The Real Work: A Podcast About Theater Culture and Transformative Justice

Episode 2: TJ 101

TIERRA: The Real Work: A Podcast About Theater Culture and Transformative Justice. What does it really mean to practice transformative justice? Could doing so heal patterns of oppression, violence, and abuse, and grow communities where everyone thrives? What about in the theater community? Where would we even start?

This six-episode audio series tells the story of 27 theater practitioners on unceded Lisjan Ohlone territory who gathered regularly for one year to explore using transformative justice, or TJ, in our creative spaces and our lives. We were guided by one of the founders of the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, Mia Mingus.

This podcast is a report back, and an invitation. May we invest in the real work it will take to end and heal all levels of violence, for ourselves, our communities, and our future generations.

Music

TIERRA: Episode 2: TJ 101

Greetings, y'all. It's Tierra here. Welcome back. Thank you so much for returning, for showing up, for continuing this work with us.

So. Last episode, we got up to speed about the conditions that brought theater makers in the Bay Area to organize around TJ. Today's episode is dedicated to unpacking, at its core, what *is TJ?*

Here is our audio producer, Cat Petru of We Rise Production, asking members of the yearlong training cohort that question.

CAT: Do you wanna try giving a brief definition of TJ?

VOICE 1: No. [laughs] I feel like I suck at it. That's my biggest problem with people. I'm like, I do not know how to describe it…

CAT: It's hard.

VOICE 1: It is. I don't know my elevator pitch for TJ. Cuz I think that's the part that bothers me in a weird way. Cuz I'm like, if i don't know how to say it to people, then how am i supposed to educate?

VOICE 2: Community and interpersonal ways of addressing harm that don't perpetuate harm and violence, with an eye to healing and transforming the systems that are in place that are contributing to the harm as well.

VOICE 3: Transformative justice has a goal of transforming an entire society or an entire group, or I guess in our case the theater ecosystem. Transformative justice has a goal of transforming a group or society into a place where the community is accountable to each other and there's not a need for outside intervention in order to repair harm that takes place. In other words there's no need to, say, put people in a prison if they have caused harm. There's sort of two tracks as I see it in transformative justice. One is the track or question of how to repair harm that is caused, and the other track is how to prevent harm in the first place.

VOICE 4: So I think for me it's how to do I uncondition my brain and what I have been told is a certain way of doing something and really looking at something completely different? How do I unwire everything that I've been taught til now and really look at the systems around us, which I've always been aware of, but how to have the language and vocabulary to really name it and feel confident in naming it? And how do I confront it in that way I guess? How would you in your wildest dreams like to think of a place where there's peace, there's love, there's affection, there's compassion for one another? How can you truly transform a system that's been broken in a way that's truly sustainable by the community, not bringing in like law enforcement or anything, but what's something that can truly empower the community to completely transform itself from where they started to where they want to be?

TIERRA: Ashe, amen, and so it is.

Music

TIERRA: Our audio producer Cat actually sat down with Mia Mingus a few years before Mia came on board as a trainer with Cal Shakes. For the rest of this episode, let's listen in to their conversation on transformative justice and the work of the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, previously recorded for the We Rise podcast:

Cat: To share with you a little bit about Mia, she is a writer, educator and community organizer for disability justice and transformative justice. She is a queer, physically disabled, Korean woman, transracial and transnational adoptee from the Caribbean. She works for community, interdependency and home for all of us, not just some of us, and longs for a world where disabled children can live free of violence, with dignity and love. As her work for liberation evolves and deepens, her roots remain firmly planted in ending sexual violence.

So, we're going to start by talking about the collective. I want to introduce listeners to the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective. So, what exactly is it?

Mia: So, the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective or the BATJC, we're a small local group located here in the Bay area of community members, individuals. We're not a non-profit, so we all just do this because it's part of our life's work and we work to build and sustain transformative justice responses to child sex abuse specifically. And then because child sex abuse is usually bound up with lots of different types of violence, we end up working on all kinds of violence. But pretty much it's mostly intimate and sexual violence that we work on.

Cat: So, what is transformative justice?

