



ADRIENNE MAREE BROWN ON CANCELLATION, ABOLITION AND HEALING



THE FINAL STRAW RADIO

A conversation between our occasional host, Scott, and adrienne maree brown. For the hour, Scott and adrienne speak about “We Will Not Cancel Us and Other Dreams of Transformative Justice”, her latest booklet available through AK Press, as well as sci-fi, abolition, harm, accountability and healing.

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This week on The Final Straw, we feature a conversation between our occasional host, Scott, and adrienne maree brown. For the hour, Scott and adrienne speak about *We Will Not Cancel Us and Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*, her latest booklet available through AK Press, as well as sci-fi, abolition, harm, accountability and healing.

adrienne maree brown is the writer-in-residence at the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute, and author of *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* and the co-editor of *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction from Social Justice Movements* and *How to Get Stupid White Men Out of Office*. She is the cohost of the *How to Survive the End of the World* and *Octavia's Parables* podcasts. adrienne is rooted in Detroit. More of her work can be found at **adriennemareebrown.net**.

Also, to hear an interview with Walidah Imarisha, who co-authored *Octavia's Brood* with adrienne, search for “Walidah Imarisha on Angels With Dirty Faces” on **thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org**

The Final Straw Radio: Thank you for coming and talking to us in the Final Straw. Do you mind introducing yourself with a pronoun and relevant information you want to give?

adrienne maree brown: Yeah, so, my name is adrienne maree brown, I use she and they pronoun. I am a writer based in Detroit and I'm the author of *Emergent Strategy, Pleasure Activism*, co-editor of Octavia's Brood, and most recently, and I think what we are going to talk about today, the author of a book called *We Will Not Cancel Us and Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*. I have been a movement facilitator and mediator for over 20 years, close to 25 years now. And most of the writing work that I do is rooted in the experiences and questions that have come from those places. That's who I am for people who are meeting me here.

TFSR: Thanks! I'm so excited to get to talk to you and I wanted to dive into your most recent published book because it offers a lot of food for thought, especially for people who are engaged in different kinds of community processes and accountability and larger projects of abolition and transformative justice.

amb: Oh, one thing you should know and it may show up for your listeners, too. I have neighbors upstairs and today is the day that they host the preschool pot, so if you hear big thumps and bumps and things like that, just know it's kids playing and everyone's all good.

TFSR: That's a good [chuckle]. I also have a sleeping cat that may awake and attempt to hang out on the computer.

amb: Real life continues happening even during Zoom calls, so...

TFSR: I kind of wanted to just jump in into the stuff thinking about listeners have a basic concept for abolition and transformative justice. The first thing I started thinking about when preparing to talk to you was that way that cancel culture which you, you know, you reverting in the title, it's become a kind of meme at this point. And there is plenty of critiques from the radical liberatory side which is the one that you are offering, but also right-wing conservative perspectives, like I'm thinking of Trump getting kicked out of Twitter, or

the J.K. Rowling transphobic stuff that prompted this all of these rich and powerful people to talk about cancel culture, so I was wondering what you think... How do we differentiate those critiques from the liberatory side vs. the powerful side?

amb: Yeah, I feel like I've had to explore this a lot more since the book came out than I ever did before. I'm really not following what right-wing conservative people are up to or saying or doing. It's literally not a part of my world, my conversation. So when I wrote the initial piece and people were like "Trump uses this language", I felt like "What?" I don't follow him, so for me, it was interesting. I can totally see the right-wing using the critique of cancel culture to dodge accountability and to me, the major distinction is what is the impetus of the critique. For me, it is a love-based, abolition-based impetus. I do believe that as people who are fighting for abolition, there are conversations we need to have, questions we need to be asking and practices we need to get good at that are related to how we practice being in deeper accountability with each other and starting to develop an expectation that accountability is possible when harm happens. Because I believe that those twin expectations are what lay the foundation for a truly post-prison, post-policing coexistence. So that to me feels like the primary thing is that when someone like J.K. Rowling is being like "No, cancel culture is being no good", what she is fundamentally fighting for is like "I want to protect my right to be oppressive, to basically cancel or deny the existence of other people". And what I think we are fighting for is the right to protect as many people as we can from being harmed, denied, erased. So there is a call, you know, to me, the difference is also people talk about call-out vs. call-in and this kind of things, I think a lot of what we are doing is that we want to actually pull ourselves into more interdependence, relationality, accountability. And that feels like a huge distinction.

TFSR: That's a good point, cause the words can become slippery, especially as they get co-opted by people who don't have those horizons that we have.

amb: When I was trying to figure out which words were are going to fight for, and how we do that fighting for. It's hard, but I do think it's worthwhile in some places. Abolition is actually still ours, transformative justice is still ours. I don't think cancel culture necessarily is the one

that is ours. For me, *We Will Not Cancel Us* is about the activity, like we are not going to cancel people we need to be accountable for. How do we do that?

