own community (p. 124). Whereas, the site of their sexual violence perpetration, is termed by Razack as a “degenerate space” external to perpetrators’ own community in which they are protected and where they do not have to remain to face community accountability for the harm they caused (p.127). These two perpetrators can be characterized by their mobility privilege, which is the privilege to be able to traverse back-and-forth from respectable space to degenerate space. They can return to their own community in which their perpetration is coded as part of a racial Other outside of the community and not a concern for the community itself (p. 127). Sociological researcher Kristin Lozanski adds to an understanding of this privileged community construction by explaining that sexual violence is coded as reality beyond the community contexts in which individuals actualize themselves “as liberal and tolerant against the irrational perpetrators of violence.” However, these individuals positioned in communities of privilege fail to recognize how their communal context is defined by exclusion and non-recognition of violence perpetrated within their own space (Lozanski, 2007, p. 311). From these understandings, it is difficult to fathom the contextualization of the community context as a neutral site or entity. It can be rather understood as an environmental context in which the perpetration of sexual violence may become normalized if an appropriate interventional response is not considered. This intervention can be a critical response based in a community accountability model, which demands apology from perpetrators in their own community; where the community upholds their responsibility in deconstructing itself as a location of sexual

violence perpetration.

Why is the medium of an apology the element to which a community accountability model should be applied as a critical response intervention to better support those who have experienced sexual violence? There are individuals with experiences of sexual violence who possess an ongoing need in their journeys of healing to receive meaningful apologies from their perpetrators. It is in recognizing this desire—for some, not all victims of sexual violence—that the power of an apology cannot be ruled out as a supportive resource in their healing process. Writer and psychotherapist Lori Gottlieb (2018) explains that there must be space held for perpetrator apologies to occur so that accountability for perpetrating sexual violence can be taken up by perpetrators to validate the experience of the victim as one that deserves to be addressed. Gottlieb notes that perpetrators who apologize need to take ownership by admitting to the complete impact of their violent acts instead of minimizing the severity of their actions. The apology is foremost for the person who has experienced sexual violence to hear the perpetrator taking responsibility for the depth of the inflicted pain; something that they may have waited for years to hear (para. 8). The article from writer Katy Schneider (2018) expands on the nature of meaningful apologies as those that decentralize the objective of the perpetrator to absolve themselves of the guilt that they deserve to have burden them. Schnieder recounts that the apology they received from their perpetrator was impactful to have and “can be a terrific, addictive relief even if it comes ten years too late” (para. 21). Both Gottlieb and Schneider’s work exhibit reasoning for the power that an apology can have when it is done with intention to prioritize supporting the person who has experienced sexual violence. It is in keeping the perpetrator accountable to forming a meaningful apology that the community accountability model appears as a critical response intervention to help ensure that there is space held for the apology to occur and be part of the ongoing process of one’s healing journey from sexual violence. An apology can be made more meaningful, particularly when affirmed on a community level, through action such as perpetrators making financial restitution to those whom they have harmed to help them alleviate the financial burden of the journey in healing from sexual violence at their own pace. Alternatively, community level affirmation of an apology may look like a network of individuals taking responsibility to

ensure that the victim of sexual violence perpetration has their physical boundaries in the community adhered to by the perpetrator. Perpetrator apology does not have to be restricted to a single, universal form for it to be meaningful. Listening to what the victims of sexual violence are seeking themselves from an apology is necessary to center in a community accountability model of apology.

It has been established that both the communal context and the element of apology are significant entities to be considered thoughtfully together in a community accountability model of apology. There must also be a valuing of this critical response intervention as a viable and transformative model that could be realistically implemented. Establishing a more meaningful apology for those that have experienced sexual violence involves the use of a community-affirmed accountability design. Scholar of Chicana and Chicano studies, Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo (2011) shares their experience engaging in a difficult yet transformative healing experience in a university classroom community where they engaged with a student who was a perpetrator of sexual violence. Durazo defines community accountability as a “practice of imagining, creating, and applying alternative responses from and within communities,” which helped the university classroom collectively provide space where the perpetrator could self-determine the action they would take (p. 79). Durazo also notes that “accountability is not the pursuit of redemption or forgiveness” and what accountability looked like in this university classroom community context did not take up the element of apology to achieve these ends (p. 85). This recounting of a complex community accountability process by Durazo presents an intriguing context to which I would suggest a greater valuing of the partially considered accountability principles from Communities Against Rape and Abuse, specifically concerning the prioritization of the survivor (Bierria et al., 2016). Such a refocus could have made the element of apology a more viable consideration through community accountability (p. 251). It is in cases like this that a community accountability model of apology can take a transformative hold in shifting conversations. The model shifts conversations from just performing the function of providing space to understanding the need for the perpetrator to step back and consider what needs to be secured for the victim of sexual violence. The transformative aspect of a community accountability model of apology rests in

encouraging a more focused community effort to hold perpetrators accountable by centering the needs of those with experiences of sexual violence in structuring a meaningful apology.