Mia: So, transformative justice at the crux of it and its most kind of bare bones if we were just talking to anyone on the street, I usually say it is a way of responding to violence, harm and/or abuse that doesn't create more violence, harm and/or abuse. And so, we understand the state, for example in-state sexual violence, as creating more harm and violence and abuse. And actually, being outright abusive. And so, transformative justice is in two parts. So, one it's a way of responding to violence, harm and abuse in your communities that doesn't involve the state. So, it doesn't involve police, prisons, the criminal legal system, ICE, foster care system, etc. And it also doesn't reinforce any kind of oppressive societal norms, so we're not talking about reinforcing harmful gender norms or vigilantism either. We're not talking about people just going out and beating up somebody with a baseball bat or anything like that. So, that's the first part is the resistance part of what we don't want. But then I think the second part of transformative justice that is really important, and I would say even more important, is that it's also actively working to build and cultivate the very things that we know prevent future violence. So, things like accountability, safety, healing, connection, all of that, trust, and those two pieces together I feel like are what transformative justice is. So, it's both resisting against the world that we don't want, i.e., not using the state, but it's also actively building the world that we do want. So, actively cultivating all of the things that we know prevent violence. And in doing that, I feel like it's important to say that transformative justice – a lot of times when people think of transformative justice, they think, oh, that's responding to violence without calling the cops or without bringing the criminal legal system. And, yes, that's true, but just not calling the cops is not necessarily transformative or revolutionary. And so, I really try to stress to people that it's a both/and and that it's not enough just to not call the cops because as we know, and as so many survivors know, our communities can be just as challenging and violent and traumatic as the state can be, and in many ways our communities have also internalized the state in a lot of ways. And our communities are not perfect, and our communities don't always know what to do when violence and harm and abuse are happening. And oftentimes many survivors talk about that even though they were treated horrifically by the state, that it was actually the way they were treated by their communities that ended up hurting them the most and the deepest.

Cat: So, that makes me wonder a lot about what kind of interventions you and the BATJC create within communities. But maybe before jumping to that, I was curious. I'm sure

some folks have heard of restorative justice and I would love for you to provide a distinction between restorative justice and transformative justice.

Mia: Yeah. There's a lot of differences and a lot of similarities. And I think as time continues to progress, the differences and distinctions 10 years ago for example are – some are the same, but I think some are shifting now as we're looking at both of them.

So, kind of just bare bones. A lot of what restorative justice was oriented towards was this idea of restoring, right, that we want to restore the relationships to what they were before the harm occurred. Or we want to restore some type of community feeling, you know, some sense of communal justice or what have you. And a lot of transformative justice organizers would question, say, what are we restoring to and that we don't actually want to restore the relationships to what they were before the harm occurred because those relationships are part of the conditions that allow for the harm to occur. So, with transformative justice, we're talking about how do we intervene in instances of violence that both meet immediate needs but also transform the conditions that created that violence in the first place.

So, one, it's important to say that transformative justice and restorative justice are not monolithic. There are many people doing restorative justice work that I know who I deeply respect who really see their work in restorative justice as being a pathway to something more aligned with transformative justice. What we have right now is a moment where restorative justice is being more kind of integrated intestate systems, not necessarily on like on a huge large-scale level, but enough significant, more significantly than transformative justice. And transformative justice tends to operate outside of systems. It doesn't always have to, but for the most part we're talking about how do we build alternatives to our current system. Because we understand our current systems to be very violent. Whereas restorative justice I feel like in this historical moment and for the past 10 years really, maybe seven or eight years, has begun to be woven into state system so you have it in schools and things like that. And so, there is a sense I think right now in this historical moment of really seeing – I see restorative justice in a lot of the work that's happening as a lot of harm-reduction work, because many of our folks are in the system whether we like it or not. And they don't have the luxury of being outside of the system. And so, I see both of them, restorative justice and transformative justice, as being really complementary to each other in a lot of ways. That there are people who are doing work on the inside. A lot of them are lawyers. A lot of them are folks working with folks in prisons, like I mentioned, kids in schools, and then also people doing work in transformative justice who are working outside of the system. So, I see it as being very complementary to each other.

I think there are some differences, though, in terms of, you know, a lot of the critiques have been the kind of cooptation from First Nations and indigenous communities, especially in this continent with things like the circle process and all of that. And I think it's important to remember, we talk about this in TJ a lot, that those practices were

created within a certain set of conditions and within a certain context. So, you had the circle process for example that was created in cultures and communities where everybody shared the same language, everybody shared the same set of maybe spiritual values and principles of practices. Everybody had a relationship to each other. And when you are taking those types of practices into our current conditions and context, it doesn't always transfer as well, and/or they need to be changed. And because especially in the metropolitan area like the Bay, when violence is happening in our communities, oftentimes people are coming at it from all different cultures, backgrounds, different experiences. Sometimes we don't even share the same language, let alone the same values, and principles.

Now I will say that I think another important distinction though is that restorative justice has actually had a lot more established people in, we call it time in, of just like having 30, 40 years doing restorative justice work and we'll just leave it specifically in the U.S. context, whereas with transformative justice, we don't have that necessarily. The sustainability of transformative justice has been really hard to keep up. The work itself has been hard to fund because oftentimes you're talking about people who are building from alternative systems, so outside of the non-profit system, outside of systems where you might get paid for that work, and that is very hard to sustain in a capitalist society where you need money, as well as the work is very grueling. I mean, it's hard work for sure to be dealing with trauma and to be trying to forge new ways of dealing with trauma that aren't replicating direct service models. So, they aren't replicating traditional practitioner models or traditional direct service models.