TFSR: Yeah, this is a very important distinction, because cancel culture is already a mainstream critique of this thing, probably they see it as a youth phenomenon on social media. And canceling is a thing that people do, but it's not a whole culture necessarily.

amb: It's not, and what I think is interesting is that there is a culture of disposability, and there is a culture of conflict avoidance, but I think the cancelation... So much of it is rooted in social media culture, so social media culture is a shallow engagement, clickbait headlines, very surface-level arguments, and then canceling people. It all goes together: trolls-gone-wild, then we are trying to build a movement and how do we navigate and organize around social media as a part of building movement, and how do we harness it as a tool? I think what's been happening is that it's been harnessing us. We've got down into the way social media works as if that's how a community works and changes.

TFSR: There are two different levels that we can use social media as a tool for things that we've done historically to protect ourselves, but then there is this other level where it takes on another meaning. One thing I was thinking about reading your book is that probably also the most notable mainstream version of this that gets discussed is the #metoo. It's called a movement, but from what you discuss in your book I don't see it as a movement, cause it's an isolated act of naming something. It's not necessarily a struggle in the streets. And I'm not saying this as a judgment, I'm reserving judgment of like it's effective or should people do this, but I'm interested in thinking about that, not having a basis in a tangible community.

amb: It's interesting, I think it depends on where and when you enter the MeToo conversation. If people enter the conversation as like this happened related to Harry Weinstein, a year and a half ago now, then I think that's the case. But if you take it all the way back to the work that Tarana Burke has been doing for years, that was very tangible and the work that she has continued to do is very much tangible, happening in real-time,

in real space, in real relationships and calling for changes that happened in the offline world, and using social media to help push that along, to spread that. But I just did an event with them recently and I was blown away by how much they are inviting people into offline practices. And I think ‘movement’ is a kind of slippery and tricky term. I see people telling like “We are starting a movement”, I don’t think that is how movement works, how things take off or people get called into something and like what is actually moving. And I look at, like, is policy moving? Is our sense of identity moving, is our sense of capacity moving? And in that sense, I would say that to me MeToo is absolutely a movement because it has moved and transformed how people negotiate the intimate relationship, intimate harm, how people negotiate being public or non-public about the harm that happened to them. So I would see it that way.

TFSR: I like that idea. I was thinking, bell hooks distinguishes between political representation and pop culture that doesn’t get grounded in grassroots. But the way you mention it makes sense, and the thing I admire about the call-outs that happen, cause though we could read from a lens of canceling or even carceral sort of minds, but it also is demanding accountability and giving voices to people.

amb: Absolutely, and that’s what I think is interesting is who do we listen to, so if we listen to Cherana and Nikita and so many people who are now working in that space, one of the things they talk about all the time is...this is actually not about destruction, it’s not about trying to bring people down and destroy them. We are trying to heal trauma, to end cycles of harm, and end trauma that has come from that harm. And I think this is one of the most interesting pieces about the distinction between what I had actually an issue writing about and the larger culture of cancellation and call-out, cause call-outs are rooted in the communities I come from – brown, queer, trans communities. And the reason why we initially needed the strategy was because the power differentials between us and the folks who were causing harm were so vast that we couldn’t be heard as equal parts of the story-telling, we couldn’t be heard in our survival. That’s still the case in so many scenarios where “Oh, these workers need to call someone out, or call out an institution, a corporate entity because the power dynamics are so vast. And with Harvey Weinstein, with R. Kelly, with some of these big public cases, I hundred percent

support those, I've tweeted that, those make sense to me because the power differentials are so big that the only way to potentially stop this harm is by making this huge call. I think the difference is then how do we handle it when the harm is much more horizontal, within a community, where there might be slightly more positional power, slightly more social media cachet or something, but no one is wealthy, no one actually owns anything, no one has long-standing security in any kind of way, and a lot of time we are talking about survivors, where everyone is in a situation of survival or something.

And that to me, as I've stressed, has got much more complex, and again, that still doesn't mean that we take it off the table. It might still need to be. I've witnessed, I've held, I've supported the situations where we have tried a million other things to get this person to stop causing harm and this is not the move. And I think that is the case...A lot of the push-back I got from people when I published the original essay, they were like "Hold on, in a lot of these cases, we have tried everything". Don't take the power out of the move that we do need the capacity to make. And that was not my intention in writing and it's not my intention now is to say "How do we make sure that we are using the tactic precisely when it needs to be used and how do we make sure we have other options when we need other options, right? This is not the first thing people jump to.

TFSR: I guess that's the thing with social media, and we have so many examples of it, especially because being harmed is a really isolating experience and being able to voice it really scary...

amb: It's so hard.

