The Practices We Need: #MeToo and Transformative Justice

Interview by Autumn Brown and adrienne maree brown
How to Survive the End of the World, November 2018

adrienne maree brown: *The #MeToo movement has swollen and become this massive place where a lot of people are calling for transformative justice and community accountability processes, and I'm wondering how you see it.*

Mariame Kaba: Yeah, I have been thinking a lot about #MeToo and thinking, What if we look at it as something that is not done to "bad people?" What if it is actually a way to understand the ways that various forms of violence actually shape our lives? If we could see it as a way to understand how deeply enmeshed we are in the very systems that we're organizing to transform, then I feel like it's a movement that will allow us to move a step toward transformation and more justice. The real truth of the matter is that when you think about #MeToo and you think about sexual violence, these things don't live outside of us. They really don't. They are systems that live within us, that manifest outside of us. If we don't really take that seriously, I don't think we're going to make a dent in this problem.

The fact that sexual violence is so incredibly pervasive should tell us that it's not a story of individual monsters. We have got to think about this in a more complex way if we're really going to uproot forms of sexual violence.

Autumn Brown: *If you could, say more about what you mean by "these systems live inside us as well as outside of us."*

Kaba: This is something I take from Morgan Bassichis, who was part

of Oakland-based Community United Against Violence. Morgan had written that basically the very systems that we're working to dismantle live inside us. And that really struck me when I first read it. It forced me to acknowledge my own complicity in forms of violence that I may not even personally be perpetrating in an intentional way. It also calmed me down to some extent. When you're always in a position of seeing everything as outside of you, then you're always on the outside looking in, which isn't necessarily the best way to address forms of violence. We have to do both. We have to be on the outside looking in but also on the inside looking out.

Brown: *When and where in your trajectory in this work did you really decide to start focusing on working with those who have caused harm. And how did that happen for you?*

Kaba: I've always worked more with people who have been harmed than have caused harm. My work was rooted in supporting survivors, mainly because I myself am one. And my orientation has always been toward addressing harm, wherever it is. However I can intervene in a way that's supportive, that's really what I care about. It didn't really matter whether it was the person who caused harm or the person who has experienced harm—it's the harm that I'm interested in transforming.

Over the years more people started approaching me. Initially I got called into this work by happenstance. A friend of mine was sexually assaulted in the early 2000s by somebody else that we knew in common. And I was called in to help and to support her through that process. I didn't ask to do this. And still, I'm not paid to do this kind of work. I facilitate only within my communities. So it became something where it was like, "Oh, I'm going to try to step in and support these folks who I know. And I don't want the harm to compound. And clearly people are in pain. And what can I help do to support that?"

I'm not trained as a social worker or a psychologist or anything like that. It was really like, "This is happening in my community, people are in pain, there's harm, what can we do." About fifteen years ago people started asking me to come and support them. Come and help. People who caused harm reached out and said, "This has occurred, and I'm trying to figure out what to do." That's how that happened. And then in

the last few years a couple of processes that I facilitated got known by other people. And through that more people who have caused harm approached me. Or people who knew people who had caused harm would approach me to support them in taking accountability for their actions.

Note that I said support them in taking accountability for their actions. I'm not able to actually force anybody into taking accountability. It has to be a voluntary process through which somebody decides to do that. You can never actually make anybody accountable. People have to be accountable. I want to be very explicit about that. A lot of the frustration that I hear from people who think about transformative justice or community accountability is really people who want to punish people. I totally understand that they want punishment. It's a normal human reaction within a society that is so incredibly punitive. How do you live outside that?

Remember again, the systems live within us. The punishment mindset is very hard to get out of. And it's normal and healthy often to want vengeance against people for causing you great harm. That's not going to get addressed in an accountability process. If you are the one who is rushing after that and that's really what you're seeking, an accountability process really would not help. You're always going to be feeling as though it's "not working" because it's not doing the thing that you really would like.

And I really want to make people understand that. Not everything should be in an accountability process. Not everything can be resolved in an accountability process. Accountability processes often feel terrible to the people while they're in it. It's not a healing process. It might put you on the road toward your own personal healing.

Brown: *This is exactly where we're heading. This is exactly what we want to get into. The experience I have as someone who is trying to mediate things is that people go through it, they go through one time, the process doesn't work the way they want it to. They don't feel like we deeply returned to a place of love that we had never reached in the first place: we're totally healed, it's all clear. We don't get that. And then people are like, "Well, transformative justice doesn't work. Fuck this process, I'm not going to do it." . . . what are some of the other things that make it fail, and then, conversely, what are some of the things that make it succeed?*

Kabat While the person has to be willing to at least begin a process of taking accountability for their actions, they don't need to necessarily be at the point where they've admitted harm. I think this is very important. Because what is the process for? It's to get people to understand how they've harmed people. It's to get them to sit with this harm that happened to this person and to be like, "Oh my god, I thought I was doing this right thing, and here's this situation, and this is the person's experience." So I think often people think before we can even start a process people have to put out a statement. Well, no, the statement process writing thing might be part of the accountability process, but it's not necessarily necessary for the beginning of it, in order to initiate it. So that's very important for people to understand off the bat.