So, what I'm trying to say is I'm not sitting here saying that one is better than the other at all. That's not where I orient from. I really feel like we need both approaches, and they are distinctly different approaches. I think a big critique of transformative justice, not just sustainability, but also that we don't have as many established models or processes as, for example, with restorative justice, you have for example, the circle process. Not everything is a circle process in restorative justice, but that has tended to be one of the kind of more popular, more widespread models that people have used, or processes that people have used. With transformative justice, I feel like it tends to be, in my experience, it has tended to be a lot more malleable and much more, both its kind of greatest strength as well as its greatest challenge is that it really can mold to whatever you need in your community. And I think that while that can be very hard to handle, it can also be a really beautiful opportunity. I think living in the U.S., living in a western context where people – you know, we've kind of been brainwashed. Our revolutionary imaginations have been brainwashed out of us, so we like it when somebody tells us what to do. We like to have a manual or a work book that says, this is how you do it. And with transformative justice, we really don't have that. I think that's a good thing.

Cat: Absolutely. There is a quote by Grace Lee Boggs who Mia mentions on her website which is called "Leaving Evidence" and we'll have a link for that on our website for the

show. But Grace Lee Boggs says that there are times when expanding our imaginations is what's required, and I love how you articulate how that relates to TJ.

I also want to help listeners understand more and more deeply what transformative justice is and how it's something that we can all be using in our lives. So, you just said both restorative and transformative justice have different tools. Can you talk about the tools that you've used or that BATJC has used in transformative justice?

Mia: Yeah, one of the tools I can share is – it's going to sound very science fiction, sci-fi, is our model of pods, which it feels even weird to call it a model, but people have been calling it a model to us. But it came about very organically, and I feel like the best work comes organically. The best work comes out of when you're doing the work and you're creating what you need with what you have. And pods felt very much like that. And so, we were, for a long time we had used, and we still do, using the terms of, like community, community accountability, community responses to violence. And what we found in doing our work was that oftentimes the word community was a very confusing word to people. People had very different understandings of what community is, what it could be. Some people defined community as just a general geographic location like the Bay Area community. Some people defined it as huge groups of numbers of people based one identity like the feminist community. Some people defined it as just like an arbitrary set of values or relationships like, oh, I go to church with this person. So, they're in my community or, oh, they're in community with me. And it was like, what does that mean? And so, when we would ask people, or we would say things like community responses to violence or we're going to respond to violence with our community and asking people to organize their community, a lot of people didn't know what that meant, and they were very overwhelmed by it. And I think it's really common for a lot of people, especially in this country, in the west, people who are living under capitalism, I think community is a hard thing, because I think a lot of us don't have community, don't feel like we've ever experienced community. At the same time that we actively crave it and long for it. So, because of that, we realize that we needed a different word and we needed a word that specifically spoke to the specific type of relationship and set of values and criteria that you had with somebody that you would call on if you were experiencing violence, harm or abuse. And so, I think pods was suggested and it just stuck.

So, your pod people – I don't know how much more science fiction we can get – but your pod people are the people that you would call on if violence was happening to you, if you were surviving violence, or if you were doing violence or harm, or if you had witnessed violence or harm or if somebody you love have been targeted or done violence. So, we started with this idea of pods that basically everybody may not have a community but almost everybody had at least somebody or has at least somebody that they would call on if they were experiencing violence. And it may not be their closest people, because oftentimes doing interpersonal intimate and sexual violence work, that's where the violence is coming from. So, it may not be their closest, deepest

relationship they have the most trust with, but what we did find was that people, pod people usually it was somebody that you did have some semblance of relationship and trust with. And then from there, everybody has their own criteria about pod people. Because what we noticed was that, so I feel like the traditional model of organizing or kind of community building that we have in social justice circles is that we have like an issue or an analysis, and then we bring people together around that, and we just say, now you're connected. You're in community with each other. Build a relationship. And while that might work for some things like fighting back against gentrification or genocide or poverty, things like that, when we're dealing with sexual violence, what we found was that there were different obviously unique conditions as there are on every different type of violence that you're fighting back against. So, the amount of the trust for example in relationship that it took to build up with somebody for somebody to feel like they could disclose that they were survivor of child sexual abuse or that they did child sexual abuse when they were younger or even as an adult. It was a lot and so instead of saying like, okay, well we'll wait the five years there, six, seven years that it will take to build these kind of relationships, it was almost like if you think about a metal detector on the beach, we're like where do people already have relationship and trust in their life, and then let's build there. You know, like if you're swinging that metal detector over the sand and it's like ding-ding-ding-ding. Then you're like, this is where we need to build. So one of the things we're trying to do with pods is build through relationship and trust, and that's one of our principles in the BATJC, is that rather than trying to piece together superficial models of trust or superficial versions of relationship, where really people don't actually know each other and they won't actually – they don't know each other nearly as well to show up for each other like 3:00 in the morning or, you know, what have you. We said, look, even if it was just one person, even if it was just their co-worker who they didn't really know a ton, let's go there. If you feel comfortable enough to disclose to this person about surviving violence or calling on them to help you to survive violence, then let's build there. And so, we started to bring people together and ask them to identify their pod. Who are your pod people?