TFSR: We see the representation of that on social media that can give you the ability to do something even if you wouldn't reach out to your pod or whatever. That's a distinction that, I don't know, I don't know...

amb: Well, just briefly on that point, that's also part of what I'm fighting for. As someone who is a survivor myself and who really has to battle like "Would taking this public be healing for me? Who would I share this with that it would be healing for me? How would I actually be able to heal the pattern that happened here? What do I want for the person

– multiple people in my life – who have caused harm?” And it’s a very intimate reckoning. I can’t outsource like “Here is what I landed on, and that’s what everyone got to do too”. Because it’s very intimate. What I do know is that I want the result to be satisfying. If people are taking this huge risk to tell these stories, I want them to be satisfied that they are not able to get justice, but they are able to get healing. I think it is often what happens with the way the call-outs play out right now. A lot of what happens is people take this huge risk, tell a story and now they are associated with that story. It’s now they become a public face of the worst thing that ever happened to them, and sometimes there is some accountability, but often there is not, sometimes the person who caused them harm just disappears and goes somewhere else and keeps causing harm. For me, I’m just like “Hold on, let’s examine this strategy and figure out how do we actually make sure survivors are having a satisfying experience or healing and being held, and getting room to process and not having to be responsible for managing anything to do with the person who caused them harm.

My vision is where we live inside of communities, that have the capacity and the skill to be like “That harm happened to you – we are flanking you, we’ve got you, you are being held, we are attending to your healing. And that there is also enough community to go to the person who caused the harm and hold them in a process of accountability and also healing”. Because fundamentally, we know something’s wrong if someone is causing that kind of harm, if someone commits sexual assault, if someone commits rape, steals resources, abusing power. We know that actually some healing is also needed there. Not that the survivor needs to guide the healing, but the community does need to be responsible for it. I think we are a long way from that. Where we need to be heading if we call ourselves abolitionists is we have to develop a capacity to hold all of that in the community, so that we are not outsourcing it to a prison, to the police.

TFSR: Yeah, it’s interesting in this transitional period, we are not there, it that vision just discussed, we are trying to reach that. There is that experience that so many people have and you’ve probably seen and had it yourself where accountability processes go wrong or a call-out isolates someone and the person who caused harm gets scrutinized and their process doesn’t happen or even I feel like processes

can be used to wheel power within subcultural communities, whether that is anarchist or queer, and exclude people. So there is a high level of burnout or disillusionment with these processes, and I just wonder what you think about how we counteract that. That's another form of healing that is needed.

amb: Yeah. I keep pointing people to these two resources, they just came out last year, which to me says so much about how early we are in the transformative justice experiment. And to place ourselves in a context of time, helps me to drop my shoulders. Be like “Of course we don't know what the fuck we doing, these processes are fucking hard and everything” because we are so early and we have been... Mariame Kaba talks about this, that we had 250 years of the carceral experiment, of well-funded policing and prison systems rooted in enslavement practices, had a long time of those being well-funded and we have never had a period of experimentation in what we are talking about – transformative justice and abolition practices – have been well-funded. Of course, we don't have the resources to do it.

So one book is *Beyond Survival* by Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha which gives a history of transformative justice, which talks about the people who were doing it before they knew that they were doing it, maybe they didn't call it that, but just different kind of case studies and models and experiments so people can see that we have been innovating and adapting and trying to figure this out. That feels like one resource for people to say “Go look, we are not the first people to fuck up”. We still don't know how to hold this, we are learning. The other resource is Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan put out this workbook called *Fumbling Towards Repair*, and I'm in love with this workbook because it's very tangible as a resource. Here is how you can do a community accountability process in your community when something happens. It's rooted in the idea that Mariame talks about which is it's not going to be a one-to-one shift from the carceral state to a perfect transformative justice system that someone else still holds outside of us. It's going to be a system where we want to defund the police and the state and redistribute resources into a million different options in our community including that many of muscle up our capacity to do community accountability processes. And if we are doing one for the first time – I remember the first time I did one – I went in with a big dream of healing

and I came out mid-level satisfying, like I said my piece, and this person agreed not to do whatever.