I want to say something also briefly about the concept of success and failure. In trainings that I do with my good friend Shira Hassan we read a very short piece that was written by Bench Ansfield and Jenna Peters-Golden about getting seduced by the idea of success and failure within processes, published in in *Makeshift,* a feminist magazine. And it's really helpful. Failure and mistakes are part of a process. That feels counterintuitive because when people are in pain and have been harmed, you think you have to be perfect in order to protect that person from further harm. And what I always tell people is that as a survivor and as somebody who has been around survivors my entire life in my community, we are actually not fragile beings. We are incredibly, incredibly pragmatic. And very resilient. Because we've survived a lot of bullshit.

And so going into processes, if you go into it with an idea that the person you're working with is a fragile China doll who is going to crack under any pressure, you can't make a mistake—well, then you're already set up for failure, in the sense of potential catastrophic hurt. Start off with the notion that our process allows for survivors to reclaim agency. That's what you're working toward. The binary of success/failure, get rid of that. That's important, number one.

Number two, you have to know the goals of the process. A third thing is knowing whether or not you're the right person to actually get into this. Do you have the support system that will help you navigate this? Are you facilitating this by yourself? Do you have a team of peo-

ple? How are you going to end this process? Because it should not be something that goes on for ninety years. There should be an end to it. How will you know it is over? Having goals will help you in that. So those are all very critical important things to have at the outset or to be working out through the process. I think the failure parts or the places that will ensure ineffectiveness are not knowing whether or not you're the right person to hold this.

It's not having any goals. It's the other side of the thing I just said are the ingredients that you need for a strong process. It's really not being clear with people about what the wants and needs are. What do people really want? And you can't get—people cannot get all their wants met in a process.

Brown: *Just as a follow-up to that, are there processes that you're like, "I feel like I have to walk away from this"? And are there processes that you've heard that you're like, "Oh, I know what to offer." Do you only respond if people are like, "Come help," or are there things where you're like, "Hey, I see y'all over there?"*

Kaba: I never seek out any processes. Ever. It's not a job for me. It's not a way of sustenance. It's a political commitment that I make because I'm in community with people who aren't going to avail themselves of the systems that currently exist for multiple reasons. And it also fits within my larger political commitment to PIC abolition. That is why I'm engaged. I never seek out any processes; people come to me. Frankly much more than I can even offer any support around. But I'm very good about boundaries. I'm very good about confining myself to what I really think I can offer. I'm one person. There's no way I can have integrity and give what needs to be done to everything if I'm just all over the place. I really focus on that. And I always tell people where I stand. And sometimes I can try to help people figure out whether a process is possible, so I might do that. So those are the kinds of things I would do.

Brown: *And what I hear in what you're describing is the difference between intervention versus support. Right. That in our movement spaces we do need those kinds of interventions of, "Hey, y'all, take this offline." This is not the way that we're going to get healing or accountability. But I'm hearing the difference between those kinds of interventions versus what level of commit-*

ment is required in order to be a part of a sustained process. . . . I personally really struggle with this question of what is the relationship between healing and accountability? Especially coming out of a healing justice framework in terms of my movement background.

Kaba: Yes, this is a great question. I'm going to backtrack one second to the question of intervention versus support. I also think we need to make distinctions between conflict resolution and accountability processes. I think that's right. And I think I'm not an expert in conflict resolution, actually. I've never taken a class. I don't know how to—that's not the work I do. I help some people facilitate processes of accountability, which is different. And so I think sometimes we're all over the place in our language. But that also leads to people thinking they're doing everything, and then they're doing nothing. I think that's important to keep in mind.

So, jumping to the question that you actually asked about healing, I think it's such an important question. I've come to my understanding of this through being part of processes. Initially I thought that these processes were intended for healing. But it turned out that I wasn't actually asking the people involved what their needs and wants were. And for many people it was not actually healing. They were not trying—their needs were not to heal within this particular space. Their needs were to have an acknowledgement of the harm that occurred, to insist that this person never do this again, to address issues around trust and figuring out how to trust people again. It was self-agency and self-accountability. There was a list of things. And healing almost never came up. So that sounds a bit counterintuitive. But I realized later on why that was. And it was because people were actually understanding that to heal, they needed a different kind of space to be in.