So, I think for all your listeners listening now, they can think of who are the people in your life that you would call on if you were experiencing violence and/or harm or abuse? Whether that means you're surviving it or that you have survived it, or that you are doing it or have done it. And we found that the people you would call on to take accountability for harm you've done oftentimes are different than the people you would call on to support you in terms of surviving violence, being targeted for violence. Right? So, the people that survivors would call on might be different than the folks who have caused harm might call on. And that's also one thing that everybody, I feel like, can do now in their day-to-day lives, is think about who are the people? And you can go to our website, our BATJC website, and you can download. We have a little worksheet and everything and a write-up that we wrote about this. If you need a template, you can make your own. Just writing actual names. Who are the people in your life that you could call on, and you know that they would show up for you or you know that you could

have a nuanced conversation with them about accountability and they wouldn't collude or minimize what you've done, but they also wouldn't criminalize or demonize you. You know, they wouldn't say like, oh, I'm sure you didn't mean it or what have you, but they also wouldn't say like, I'm never going to be your friend again.

Cat: Right.

Mia: They could actually hold those complexities. And that's a lot easier said than done, let alone, who could you call on if you were trying to get out of an abusive relationship, for example, and you needed help. So, your pod people are a really important key to transformative justice, because if we're talking being able to respond to violence, abuse and harm in our communities, then we in our "communities", then we need to get concrete. Who are those people? What do we need? How can we – once we've actively identified them, how can we actively work to build and cultivate them?

And I just want to say really quickly, once we started doing this, it was a very sobering process for a lot of people. Even seasoned activists and organizers. We've realized that most people had less people than they thought they did. And that's real. And I feel like that's a result of capitalism, because capitalism requires the breaking of relationships and the breaking of trust, and being fearful of other people, and not having the time to invest in our relationships because we're working all the time. So, it's very common.

And I just want to say for people doing this, it's not a popularity contest. This is really a chance to get clear for yourself in your own life and say, how am I actively building an accountable life? How am I actively building a life that's grounded in care and support of each other which really, what else matters in general?

So, that's one kind of general model. And I just to say like, as a caveat, is that another thing that we found through doing this – well, two things. One is that not everybody has pod people, and that's really real. And so, like, for example, if we think about immigrant women who are in abusive relationships, whether abusers are actively isolating them, immigrant women and their families, they may not have pod people, or they might be actively also being isolated because of lack of documentation or lack of language. And the ways that xenophobia, racism, misogyny all plays out. Or, you know, I'm thinking about disabled folks who are being abused by their caretakers. They may be actively being isolated. They may not have any pod people. And so, identifying our pods is not just something we can do for ourselves, but it's also a way to build a network of pods that could help anybody responding to violence. And then the last thing I'll say is that the other reason why we have been using this "model" is that it also helps us to get to where children already are. So, we work on child sexual abuse and we always say, like, a six-year-old is not going to call us to spearhead a community accountability process, nor should that burden be placed on them. So, identifying your pod people is also a way that helps us get to where children already are, and the more we can talk about and

have conversations about, how do we keep our children and our youths safe, the better we are and the more prepared we might be to be able to respond when our children and our youth are actually being harmed.

Cat: Everything you said brings up so much and one piece is just, this is just so personal. But, how does the process of transformative justice get initiated? I understand something might happen and you might identify your pod people, but how does it start and then what happens? Like, once I've identified my people – you know, it sounds like, with healing, there's not a given time frame. It's not a linear process.

Mia: Yeah, so usually, so there's lots of different ways. So – okay, let me set the stage. First and foremost, I feel like when we talk about responses to violence or community responses to violence, it can feel like responses to violence, you know, like this huge thing that just feels completely overwhelming, and people automatically think of usually like the worst types of violence. But what we talk about a lot in transformative justice work, especially in the BATJC, is that oftentimes the way that violence starts out is that it doesn't start out full blown. It's very rarely that that happens. It usually starts out like very slowly and then it builds up, builds up, and then it starts to rise. Almost like if you think about it on a graph, then it starts to rise exponentially. So, there's a both/and in what we're talking about here, so, I'm going to get to your question. But I just want to say that when I think about responses to violence, I think about them as being everything from a full-blown intervention where, you know, it's gone off the rails and somebody's in the emergency room, somebody's been beaten up, or somebody needs to get out of their house right away, like full-blown violence is usually what people rush to immediately. But, when I say responses to violence, I mean that all the way down to having conversations with your cousins about maybe even good-touch/bad-touch, having conversations with your mother around a dinner table or with your brother and sister as you're taking them to the bus stop. You know, like all of these small ways that are also responses to violence. So, if you hear your friend, for example, using misogynist language and you begin to have conversations with them before they do misogynist violence, that's a response to violence. That's an intervention, too. It may not be a full-blown intervention where the entire community is getting involved, and I actually would steer people away from the entire community getting involved, but we'll get to that. But, that's still a response. So, what I always want people to take away is that responses to violence can look all different types of ways and then oftentimes, if we can begin to recognize the red flags and like the beginning signals of violence as it's escalating, if we can begin to learn how to respond to those, we can also work to prevent violence which is part of what our work is too in the BATJC, is both/and.

