

looking toward repair

By Bhumi Patel

Based on my attendance of SORRY | PLEASE | NO presented by Flyaway Productions, this writing takes the shape of the performance itself, organized in the eight sections we moved through on the afternoon of February 19th at Zaccho Studio in San Francisco.

- I. Grounding
- II. Introductions
- III. The artists/ Dissolving Shame
- IV. The Dance
- V. Returning Citizens/ Dissolving Shame
- VI. Break
- VII. The Audience Joins In Conversation
- VIII. Closing Ritual

I. Grounding

As I walked up the stairs to the Zaccho Studio space on Yosemite Ave in the Bayview, I thought about what it means to embody practices of consent, accountability, and the justice process, topics that I knew were woven into the activities of the event, and wondered with a curiosity how all of these ideas would come together in the afternoon.

Entering the space, chairs were set in a semi-circle facing a hook-shaped apparatus in the sun-lit studio. I sat down, took out my notebook, and inhaled surroundings. Gathering with others still feels wondrous and new as the circumstances of the pandemic morph and change.

The afternoon began with a grounding, an invitation to check in with our bodies and our energies. Kevin Martin from Community Works in Oakland guided us. As with all spaces I enter, I looked around to see if there were other people of color in the room. I was one of only a few. In a space like this one, I am left wondering if grounding needed to include understanding not only one's energy, but understanding one's power, privilege, and positionality as well, so that self-interrogation to prevent harm in the room itself was already in the mix.

Can we both assume best intention *and* set up explicit understandings of how each individual comes into a newly formed community?

II. Introductions

In the program, the organizers acknowledge the questions they are asking in the process. They write, “The project embraces the question, well stated by activist adrienne maree brown, ‘How do we believe survivors and still be abolitionist? And still practice transformative justice?’”

How do we?

During the grounding we were asked to acknowledge the empty seats, bring curiosity, and think about what kind of energy we were bringing into the space. As introductions began, I was still thinking through these questions and provocations and wondering what was to come. The introductions were made by collaborating artists in the project, the facilitator, and the participating returning citizens. Each individual brought a profound thread to understanding how we all came to be in the space together, and each shared a commitment to the practice of transformative justice as ongoing and to *repair*. I could feel these intentions in the air.

When the composer introduced herself, she spoke about the apparatus of repair (which may also be the name of a forthcoming piece from Flyaway Productions). Even now, as I write this weeks later, I continue to think about this idea. What is an apparatus of repair? What is repair? Who decides? When enacting repair, who chooses when the repair is “over”? Does repairing harm ever end? How do we develop a community to which we are accountable as an act of love, rather than an act of control or punishment?

III. The artists/dissolving shame

Each participating artist was asked to share the vulnerabilities they were bringing into the space. This moment felt tender and vulnerable, and I continue to explore the ways in which we think about the vulnerabilities that artmaking asks of us, and how we both act with protection of ourselves, and offer ourselves to the witnessing of audiences. Making art doesn’t require an audience, but often it has one, so how do we approach this temporary, reciprocal relationship with a tenderness for the vulnerabilities that are brought into the space?

The artists spoke of having had similar experiences of violence in their lives. They shared that they hope that this piece is an experience of repair, that it was a way to navigate their experiences of survival, that they were weaving together the stories but not necessarily trying to tell them in a linear way.

One of the artists brought up Chanel Miller, the victim of assault by Brock Turner, and I am reminded of how she writes in her memoir, *Know My Name*, “Most people say developing is

linear, but for survivors it is cyclic. People grow up, victims grow around; we strengthen around the place that hurt, become older and fuller, but the vulnerable core is never gone.”

In this sharing, was the shame dissolved for the artists who offered their vulnerable cores to a group of mostly strangers?

IV. The dance

The dancer has a bucket in the corner. She washes herself. The soundscore feels anticipatory, as though something is coming. Traveling on the diagonal toward the apparatus, the dancer looks forward and looks back, perhaps a metaphor for time itself.