So I just think it's important to be humble on a grand scale about the fact that we are still learning these things and there is a lot of people in our community who actually are developing some expertise around this, but you are developing an expertise in something that is very often a private process, so it's not something you are writing out like "Honey, let me tell what I just did with this horrific person", a lot of it is very private and quiet, and I think that also skews the sense of this moment because a lot of times the initial call-outs, initial accountability moves are much more public, and social media takes them very far, but then we don't see what happens behind the scenes, we don't see what was happening behind the scenes to lead up to that moment, all the things that are behind. So if we were able to be like "Ha! We don't know how to do this yet, we have to learn how to do this. And learning happens mostly through failure. We learn by trying something, it doesn't quite work, then we make the adjustment. We have so much to learn. We have to learn what roles work best for different people, who are the mediators, who are the people who can hold these processes, who are the people who are like "I'm a healer, I can hold a role in a community". Do you have to experience these accountability processes yourself, can you just read about it and hold it? There is so much to figure out, and to me, it's actually exciting. We are in an exciting place potentially for transformative justice and abolition. But not if we stay committed to outsourcing those we deem as bad or the processes themselves. It's more like how do we turn to be like "Yeah, we don't know how to do this, let's learn".

TFSR: Right. I actually had an opportunity to teach a queer and transformative justice class, it was very well-funded, it was right when those books came out, I was so excited, look at all these new books on this. Teaching this stuff to young people seems important, but also familiarizing them with the fact that it's not a one-to-one replacement or solution. I use a lot Walidah Imarisha's *Angels with Dirty Faces* because she talks about it not being a resolution we are used to within a Capitalist society...

amb: Exactly, and looking at those three stories, cause I think that's the stuff, looking at these different real-life scenarios and being with the

complexity of each of these human beings, I think it is such a great book. I also point people a lot to Mia Mingus's work, particularly the work around apology, because so much of it is, you know, you are trying to get water out of the stone, it feels like "When I really need is an acknowledgment of the harm you did and an apology for that. Few people know how to give a good apology. There is a myriad of resources that we're building and generating and slowly bringing into a relationship with each other. I think in ten years, it's going to look very different.

TFSR: There is something interesting I was starting to think about. You talked about the privacy of the intimacy of situations that need this kind of handling. If we start having people specializing in training and that stuff that go around doing the work, we can run the risk of professionalizing it.

amb: I hope this is not the... To me, that's why the workbook model is so exciting. And I say this is someone who has worked as a facilitator for the last 20 years. I recognize what happened for me was I had the skill, those I used in my community, and then it became a professionalized skill. Suddenly people started "We'll fly you to all different places to do this". For a while, it worked for me and allowed me to work with very exciting movements, but it also has the impact in the long run of making people think that they have to fly me in rather than looking around and see who in their community has this capacity and strength. I wrote Emergent Strategy to help with spreading those tools and I have a book coming out this spring called *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy. Facilitation and Mediation*. And for me, the idea is similar, the workbook is like "Pick this up, integrate the skill-set, find the facilitators, the people who are like this in your community and do mediation, who are drawn to it, and let's start to have more capacity for local reliance in these different systems and needs. I think the professionalization and the sense of bringing someone from afar to do this – we can do this, it's possible on the level of the community.

TFSR: I know since you post so much from Octavia Butler that maybe you are kind of seeding the communities, then figure it out themselves.

amb: Exactly.

TFSR: And thinking about Emergent Strategy and the new book you've just mentioned, OK, in *We Will Not Cancel Us*, you talk about the sort of supremacy within us and connect it to the diagnosis that the Oankali make in Octavia Butler's book about the problem with humans is like...

amb: Hierarchy and intelligence...

TFSR: Yeah. I see that work that you do, the writing that you do as part of the process, the internal process that we need to do to unlearn supremacy, the hierarchy within us...And that would work on so many different levels – power, masculinity, and all these things.

amb: Everything.

TFSR: Do you see this as a sort of thing that takes place in culture, is it internal... It seems like you're initiating a new genre to have an "anti-authoritarian help book" or something.

amb: [laughs] Thank you. The other day I was interviewed and they said that my new genre was "facila-writing", writing stuff that facilitates people through a process, so I'll accept this too, "anti-authoritarian help books" I do think that is something that happens at both ends and I say this like one of my great teachers, mentors, was Grace Lee Boggs who is an Asian-American freedom fighter based here in Detroit, part of the Black Power movement. And she said we must transform ourselves to transform the world. And when I first heard it, I was like "No, we have to go out and transform all the fucked-up people who are doing bad things, we are good". It took me such a long time to understand what she meant, which is any of the systems that we are swimming in have also rooted inside of us, and as we un-root them, uproot them, we unlearn things inside of us, then we become both models for what it looks like to be post-capitalist, post-nationalist, post-patriarchal, post-white supremacy, we become models of that, we become practitioners and scholars. We actually understand what it takes to do that unlearning. That feels like such a crucial part of this.