Obviously, we know violence is not going to be ended in a campaign. It's generational. It's not going to be ended with one amazing grant or one amazing organization. And so, how do we have generational responses and craft generational responses to violence? So, that's one to just set the stage.

So, what you're asking in terms of what do these responses actually look like, I mean, honestly, I feel like a lot of what is amazing about TJ is that it's, on the one hand it's like so simple, and on the other hand it's complex. It's always –

Cat: Yeah, I'm gathering that, for sure.

Mia: It's very organic. So, the reason why we talk about pods is because we're really trying to build and cultivate just a general culture and general relationships where we could come each other and just start brainstorming, like, hey, I think my friend is dating somebody that I don't like the way she talks to her. Right? What should I do? Nothing violent has happened yet, not that –verbal abuse is definitely violence. But like in terms of nobody's getting beat up, yet. But I think it might escalate. So, even things like that. And so, pod work is a way to do that. And then when we sit down with people, that's essentially what we're doing, is we're saying, okay, who are the players involved, who can you call in for help, and it's never like we go into people's communities or families and like hold interventions. It's always how do we support you to be able to do that? And in doing that, hopefully transferring some of that skill set out. And that's when we try to do as much as possible, because we don't want to replicate direct service models where everybody is always dependent on us.

And I should say oftentimes the people coming to us are people who have complicated relationships with their abusers or with their offenders as most of us do, because most times, especially in intimate and sexual violence, it's not always black and white. Sometimes it is, but most of the time, especially when you get into the realm of abuse which is different than violence. So, abuse is different than like a one-time sexual assault, for example. Abuse usually takes place over an extended amount of time. Sometimes even over a lifetime. It's consistent, happening over and over again, so there's a lot of, again, signs building up to that that we can start to recognize. Some people talk about it as grooming, some people talk about it as, you know, whatever people are putting in to place so that they can abuse somebody. And so, having said that, oftentimes people are coming to us are people who have complicated relationships with the folks who have harmed them, like they oftentimes love them at the same that they're devastated by them and are angry at them, and/or they might still be dependent on them, you know, for financially, for lots of different reasons.

But oftentimes what they all have in common is that they don't want the person who caused them harm to just be like thrown in jail, where they don't want them to go through more harm. What we hear, what I hear most often from survivors is what they really want is accountability, and what oftentimes I hear from survivors is I don't even necessarily want an apology. I just want to make sure this doesn't happen to anybody else. Nine times out of ten, what people, what survivors really want is accountability.

And I always say this, but questions of accountability are always bound up with questions of justice, and I feel like this is one of the reasons why transformative justice I feel like is so important to all of our political work right now, is because it really forces us on a micro level to really grapple with what is accountability? What is justice? Whenever we talk about justice, we're talking inevitably about accountability. If we don't even know what accountability is between three people, four people, two people, then how are we going to demand accountability from the state or from a stranger no less, if we can't even figure it out in our friendships and our families and our intimate networks. So, I feel like a lot of the process is very organic. But another example might be that, if it's between adults, if you have a survivor, and then a person who caused harm, maybe it's around sexual violence, maybe there was a sexual assault that happened, you know, you might have a support team around survivor side, you might have folks who are around that person who caused harm, supporting them to take accountability, and then you might have some people, either representatives from each of those sides with some core people in the middle who are helping to coordinate things and helping communication to transfer back and forth, and/or who are helping to organize and plan, for example, like a healing circle that the two of them might be in as a way to heal from what happened. I feel like that's a really common structure that gets set up. Does it help?

Cat: Yeah, absolutely. I guess the way that I initially thought about TJ is that it's an intervention or a disruption or a breakaway from our existing so-called justice system, which it is. But listening to it, it's so much about relationships. And, I heard you say something really important which is that, when you meet with someone or someone comes to you, you're not, you don't want them to be dependent upon you. And there's also an important instinct, survivor rather than victim. There's something that happens when we encounter trauma where we don't feel our power anymore, we don't feel our agency. And to heal requires some capacity to feel ourselves as capable, as whole, that restoring that to the person who has been harmed is a critical piece of transformative justice. That's what I'm hearing. And then, of course, as it stands, say, the person doing harm is a person of color – I mean, for many people, but especially, especially if you're a person of color going into our prison system, you're going to be harmed again and again and again and again. And so, it's a chance for everyone's humanity to surface and for stronger relationships to be formed. And it's sad that that's revolutionary, but it is.

I am curious about if you have experienced any ah-ha moments.