A primary counterargument to consider in this discussion of whether a community accountability model of apology would realistically present a viable transformative option as a critical response intervention involves addressing the current limitations of restorative models of justice. Durazo (2011) explains that a restorative model of justice attempts to present an alternative form of justice against state-based criminalization tactics that fail to genuinely represent the needs of those experiencing sexual violence while individualizing punishment for perpetrators without addressing the context of harm in which the perpetration occurred (p. 78). However, work from the organization INCITE! notes that gaps in a restorative model of justice involve communities that may fall short of adequately holding perpetrators accountable for their actions and may fail to properly account for and protect the needs of the victims of sexual violence in the community. In turn, those who have experienced sexual violence are not being centered in the community’s attempt to hold perpetrators accountable, thus making any hope of obtaining a meaningful apology unlikely and more likely a point of re-traumatization for the victim to engage in such an uncaring communal process (para. 27). If these are the negative consequences being seen from a restorative model of justice that attempts to employ a format of community accountability work similar to the one suggested through my critical response intervention, what chance is there for the same outcomes to not be replicated in a community accountability model of apology? My rebuttal is that what makes the community accountability model of apology different than a restorative model of justice is that my critical response intervention is foundationally informed on securing agency for the victim of sexual violence through meaningful apology rather than making apology an afterthought of community engagement. Meaningful apology can be secured by structuring the community to hold perpetrators of sexual violence accountable through the intentional formation of apologies, the needs of the victims of sexual violence remain integral to these efforts. Communities are engaging with perpetrators specifically to decide what labour is needed to recognize and work towards mitigating ongoing harm against those who have experienced

sexual violence, thereby decentralizing and challenging perpetrators to significantly address the aftermath of their violence.

The second counterpoint that needs to be contended with suggests that a community accountability model that centers on the element of apology cannot be enough to provide those who have experienced sexual violence with the meaningful support they are seeking. This argument holds that individuals with experiences of sexual violence should be considered in community interventions that regard more long-term solutions of providing support and care for the healing processes being undertaken instead of attempting to develop meaningful formations within the limited nature of apologies. Reporter Neda Ulaby (2017) argues that the body of weak public apologies for sexual violence has “morphed into something of an apologia subgenre” that performs apology for the wider community to help absolve the perpetrator instead of centering the victim of sexual violence (para. 4). Even Schneider (2018) notes that good apologies are too few and far between, as they are overshadowed by many bad apologies from perpetrators of sexual violence. Those who have experienced sexual violence are often let down by the apologies that they may have been seeking for years and were expecting more from in their healing process. I would respond to this position by stating that apologies do not have to be limited by the perception of them being an inadequate response from a perpetrator, especially with the implementation of a community accountability model in the formation of this apology. The objective of this critical response intervention is to recognize the existing value that apologies hold for those with experiences of sexual violence. It is too subjective of an element to assume that apologies cannot have long-term and inherently meaningful or supportive results for those on their journeys of healing from sexual violence. I find it valuable here to also incorporate the work of scholar Sharon Marcus into this rebuttal, where the linguistic reality of sexual violence cannot be denied yet it can be worked into linguistically intentional apologies that interrupt narratives that see “rape as the fixed reality of women’s lives” (1992, p. 387; 389). Rather, by having a critical response intervention of a community accountability model of apology, the element of apology can be given the attention it deserves to properly craft apology structures that equate to the level of impact it may have for

those with experiences of sexual violence.

Through this paper, careful considerations have been made to address how a critical response intervention based in a community accountability model of apology presents a transformative alternative to conventional models of perpetrator apology for those who have experienced sexual violence. By incorporating a thorough analysis of how communal contexts code sexual violence, how perpetrator apologies can provide significant support to victims of sexual violence, and how a communal accountability to apology can transform the agency and significance given to the needs of victims, it has been made evident that a critical response intervention based in a community accountability model of apology can effectively intervene in our culture of sexual violence. Formulating an argument for this critical response intervention through the scholarship that has been examined in this paper has been done with continual consideration that this interventional model has not been designed to support the needs of every individual that has experienced sexual violence. Rather, the argument presented offers a more meaningful, intentional, and transformative point of communal recourse to help those seeking an apology for their experiences of sexual violence have their needs better accounted for along their paths of healing.

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