In *We Will Not Cancel Us*, I reference my friend Prentis Hemphill's essay

'Letting Go of Innocence' because that feels connected to this. First, we have to recognize we are not above the people who have caused harm. They may have had different circumstances, they have let us to moving our harm in different ways or processing our traumas in different ways. I think it's such a blessing, you know I have a life of trauma, but early in my life I was given tools around therapy and healers, I had a loving household, a loving jumping off board from which to process the trauma of being alive in this time, which I think everyone actually is experiencing at some level. I interact with people and they didn't come across the idea of therapy or they thought that's not an option or a healer – that's private, that's something you don't do. And that energy is going to move somewhere. So I don't look at myself as above anyone who ends up in the prison system or anyone who ends up canceled. I just had different circumstances and they allowed me to process the trauma in a different way. That's internal work that allows me to be present with the fact that capitalism is in me, petty jealous behavior is in me, judgmental behavior is in me, and that I have to examine what is white supremacy, what is patriarchy, what are those things that live in me. I keep uprooting that.

At the same time, I do believe it is cultural work and that is why I write books instead of just having these thoughts in my head or only doing the work with a small group of friends, as I am interested in dropping seeds into the culture to see if other things can bloom. And my experiment with that, with Emergent Strategy, was so exciting to me because I released the book, didn't really promote it, I was just like "Look, if there are other people hungry for these ideas, this will spread, if they are not, I will know that I'm alone in Detroit looking at ends and that's fucked. I felt kind of OK either way cause the Earth is still offering its amazing lessons regardless of people see it through my book or not, but now I know that that strategy can really work. And *We Will Not Cancel Us* similarly, we did a couple of events that just felt like important conversations to have with Charlene Carruthers, with Cindy Weisner, with Shira Hassan, and with Malkia Devich-Cyril who wrote the Afterword. But mostly it was like the book is out and people are either reading that or not. And I have a lot of people who were like "I'm reading this". I got a lot of messages from people who are like "I'm really surprised based on the first essay to what happened in the book, I'm surprised. I see what you did, I see the growth". That's still not the perfect book, it was a quick process, but

to me, it feels important that people are reading it in their own groups and talking about their own local culture. Because social media is not the whole world, and so much is happening in our local movement circles, and how at a local level we are integrating these questions of “Well, how do we handle harm? How do we handle conflict when it arises? What are our case studies? Are there people who we have canceled or tried to dispose of? What happened with them? Where are they now? Did they stop causing harm? Did that work? If not, what else could work? Are we putting people in the line of the state, in the eyes of the state?” Just having it as a local conversation.

The thing I’m interested in is a culture of discernment, a culture of mature, generative conflict, and I think that’s so important on this journey towards an abolitionist future is it’s not just a policy change that will make that possible, it has to be an entire cultural shift, and culture shifts because lots of individuals shift.

TFSR: That’s a good way of thinking, cause the internal work, we are sort of taught to think of the internal work as of the work you do for yourself, your goals and your profession, but actually the internal work and this stuff, it turns you into a potential facilitator. I’m not perfect obviously, but I’ve done a lot of work, and the work that I do allows me to enter the situations from a different place, that I can help facilitate them. It’s not because I’m better or to be above them or avoid them completely, cause that’s impossible.

amb: Yes, and I think right now the culture that is being produced is one where people have a lot of fear around making mistakes which limits how honest people are, because if we are being honest, we are making mistakes all the time, and we have fucked-up thoughts all the time. One thing that I appreciate about my best friendships is that I can say something that is wild and my friend will go like “That’s wild, girl, you can’t say that, and let’s examine where that thought came from”. I grew up in a military household, in a capitalist family. I have to know that that shaped me that by the time – I went to an Ivy League University – all those things shaped me. And so as I’m unlearning this, a lot unpack there, and if I’m above that unpacking or I’m hiding from ever making a mistake, then I can’t do that learning. We want to move from a culture where

people are terrified to show up to a culture where people are excited to be able to be like “Here is all of me and I know I have work to do”. And if it’s a culture of belonging, where even if you are fucked up, which you definitely are, you still belong to your species and you still belong to your community. And belonging means you are in a constant state of growth.

I’m rereading bell hooks’ *It’s All About Love*, and she uses this definition of love which is that you have the willful extension of yourself towards the nurturance of another’s growth or your growth. I want love-based communities, to me, that’s what it looks like when you see that someone has fucked up or failed, you are like “I’m going to willfully extend myself towards your growth” so that there is room to come back. That doesn’t mean people are ready for that. I held space for people who were like “I am a flamethrower, I’m in a flamethrower phase of mine, I’m just going to throw flames and everything, and then I was like “OK, this community just needs to set some clear boundaries, so that you know it’s not OK for you to be burning down everybody’s everything.

And that’s a particular move that says “You have a space here when you are ready to come back, and until you are ready to come back, we have to set this boundary. And again, there is no public shaming needed for that, there is no public humiliation, we don’t get pleasure from boundary setting, it’s just a boundary that needs to be set. So that is a kind of cultural shift that to me feels important.