Mia: There have been many, many, many ah-ha moments. I mean, so first and foremost, all of TJ feels like this both/and. It's both/and what makes total sense and then also feels very counter-intuitive. So, I feel like a lot of the ah-ha moments I've had have been around the counter-intuitive pieces. So, I think a lot of people, because we've been influenced by capitalism and we've internalized so much of capitalism and the criminalization that capitalism depends on, and all of these things, and we've kind of

internalized the prison culture inside of us. That's beyond the actual prisons, but that has now seeped into how we even treat each other in relationship. And transformative justice is abolitionist. It comes out of abolitionist work, abolition work, and I feel like is the other side of abolition work, that it's not just about shutting down prisons or ending of prison culture. Like, we also have to be building the alternatives that we're going to need. Because generational harm and harm and abuse and violence, those things are not going to go away. And if even if they did, we would still have to contend with generational trauma and trauma itself, and that's not going away anytime soon. So, I think there's this both/and transformative justice, but I think because we've internalized so much of a prison culture and a capitalist culture and a culture of disposability frankly, that has everything to do with how we treat the earth, too, that I feel like the only ways that we understand accountability and even justice is through a punitive lens. And I say this, all of us in the same bilk, like we have a hard time imagining and really concretizing and articulating what justice and accountability could look like outside of punishment, outside of more harm, outside of really oppressive and traumatic things. And so, I think people think of transformative justice as this like "soft" kind of justice, like it's not the real justice.

Cat: What will you do with those hardened criminals?

Mia: Exactly. And what I found and learned through my time in it is that it actually, in a way it is softer, but I think that's harder, if that makes sense to listeners right now. Like, I think that there's a way that our current responses to violence, and I include our current communal responses to violence, too, in that. Like, vigilantism and cutting people off, things like that. Isolating people. I think there's a way that our current responses to violence, it's easy in a sense. Like, if you beat somebody up or you cut somebody out of your life, it's like, well, that's done. I've washed my hands of that, and that's over. You know, versus really saying to somebody, yes, you've done this horrible thing and it has impacted so many people negatively, it is not okay that you have done that. We still care about you and we care about you enough to work with you so that that doesn't happen again. That is much harder because anybody who has ever tried to change their behavior knows how hard that is. Whether it's as benign as trying to break a habit like, I'm going to not bite my nails anymore, or I'm not going to stay up 'til 4:00 in the morning watching Netflix every night. Whatever the benign examples are, we can't even do those things. I'm going to drink more water. I'm going to try to eat one green vegetable a day. Like, whatever. I mean, I'm sure everybody is laughing because everybody has tried those things or things like that and failed miserably, right, like the next day. You're like, I haven't drunk a glass of water yet and it's already four o'clock in the afternoon. So, if we can take that and think about maybe the worst things we've ever done and how to shift, oftentimes behaviors that have been very ingrained inside of us, it's really hard. And in a lot of ways, I feel like that is actually the harder path and the path that is less slippery. If you think about a fish trying to slip away. And I feel like that is all of us.

Part of accountability is resisting accountability, and when we go into accountability we can either get thrown off and shocked by that or we can know that and prepare for it, both for ourselves as well as other people. That part of accountability is resisting accountability. And it makes sense given our trauma and given the amount of shame that we're seeped in all the time. And that a lot of the accountability work that is true accountability, meaning that you understand the harm that you caused just trying to – you've made amends. You understand the impact. And most importantly, that you're trying to change your behavior, so it won't happen again. That is the most important part of accountability. And oftentimes we talk about accountability, we think of it as like a confessional type of accountability. Like you just confess what you've done and then you're accountable.

Cat: Right.

Mia: And it's like, no, no, no. That's just the surface. So, if we can think of ourselves – and again, with TJ work, oftentimes we like to hold people who have done harm at arm's length away and be like those people are the bad people over there. We're the good people over here. But if we can understand that we all commit harm and have probably caused harm, whether we meant it or not, and all of us have survived harm in some way, shape or form, then I feel like it helps us to grow the kind of capacities internally that we need to support accountability. So, if we can all think for example of things that we all – we've probably all done things we're ashamed of or things that we knew we shouldn't have done, or things that you know maybe could have hurt somebody, maybe we were lucky that they didn't, whether we chose to drive home drunk from a party one night, or whatever, and we made it safely home but we could have harmed somebody. So, if we can think about those times in our lives and think about what we might have needed from them, what we would have needed from people in order to change that behavior, those have really been I feel like a lot of the ah-ha moments for me if just like, right, like that is – I don't know what other kind of word other than soft, but it's also harder because if you're with people who won't let you turn away from that harm and won't let you turn away from whatever caused that harm, whether it was trauma, whether it was shame, guilt, whatever it was, that's ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times harder than just saying, okay, punch me in the face and then it will be over. You know. So, I feel like there's that piece.

And it's also, you know, you're not just healing individual trauma, you're healing oftentimes generational trauma, too. And that accountability and healing go hand-in-hand. That oftentimes in order to change those behaviors, there's significant healing that has to happen. So that's some ah-ha moments that I feel like I've really had, which is instead of trying to force people – I'm sure we've all had this experience when we were growing up, like, say you're sorry to your sister or whatever. You know, and you're, I'm sorry. But that's not – and I'm sure your sister doesn't feel like, oh, they really feel like they're sorry. So, that's not what we're talking about. And, again, that's

the easy way. You just wash your hands of that and you're like, I said I was sorry. But that's not what we want and that's harder to not just be able to wash your hands of it.