They were initially coming to me at a point where it was high amounts of pain, suffering, lots of emotions happening. So much stuff happening that healing wasn't even in their head at the moment. It was like, "I'm just trying to maintain." This is going to help me get to the point where I can feel like I can be in my apartment by myself again. I need people around me to do that, so how am I going to get my friends on board with coming and visiting me every week? Things like that were what was needed to get on the path toward their own very long journey

toward a healing space. But it wasn't a destination within the process itself. And that helped me figure out later on when people would say, "I didn't get healing," I was like, "Oh, okay." I was hearing other people say, "The process was really traumatic for me. It brought up all this stuff for me. It was painful for me. It was whatever." And people were like, "Oh, that meant that it was ineffective and that it was failing." And I was like actually in hearing how people were talking about that, I was like, "Actually this process sounds like it was doing exactly what was needed to get this person, a year down the road, toward their own healing." Figuring out what that would look like. I'm not saying that you won't necessarily get what you need to heal in a process. I'm just saying that for many, many times, processes feel terrible. Because the harm is so central. And if you're engaged in the process with the person who harmed you—my god. It's bringing up so much stuff that if you're constantly trying to grab at the healing, you're not in the harm, processing that. You're outside looking for that destination that's somewhere down the road. But no, actually we have to be right here right now, handling all that. The fear, the anger, the vengeance feelings, the back and forth sliding against one day you want them dead, the next day you're okay. We just have to be here holding this right now. So that's what I mean by it's not—often feels like it's not—a healing space. Because healed is not a destination. You're just always in process. So that's what I'm talking about. Doesn't mean that what you experience can't help toward that healing. Of course, it does in its best way, in its best iteration. But while you're in it, it often does not feel that way at all.

Brown: *I'm just wondering if you can talk about how doing this work has been transformational for you and how it's—if and how—it's changed your relationship to your own history.*

Kaba: Yes. Oh my gosh. Thank you for that question. Because I really wouldn't be doing this only as a political project if it wasn't also transforming me in the process of doing this work with other people. My friend Danielle Sered has said and written this thing that really made a difference for me. She's lovely and runs this organization here in New York called Common Justice, which people should look up for multiple reasons. But she wrote a thing that stuck with me, which was that

"no one enters violence for the first time by committing it." No one enters violence for the first time by committing it. And it just—I was like—Jesus Christ. If that's true, then all this shit that we talk about, these binaries about victims and perpetrators—that explodes it all.

At heart it's the harm that exists that has motivated and transformed us and allowed us to continue, and if we're not intervened with, will keep harming people in bigger and bigger ways. When we know we're all going to harm each other, it's a matter of degrees.

So being in this work with people has helped to make what Sered said come to life for me in a way that just undergirds my values and my beliefs. In real, real ways. The second thing that I've learned about myself is how much I realize that punishment does not work. It does not work. If it actually did what people wanted, we'd be in a whole different place.

Not only is it true that punishment doesn't work, but also when you prioritize punishment it means that patriarchy remains firmly in place. And if I am at my core interested in dismantling systems of oppression, I have got to get rid of punishment. I have got to do it. But I want accountability. I want people to take responsibility. I want that internal resource that allows you to take responsibility for harms that you commit against yourself and other people. I want that to be a central part of how we interact with each other. Because while I don't believe in punishment, I believe in consequences for actions that are done to harm other people. I do. I think boundaries are important. I think all these things are really important. But with punishment at the center of everything we haven't been able to really address the other stuff that needs to happen. Because people fucking need to—they need to take accountability when they harm people.

brown: *Can I just ask a quick follow-up to that? Can you just give for our listeners and for us an example of a punishment versus a consequence?*

Kaba: Yes. Sure. Punishment means inflicting cruelty and suffering on people. When you are expecting consequences, those can be unpleasant and uncomfortable. But they are not suffering and inflicting pain on people and you want them to suffer as a result. That is different. And what I mean by that is, for example, powerful people stepping down

from their jobs are consequences, not punishments. Why? Because we should have boundaries. And because shit that you did was wrong, and you having power is a privilege. That means we can take that away from you. You don't have power anymore. But if we were punishing you, we would make it so that you could never make a living again in any context, at any point. That's inflicting cruelty, suffering, and making it so that people cannot actually live a life. They can't access the basic things to make life livable.

If you are doing that to somebody, you're punishing them. If you are asking somebody to move to another place because they caused harm to the people living there: consequence. If you're making it so that person can never have housing: punishment. Okay, so you have to just be able to see the difference between inflicting cruelty, pain, and suffering and being uncomfortable and losing some privileges—these are not the same things.