TFSR: That’s an interesting way of putting it, to try and talk about it without shaming. In a relationship, I try to say “If I fuck up, tell me, cause that’s a learning experience for me, it’s an opportunity for me to hear your thoughts and know something else and also not do that again if I can avoid it.” It’s surprising that so many people don’t expect that, you have to normalize that.

amb: Right, because people don’t even realize that this concept of perfectionism is one of the ways capitalism plays out within us and within our community. That there can be some perfect and we can buy our way there or fake our way there or botox-or-plastic-surgery our way there or something. But actually, no one is perfect, people are making mistakes all the time, and I love how you said that, Scott, that a mistake is a place

where an aliveness becomes possible, and learning becomes possible. There is also something really important. Just that piece around boundaries. I want boundaries from other people around me. I want to know what the boundaries are that I need to uphold and honor, even if it hurts. I think about it, in my most intimate relationship, when someone's like "No, adrienne, you can't cross this line". And I'm like "Me? For real?" and them "Oh yeah, let me integrate that". Because it actually isn't personal, that's that don Miguel Ruiz shit. Don't take it personally, when you stop taking it personally, you recognize that people's boundaries are about them, taking care of themselves, and you can love them by upholding those boundaries. Even that is part of learning.

I know a few people who have been through big call-outs and now they are sitting outside of a boundary, outside of a community that they once felt so at home in, and it fucking sucks. And I'm holding the boundary and I'm learning what I need to learn out here in order to be able to make my return. Even if I think there are other ways to do it, fundamentally, what we are trying to do is to develop a culture where we can set boundaries, the boundaries actually create growth and space for actual authentic love to be possible.

TFSR: It's so funny, I always thought about the thing I liked about hanging out with anarchists is that I can leave any situation and people don't need an explanation for it. I'm just like "I'm done", with that ability to... there is not the same kind of expectation to participate beyond your limits.

amb: Because there is a practice of non-attachment, a practice of really being free around other free people, which is very uncomfortable for people who are... Ursula Le Guin wrote about it in *The Dispossessed*, that's I really still identify as an anarchist, is that what it really means to be free is so at odds with how our culture is currently structured. We don't realize all the ways we are weaving ourselves into a self-policed, self-controlled state, and we are making all kinds of agreements – control me, control me, police me, correct me, control me. I've just noticed that in the past year my visibility has gone up to a whole different level, which means that a lot more people think they should have control over me, and really staying free within that context is like "Oh, I'm glad I have

developed the muscles before this visibility, that I am free and I deserve to fuck up and make mistakes and I can handle being in public, and someone is like “Yeah, I fuck up”. I am a human being, visibility doesn’t make me less human, but it is a muscle that I wish more people were thinking about even developing, much less practicing.

TFSR: Yeah, you have your podcast, but also your book model is a process. *We Will Not Cancel Us* is presented not as a finished...

amb: Yeah, it’s a process and I made uncomfortable decisions in it. It would be much easier for me on some level to just pull down the original piece and be like “That’s embarrassing. I made mistakes and people can see that”. But again, if I step outside of it, if I don’t think about it so personally, then I can imagine some young organizer being able to read a book and go back and see the piece and make a connection and be like “Oh, this was what you learned and improved, you still have room to grow, this could be better, sharper, clearer”. And I’m like “Great, you write the next book”. Keep this process going.

I recently got to be in a conversation with Angela Davis which is wild, she is someone who I really look up to, but I also love how I see her handle critique in her life. People come to her and are like “Why are you like this, whatever?” And she’s like “Yes, exactly. Those questions are real questions that I’m in”. That she keeps herself a living, breathing, growing being who is learning and changing all the time. And she’s like “I’m not the same person I was when I was being pursued by the government when I was arrested and all that, when you campaigned to Free Angela Davis, now I’m this Angela Davis and I will continue to grow”. And I’m like “That feels like a great model for those of us who hope to be elder organizers, elder activists, elder radicals. Grace continued to be curious and grow, Angela continues to be curious and grow, and I want to be that. If I have the blessing of being old, I want to be that kind of an elder.

TFSR: I got what you mean, to have a continuation and the inter-generational connection for a diversity of people coming in now, stuff that is happening and just sharing our knowledge and experience and also getting theirs, cause they have a different perspective.

amb: Exactly.

TFSR: I've seen this tactic used when there is a serial abuser in a community, someone who the community doesn't believe can be accountable, they do a general call, flyering, posters whatever. There is also in science fiction like *Woman on the Edge of Time*, there's this idea that eventually, if you keep harming, you get killed, right?

amb: In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, you get one chance. You mess up one time, they give you the tattoo, if you mess up again, they say "We are not doing prisons".