And then I think some of the challenges of transformative justice that I've – I mean, sustainability is a constant challenge. Whether it's sustaining myself in doing this work because it's not paid work, so how do I also do paid work so that I can do this work that I love? Or whether it's the sustainability of like what we're really asking people to do is, we're not just asking people to like show up to the polls and vote for this candidate for one day out of the year or get people to sign up to vote for like a couple of months and then that's it. We're asking people to change their lives. We're asking people to invest in their own healing, and I mean that with time, not necessarily financially, but just like time and attention and work so that you can be a more accountable and responsible human being.

Cat: And you don't get credit for that.

Mia: And you don't get credit for that.

Cat: And it doesn't always look like you're doing anything --

Mia: No.

Cat: -- necessarily. You might be sitting in tears and that's the work.

Mia: That is the work. And transformation is hard. We romanticize this notion or transformation. We're like we will transform, yes. But anybody who has ever transformed knows that it is gruelingly hard. It is very hard. And part of transformation requires a death, a letting go so that you can be – I mean the butterfly analogy, whatever. So, I feel like the challenge of transformative justice is you have to find people who are willing to walk into the fire together and not let go of hands and walk through it and come out the other side. And that is incredibly hard. So, there's so many challenges to transformative justice.

Cat: Can I just say –

Mia: Yeah.

Cat: Well, this is something I was thinking about earlier and I've known, I've heard of this with some exposure to restorative justice, that whoever is involved has to want to be there. I mean, even if you're someone who's a pod person, you have to agree. And I could imagine it could be hard if you're the person on the other side of the equation, let's say there are two people involved in the harm. And maybe it's the one who's harmed that wants the accountability practice, and the other person doesn't want anything to do with it. But it sounds like with this work, there has to be some kind of desire or some push. And I don't mean force but like some calling to do the work because it's not going to be easy or straightforward.

Mia: It has to be consensual.

Cat: That's the word.

Mia: I mean, especially when you're working around intimate sexual violence, there's no way that we're going to non-consensually force somebody to be part of a process to end rape culture, for example.

Cat: Well, then that's interesting, too, what is it in the first place that gives someone that desire to step into that fire, right? Because not necessarily everyone is going to want to do that. So how do we create a culture where that's more desirable? Do you address that?

Mia: Yeah, that's part of pod work. That's part of what pod work is, it's actually starting to have these conversations now instead of, you know, when violence has hit the top and being full-blown. That is not the time. When somebody is bloody and trying to get to the hospital, that is not a time to say, hey, there's this thing called transformative justice. Do you want to talk about it? But if we can do it now and have conversations with our pod people and say, hey, Cat, you're somebody that I would call on to take accountability for violence if I ever was harmful to somebody, and like to actually get consent from that person, right, and then to begin to have those conversations around like, what do you need? And so, a lot of the work that we do, a lot of our prevention work is about preparing. How do we prepare better? And so, we have like transformative justice studies, for example, where we ask people to invite their pod people so that again that metal detector on the beach, again, finding where the relationship and trust is, and then moving, building in that. So, saying bring your pod people.

And so, in doing pod work, it's not only just like the action of yourself actively thinking about who would I call, how can I build my own support network, I mean in those terms, and then also having conversations with them. Maybe your neighbor is somebody you would call but you've never actually never had a conversation with them about sexual violence. This is an opportunity to talk with them. Maybe you would call your uncle, but you've never talked with him about prisons, for example. Maybe you would call your aunt, but you've never come out to them as a queer person. So, this is the time to do that work so that we can begin to prepare for when violence happens.

Cat: Amazing. Is there anything else you want to add before we wrap up?

Mia: I think TJ is super-important in this moment and one of the reasons why, only a couple of the reasons why – so one is like I said in the beginning, part of what transformative justice does is it forces us, it requires of us, it asks, invites us into really flexing our revolutionary imaginations and flexing our imaginations to figure out what else is possible. And I feel like even just transformative justice in and of itself is saying something else is possible beyond more trauma, more criminalization, more hurt, more isolation. Something else is possible. So, I feel like that's one and we need that so

badly, especially now in this current political moment and as we're working to, not only resist against the systems that are trying to erase us but build alternatives and that the world that we long for and ache for really.

And then the second piece is that I feel like, because transformative justice is so relational and what I mentioned before in terms of that transformative justice, I feel like really allows us to grapple with in a concrete way that's not this ambiguous kind of lofty thinking of what is justice and accountability. Like, I mean for all of us, we can think about times that we've been harmed or violated or assaulted maybe even or abused. What would justice have looked like for us, to us? What would it have taken for us to feel like that was just, and feel like justice happened. You know? What do we want from people who have hurt us or harmed us or wronged us for us to feel like they've taken accountability now? And then vice-versa. When we've done harm or when we've done things that we're not proud of or we acted in ways that weren't aligned in our values, what would justice have looked like for us when we have harmed people? Or what would we have wanted to have given to the people that we've harmed in a way that it feels just? All of those questions we can ask when we've witnessed harm. And a lot of us probably grew up either witnessing direct harm or abuse in our homes or in our communities or even just on TV, right, in thinking of media and how ingrained violence is inside of us as well. Which is another reason why I think that transformative justice is so important right now because violence is everywhere, and we want to act like when people are violent or abusive, that it's this abnormal thing that's just like horrible.