In the music I hear the following phrases:

“Who is there to blame?”

“I am the chance to be brave”

“What’s the use of grief?”

As the dancer moves in and out of the apparatus, from flying to floor, I notice that at moments the mechanics of working with an apparatus are revealed. What a beautiful metaphor for how transformative justice must function - at times we need to see the mechanics of the work to know where we have gone and where we are going. Maybe this is what the dancer sees as her gaze travels both forward and backward on the diagonal toward the apparatus.

The piece comes to a close with the dancer emptying the bucket of water onto her own body, a metaphorical and literal washing clean. I am left wondering if repair feels something like being washed clean, for both the person who enacted harm and the one who was harmed.

V. Returning citizens/dissolving shame

In *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, Mariame Kaba writes “An abolitionist journey ignites other questions capable of meaningful and transformative pathways: What work do prisons and policing actually do? Most people assume that incarceration helps to reduce violence and crime, thinking ‘the criminal punishment system might be racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and unfair, but it at least keeps me safe from violence and crime.’” But for the most part, I don’t know if I believe that policing and incarceration keeps anyone safe. Anti-Police Terror Project, a Black-led, multi-racial, intergenerational coalition to eradicate police terror in communities of color reminds us: We keep us safe.

As I listened to the stories shared by Leverett Grissom and Betty McKay, two returning citizens, I felt conflicted. Repair for harm is non-negotiable in my framework of living, but how do we both hold that systemic issues often lead to harm being caused, and that repair for harm is necessary? That individuals can both be at fault, and not completely at fault for their harmful actions?

I kept thinking about the vulnerable core of each person that was collaborating in the process and each person that was part of the audience, witness to the process.

What does it mean to bear witness? What does it feel like in the body? What does it feel like to be witnessed in one's fullness of humanity?

VI. Break

Take a break. Take a breath.

Return to your body.

VII. The Audience Joins In Conversation

After the break, we gathered in a circle. We made community agreements.

Almost immediately, I felt the conversation co-opted by whiteness.

Almost immediately, I wondered why we weren't addressing ongoing systemic inequities that lead to incarceration. Why weren't we talking about the history of policing Black bodies and Black people in the US alongside witnessing and holding space for the returning citizens who are part of this creative process?

For me, the open discussion highlighted two things: 1) that conversations about the carceral system and justice in action are both difficult and incredibly important to have, and 2) without a foundation of understanding the long histories and intentions of this system to function exactly as it is functioning, we are recreating inequity.

This space was holding wonderful intentions and did dive into the prison industrial complex, but whiteness was still centered, as whiteness is almost always centered. While some folks participating brought thoughtful ideas and insights to the group discussion, as a whole, this discussion further revealed the centering of whiteness. Many, while perhaps having good intentions, were simply centering themselves in sharing anecdotes about their own acts against this problematic system. It seemed to me that for many this was likely the first encounter they've had with someone who was opening sharing about their experiences of incarceration. How could

the space be set up to allow more gentleness with new encounters where instead of jumping to anecdotes to prove that one isn't part of the problem, one has the space to be uncomfortable and sit with that discomfort?

Healing *does* happen in community, and each of us has both the capacity to harm and be harmed, but how will this discussion lead to, as Jo Kreiter asked during the full group discussion, compassionate accountability and systemic change?

VIII. Closing Ritual

I want to leave us with a final piece of wisdom from Mariame Kaba.

“Let’s begin our abolitionist journey not with the question ‘What do we have now and how can we make it better?’ Instead, let’s ask, ‘What can we imagine for ourselves and the world?’ If we do that, then boundless possibilities of a more just world await us.”

Perhaps this conversation, as an ongoing praxis of speech and embodiment, allows us to imagine the work, and the world, that awaits us.

This piece was commissioned by Flyaway Productions in response to their February 2022 gatherings for SORRY | PLEASE | NO in San Francisco, California.