TFSR: I have an organizer friend who says that part of abolition is maybe the community decides that that's it for you, that's the vision of it. I'm not saying that everyone everyone needs to adopt that, but there is also revenge and stuff like that, and I was wondering what your thoughts are on this.

amb: I think it's complicated because I will admit that I have one response – here is my theoretical, philosophical higher-self response, which is that we have to keep building our capacity to hold even the most harmful people, somehow we have to figure it out. But then a part of me is in communities regularly and has had to hold and set those boundaries and has seen that person, I'm like "You literally don't care, you must work for the Feds, you are just... when they are passing out fives of happiness and joy, you miss the entire bucket, you don't know what happened". I've seen this side and I've definitely been in a place where it felt like there was no other option. What I mean inside of this is I am not actually judging what communities have to do to survive and I don't think that any of us can do that for other communities. At least I'm not trying to judge, I'm not trying to be like "You all are weak, cause you need to do whatever". My thing is, there is something around how we feel inside of it. Any of those times when I finally had to be like "Look, they are not willing to stop causing harm, we have to set this boundary", for me, it's been a move of grief and relief. Like we just have to make this call and prayer, cause I know us holding this does not mean that the harm is going to stop and they are going to find someone else to hurt. And at an individual level, this is always a thing, someone has been abusive to you,

do you call the person they start dating next and say “Look, this person is going to fuck you up” or you just like “Well, I hope it goes better for them”? People make different calls about that. The things that helped me through this: one is I do believe that people change. They may not change at the pace that we want them to. I do believe that sometimes a hard boundary is the only way to get people to change. I’ve seen it happen before, I’ve seen it happen to people who had that positional power, that they were abusing and abusing, and finally were like “You don’t have it anymore”. And that’s where they actually were able to turn inward.

So I do believe that hard boundaries sometimes can be the most powerful thing. I do think it’s difficult with the flyers and revenge. I’ve said it before – that person just needs to get their ass kicked. That what needs to happen. I struggle inside of the same complexities. I think it’s the important piece here. What I want us to get good at as a community is feeling like we have as many options as we do actually have and practicing all the options. A lot of what my writing is in this time is let’s not just above all the options that help keep this person in our community or help this person to heal from the harm that clearly has happened to them, or help this scenario play out differently. Let’s not leap over all of that to have the very first thing we do is, say, plaster this person’s face and name and the intimate stories of the worst moments of their lives all over the internet and then anyone can see. For me, that’s the move that I’m trying to keep us from. To be like “First, let’s understand the history of that person. What do we know? How do we protect the survivor from any further harm? Is the person actually open to mediation or any other process? If they are, who are the right people to hold that, we need multiple people to hold that?” And so on and so forth.

Now, I think we need a boundaries school. If I were creating a school that everyone in the movement had to go through for the next year, it’s the pandemic, and we are like “OK, you can’t be on the streets, let’s all go to boundary school, let’s all go to abolition visioning school and figure out when we say ‘Defund the police’, what responsibility are we taking on in that scenario?” I would have us be in some real serious schools. I think Prentice Hemphill could run a boundary school. I have visions on this step. And Sendolo Diaminah could run the school on abolitionist visions and on practicing it at the local level. Andrea Ritchie could do that,

Mia Mingus, Mariame Kaba, there are so many people. There is a lot of learning and political education and practice education that we could do because there is pleasure in revenge, there is pleasure in being able to finally say “This asshole is an asshole”, there is pleasure in all those things. But I think it’s a temporary pleasure that doesn’t actually change the conditions that will lead to more harm happening. I want us to get the pleasure mostly from healing and knowing that we have a chance from the conditions that the harm will not happen anymore.

TFSR: That’s a really good way of putting it. I was thinking about glorifying Fanon sort of violence that cleanses things. Going back to Butler, she explores violence in terms of community, but she holds it in complexity. She doesn’t endorse it, she shows detriments to it.

amb: Yeah, and there is something fascinating. In one of my favorite explorations that she has, which is *The Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind*, those are two books inside the *Patternist* series, there is this character Doro, who is a straight-up body snatcher. I remember doing a series of reading groups around this where eventually, a whole huge interconnected network has to take him out because he just cannot stop causing harm. He literally can’t survive if he stops causing harm. But I was sitting in one of the reading groups one time, and someone turned to me and was like “Did she ever try to heal him?” The lead character is one of the most amazing outstanding healers that’s ever existed. And the person said, “Did she ever try to heal him?” I went back and read the book and I couldn’t really see it, cause she tried to argue, she tried to demand, she tried to shame, to run away, she tried a million things to hold him accountable and ask for him to change, but there is not really a moment that she laid her hands on him the way she did with others, and reached into that place where he was a child, his entire family had been killed, and this was the strategy that emerged for him to survive. I always come back to that, it moves me to tears each time, cause if we look at each person causing harm as a child who has been harmed, it changes the conversation, and I think it can change what’s possible. I keep wanting to make this distinction, but that to me is not the work of the person surviving their harm, for me as someone who had been and is being abused, it’s not my job to be like “Oh, I can see the child in you”. But I think in the community, we need to grow that capacity. We have to help,

to figure out getting this person to therapy. That might be the mandate. I do feel there are things like that, like if you want to be here, we have to know you are getting support, if you want to be here, we have to see this commitment to your healing. And that would be a sophisticated future if that was happening.