Cat: Well, we live in a culture where war [violence] has been happening nonstop.

Mia: Yeah.

Cat: And it's condoned by our government. It's naturalized. But it doesn't need to be.

Mia: Exactly. And we get taught all the time that violence is an acceptable way to handle our problems, whether it's war –

Cat: And it's obvious, all the gender identities, but you know, like my grandmother will say that, like, oh, it's natural for little boys to fight and little girls will just sit there and play nicely. And I'm like, that's not true.

Mia: Exactly.

Cat: It's not true. It might happen, but it's because of socialization.

Mia: And, no. And precisely because of that culture is why I feel like transformative justice is so important and restorative justice that we have to figure out ways to not just keep dealing with the consequences of violence but to actively prevent violence. And you know the best prevention is a good response. Prevention and response are intimately tied together and mutually dependent on each other. We can't keep dividing it up and saying, oh, I'm just going to prevent teen pregnancy all the time but I'm not actually

going to help teen moms who have kids. Like, that's not – I mean, I feel like I lived through so much of that, doing reproductive justice work. And I was like, we can't stop responding and just throw all of ourselves into prevention work, but we also can't only respond and never prevent violence, because we'll burn ourselves out as we're doing. So, I feel like transformative justice is really critical as long as we live in such violent conditions and as long as we live in conditions where we have rates that are as high and epidemic as like one in three, one in four, one in six. That's huge. Or every 19 seconds, every 14 seconds, these statistics are at epidemic rates and, you know, I feel like community accountability is not necessarily for everyone, but a lot of the principles and practices of transformative justice, we can start incorporating into our lives now. And I feel like that's, to me, one of the best things that we can do to help build a foundation for successful social movements.

Cat: Thank you so much, Mia.

Mia: Thank you.

Music

TIERRA: So. We've come to the end of this quick study in TJ fundamentals. If you're wanting to take some processing or integration time after that, feel free. And if you want to go deeper, meet us for more intensive training in episode 3.

For this episode's optional take-home exercise, we're lifting up Mia's suggestion of exploring and possibly starting to build our pods. Today's show notes contain a link to the BATJC's pod mapping worksheets and instructions on how to fill them out. Consider making some time, either solo or with the folks you're journeying through this audio series with, to really explore – Who might I call on if I needed support to address harm I'm witnessing as a bystander? Who might I call on if I needed support in escaping or healing from harm? And who might I call on if I needed support in taking accountability for harm I have done? If you're able to come up with even one name, consider making time to reach out to that person to ask if they're down to be in your pod. One way to start that conversation could be "hey, I've been thinking about who I might want to turn to for support during an emergency, and I thought of you. Would you be down to chat with me sometime about that? I'd love to hear what you think." And go from there.

Thank you for listening to The Real Work: A Podcast About Theater Culture and Transformative Justice. Please check out the show notes for the transcript and for plenty of links and resources to tide you over til the next episode drops. And please consider sharing this work with your communities.

Thank you to the Center for Cultural Innovation's Investing in Artist Grant, the City of Oakland's Cultural Funding program, and to Cal Shakes for initially incubating this project. Our theme music is by zAnda of DiaspoRADiCAL. This is a collaboration with We Rise Production, and

we'd love to hear from you - connect with us at weriseproduction@pm.me, on the socials, and at weriseproduction.com.

Do we want to close with a collective breath?

SK: Sure.

Breath

TIERRA: All right, that's a wrap.

SHOW NOTES:

Sogorea Te' Land Trust: https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/

Save the West Berkeley Shellmound: https://shellmound.org/

BATJC Pods & Pod Mapping Worksheet Instructions: https://batjc.wordpress.com/resources/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/

BATJC Pod Mapping Worksheet: https://batjc.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/batjc-pod-mapping-2016-updated.pdf

EdSource, "At this Oakland high school, restorative justice goes far beyond discipline": https://edsource.org/2022/at-this-oakland-high-school-restorative-justice-goes-far-beyond-discipline/673453

Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth/RJOY: https://rjoyoakland.org/

Mia Mingus: https://www.soiltjp.org & https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com

Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective: https://batjc.wordpress.com/

Democracy Now!, "Remembering Grace Lee Boggs (1915-2015): 'We Have to Change Ourselves in Order to Change the World'": https://www.democracynow.org/2015/10/6/remembering_grace_lee_boggs_1915_2015

For additional resources, including this episode's ASL video:
https://www.weriseproduction.com/therealwork

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https://soundcloud.com/diasporadical

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