

# The Thing After

## Making Sense of Sex & Consent

Shannon Perez-Darby

2018

Reprinted from *Learning Good Consent: On Healthy Relationships and Survivor Support* Edited by Cindy Crabb. AK Press, akpress.org 2016

*FE Note:* With people today left adrift to face conflicting social cues coming from every direction, this collection looks directly at the complications which arise from sex, consent, abuse, and survivor support. This, and the other essays in *Learning Good Consent*, is a guide to preventing sexual violence, helping survivors heal, and creating lives which correspond to our ideals. This essay has been shortened by the Fifth Estate editors.

When I was younger I was less of an active participant in the sex I was having and more of a referee. I never said “touch me here” or “I like it like this,” but instead I let whatever boy I was kissing do whatever he thought was sexy and my job was to make sure it never went too far over the (my) line.

I was a gatekeeper always guarding whatever felt like the most vulnerable part of myself.

By the time I was willing to use my voice, we were several steps ahead of where I actually wanted to be. I would wait until the scales tipped, until whatever sexy place we were going was scarier than saying, stop. When I think about these interactions I’m filled with all of these contradictory things. I would call some of these experiences coercive and I struggle with that language of it all of the time. These are the moments when accountability feels muddled.

I believe the guys I was having sex with were doing the best they could. I believe that they wanted to have mutually pleasurable sex and that they wished the best for me. It doesn’t feel like an answer to say that they were all jerks or “evil perpetrators” that I then get to demonize.

I believe that the men I was being sexy with had some pretty shitty skills and fucked up expectations and they didn’t know how to do it better, which doesn’t mean that they shouldn’t be thoughtful about and accountable for their actions, but they also shouldn’t be demonized for them either...I’m not sure we have all of the skills to be enacting sustainable accountability models right now, but we can talk more about sexual assault within our own radical communities and how we extend the values of community, social justice, and anti-oppression into our conversations around consent and accountability.

Saying that I don’t want to demonize the people who have been sexually coercive in my life has become easier because, for the most part, these interactions are far away; they’re in the past and none of these guys are in my life anymore. We were working off of this hetero script that says that guys are the drivers, they will go as far as they can with a girl and it’s the girls job to be the brakes, always guarding against men who will try to get as much as they can around sex from the thing after her unless she puts a stop to it.

This script is a setup for everyone. It’s a setup for the guys because there is no space to have a full range of emotions, to not want to have sex or to feel anything other than sex crazed, always looking for and wanting sex. It’s

a setup for women because whatever happens is our fault; either we don't say anything and silence is consent, or we speak up and we are troublemakers or prudes.

I don't want to set up a false dichotomy that straight men are inherently coercive and queers are radical and thus have only equitable (sexual) relationships because that's not true, and that idea is getting in the way of creating communities that are looking at and engaging with a process of accountability.

Homos protect the fucked up things we do to each other and it's scary to talk about because what if that proves all of the fucked up things homophobic society says about us?

What if we can't have equitable relationships? What if all of this work we're doing to create the kinds of relationships we want for ourselves isn't working?

Not talking about this is not keeping us safe; it's keeping us isolated and it's making sure that we perpetuate the same shitty coercive dynamics that we have learned. It means that when coercion and sexual assault happen in our queer communities we don't talk about it, we internalize our oppression and we stay hidden.

I want more models for the relationships and the kinds of sex I want to be having in my life. Sometimes the queers I know pretend that we're more radical than coercion and abuse, that this stuff doesn't affect us, that it doesn't seep into our sex lives and relationships...

I'm tired of us all feeling like we're not OK. What would it look like to believe that we could do it another way, that we could do it a million other ways? What would our sexual interactions look like if we believed that we were OK, if we were allowed to be our whole selves, if we saw ourselves as whole? What would it look like to be able to sit with our fears and engage in a process of accountability with each other? What if we were able to show up in a centered, solid, whole, and grace-filled way?

What would we need to even imagine this? The scariest thing I can think to say to someone I'm dating is that I don't want to have sex. What does my accountability process learning good consent look like around this? What does consent look like when I'm not even sure I could tell you, no?...

We have a lot invested in seeing people that perpetrate sexual assault as evil villains and seeing people that are surviving sexual assault as perfect angels. This narrative hurts us all because it's not about good or evil but about power...Accountability is a process, and part of that process is screwing up. That's so scary and so real because, when the stakes are this high, screwing up doesn't really feel like an option.

What if the thing after instead we see accountability as a process we get to engage with when we fuck up...Because screwing up is a part of the deal, but that doesn't mean we get to fuck up in the same way over and over again. We engage so we don't keep fucking up in the exact same ways. I want to discover the totally new way I'm going to mess up.

In order to do this, we have to be coming from a place where we assume that people are trying their hardest and where people really are trying their hardest. As a survivor of abuse, as a domestic violence advocate, as a friend and a person in community with other people, I've seen and heard some of the really shitty awful things that people do to each other...

Healing is a process more than something we achieve once and for all. Accountability is not taking all of the responsibility and apologizing forever...

I choose to believe that the people in my life are doing the best they can. That doesn't mean that they get to treat me badly or do shitty things. Holding this complexity has often been very painful, jumping from unearned trust in people who keep crossing my boundaries and not respecting me, to martyrdom where someone fucks up and I keep throwing myself into the fire saying, "they're doing the best they can."

I believe there can be a place in between, learning good consent, a place where I can be real with myself and present for the constant engagement it takes to be good to the people in my life and demand respect and kindness.

Shannon Perez-Darby is the Youth Services Program Director at the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse.

# fifth Estate

Shannon Perez-Darby  
The Thing After  
Making Sense of Sex & Consent  
2018

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/400-spring-2018/the-thing-after>  
Fifth Estate #400, Spring, 2018

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**