TFSR: That's a really good point. I was really intrigued in the book about this idea of how we feed into surveillance and sort of a counter-surveillance. I just wanted to hear more about that idea. Is it airing dirty laundry, is it leaks that get turned against us? Again, it's like, I'm thinking COINTELPRO and we are bringing all this stuff back to black queer organizers who use call-outs as self-defense. How do you conceive this kind of surveillance?

amb: I think it's an interesting conversation and it's part of why I was really excited to have Malkia write the afterword because Malkia grew up as a child of a Black Panther who has really done a lot of scholarship around COINTELPRO and surveillance and who has been fighting around facial recognition and surveillance and all these things. I feel I learned a lot about what Malkia thinks about these things. I wanted to bring this conversation into the larger conversation that we are having which is I don't think we've ever healed from COINTELPRO and I don't think we've ever really figured it out. There are people who are doing really interesting work around how do we relate to living in a completely overwhelming surveillance state, how do we relate to the fact that infiltration is very common and expected. And we can see the patterns of it play out, that is very hard at an interpersonal level to ever know who you can trust and who you can't trust.

I just saw a screening of 'Judas and the Black Messiah' which talks about the infiltration of Fred Hampton in the Black Panthers in Chicago, and it's just devastating to know that people show up inside movement spaces with the intention to cause dissent, harm, and to keep us from justice and liberation. But that is definitely happening. And at meetings, I'm like "Hmm, I think that person is here for the wrong reasons. My response to this is mostly like "Let's be overwhelmingly on point with what it is we are up to and hope that we sway them and they become a turncoat to the government, whatever. But that is very unrealistic. And much more

realistic, since we have to be thinking how are we building trust with each other...For me, it's all of the above, that is airing the dirty laundry piece that harms us mostly in the eyes of our opposition. They are like "Hey, they don't actually have unity and solidarity, they are everyone at each other's necks. And even if it's true, I don't think it serves us to have that be public and transparent. And I don't think it feeds to generative conflict, if the move is that we put people on blast rather than sitting down and having a face-to-face conversation, I'm concerned about that. Zoom, face-to-face, whatever it is.

But then I also think there is something around how we isolate people. If we are taking someone and we are like "This person caused harm in our community" and we are putting that on the internet, then that person is now isolated out of the community and if someone who is surveilling and is looking for like "Who could we turn into an infiltrator, who could we reach in those ways, who could we take out, who could we disappear". To me, it's saying "Here are our weakest links, here are the weakest points of our movement. Come get us". And I think right now, because the movement has grown so fast and because social media is such a bizarre space where people think they have a relationship with people they never met, they don't know anything about, they don't have any sense of an actual history for, we are in a really endangered species' zone, when it comes to our movement work right now. That was a big impetus for the writing that I did, cause I was being asked to do these call-outs, and then I would go look who was asking me to do this call-out, it was almost people I didn't know and there was nothing to show me that this person's ever done any other community work. I can see that they've done other call-outs, but I don't see anything like "Here is what they've built".

I said this in many places: I'm much more moved by people who are creating, building, growing the movement, rather than people who are like "My job is to destroy this institute or organization, or turn down this activist, whatever". That's not organizing work. And we definitely have people in movement right now where I'm like "They may not be on the State's payroll, but they might as well be based on how they spend their time, how impactful is it growing efforts of actually being able to advance a united front, something that is complex organizing strategy. So I just think we have to be more mindful around it. To me, even if you don't

agree with me, even if you are just like “Fuck that, it’s more important to be able to call these people out”, I’m like “That’s fine”. And at all times, let’s not pretend we didn’t live through COINTELPRO and not pretend that infiltration and subterfuge and undermining and sabotaging our efforts is not a possibility for what’s happening right now. To me, it’s not learning from our history and be able to transform the future, which is what our job is.

TFSR: That’s such an important point. That we can be serving the state in ways that are unintentional and holding up a purity...

amb: If we are already embedded in philanthropy, we already have so many compromises. We can’t also be throwing our people into those hands.

TFSR: Exactly, we need to accept that we are not pure and not expect other people to be pure. That was a really helpful way of way of packaging it, thank you.

amb: Thank you for this conversation. You have really good questions and I hope that it serves us all.

TFSR: Thanks for making the time.



The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

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