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Monica Trinidad:

Hey everyone, thanks for tuning in to the Lit Review podcast, I'm one of your co-hosts, Monica Trinidad, and today we're talking with the one and only Shira Hassan! When I think about Shira, I actually think of her as a creative or a cultural worker, even though I know she identifies as a facilitator and a coach, or a prison abolitionist coach! But the way that Shira embodies creating abolitionist futures in her work is so artistic to me. I mean, Shira carves out spaces for people to get together and practice community accountability and restorative justice processes without involving the police or the state or social services.

And Shira's been doing transformative and healing justice work for over 25 years and a lot of the work she's done might not be viewed by some as abolitionist work or how many of us use abolitionist as a political identity today, but it truly always has been abolitionist work and it was actually through her experiences in working with young people of color in the sex trade and street economies in Chicago where they didn't have a choice of working within state systems without fear of being criminalized themselves or further harmed in the process. So, you know, marginalized people have just always created alternative cultures and systems because we have to, right, in order to survive.

But yeah, you know Shira talked about this great example many times, where she mentions these bad date sheets that women in the sex trade, specifically trans women of color, would create. And they were these lists of names and descriptions of people that they had bad encounters with, and they'd pass these xeroxed lists around in their community to protect each other. And I mean that's abolitionist work, right, and I think what Shira is doing now, with Just Practice, is just generously offering her experiences and her knowledge to support our movements in even more

experimentation and infrastructure building, because so many of us need help in creating healing-centered and trauma-informed orgs for sustainability at the very least.

I don't know if you were there or not, Page, but I remember attending a workshop that was co-led by Shira in 2016 in Chicago, it was a Community Accountability 101 workshop and the room was just packed with so many brilliant and wonderful people that we are still in community with today, and I just remember having pages of my notebook filled with notes and I wish I could find it now, but I just remember being really fascinated by the power that people can create when they experiment and solve issues without state intervention. Do you know what workshop I'm talking about?

Page May:

Yeah, I don't know if it was the same workshop, but I have a very strong memory of her facilitating a space where I learned a lot, it was really transformative, and I learned a lot about the ways that the 90's in particular, was this moment where in the name of feminism using airquotes, the Prison-Industrial Complex really spread, and all the ways that the movement to end domestic violence has led to so much of the mass incarceration and things that we have to tear down now. And so I just remember not only that history as being really interesting but the warning that it was giving of how important it is that we're thinking with an abolitionist strategy as we're building our campaigns and our movements. And then beyond that though, Shira is just this glam, beautiful, femme, badass, vintage, like, just so freaking cool, I've just always admired her for her mind and her style and her kindness and generosity. She's just so wonderful and it's such a blessing that we got to talk to her about a book that she loves, and the ways that it has shaped her work and her thinking.

And the book that we are talking about today is called *Kindling* which is by Aurora Levins Morales. And this is a book that really focuses on healing justice and it uses – it's composed through a series of essays and has a lot of personal narrative.

There were two things though that at the time were really striking me and that I've noticed myself reflecting on since this conversation. And the first is, I think this interview really pushed my thinking on what healing justice is, and I loved how she was connecting it to environmental justice and there was this cool historical reference that she makes to organizers after Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita. That was really helpful for me. And then also, there's this one part, and it's a quote that I pulled from the transcript that I'll share with you all now, where she talks about this book and how the author, Aurora Morales, is talking about “the ways that our experience living in rape culture interrupts our ability to connect with our body and how that is a truth that we don't often get to. We know it intellectually”, Shira said, “but we don't really know what it means to have and hold bodies that violence is projected onto every single day and that I think is real for every single body.” And I think that really gives you a preview of what this

episode has to offer and some of the things we're going to be talking about. What about you, Monica? What did you think?

Monica Trinidad:

Whew that quote. I mean, yes everything Shira spoke about in how we relate to our bodies within a capitalist, ableist society was both just devastating and also hope giving. There's complexity to it. And also before I share my thoughts on this conversation, I do want to give folks a quick content warning, there will be mentions of sexual abuse and violence in this episode so please listen with care or listen at another time when the timing feels right.

But yes, Shira definitely gave a really solid breakdown of not only what healing justice is, but what it can look like as part of an organizing campaign. Like what you were saying, Page. I thought that was really cool. And honestly, I think the part I'm currently resonating with the most was when Shira mentioned the early days of the pandemic, when everything was shut down and everyone was quarantining, and how it just finally felt like the world was moving at the same pace as she was, it was a moment where she said she felt in sync with the people around her. And if I had a quarter for the amount of times I told people that I wish we were collectively moving that slow again, I would be rich. But Shira also said she knew that the minute the world went back to quote unquote normal, that the rest of us would not only be moving at that same pace but possibly even slower because of the impacts of COVID. And that is 100% factual and we're not talking about it enough in our movement spaces. So Shira describes *Kindling* as an "indictment of ableism" which I think is the exact kind of book we need to be reading and talking about right now as so many of us are just grappling with how we come out of this pandemic without leaving any body behind, including our own.

So a little bit about Shira before we move into this episode. As I mentioned earlier, Shira is the founder of Just Practice, which is a capacity-building project for organizations and community members, activists, leaders working at the intersections of transformative justice, harm reduction, and collective liberation. And she is also the former Executive Director of the Young Women's Empowerment Project, which was a grassroots movement building project led by and for young people of color that had current or former experience in the sex trade and street economies between early 2000 until they closed their doors in 2013. Shira has dedicated her life's work to harm reduction and prison abolition, and has been working on community accountability for nearly 25 years. And with that, here is our episode with Shira Hassan talking about *Kindling* by Aurora Levins Morales.

[INTRO STARTS]

[Sound of book pages turning, soft instrumental music]

Monica: You're listening to the Lit Review Podcast.

Page: We're your hosts, Page May and Monica Trinidad.

[Musical hip hop beat playing in background from "Chicago" by David Ellis]

Mariame Kaba voiceover: *"I think it's essential for people to learn together in order to be able to understand what we're up against."*

Protesters Chanting: *"CPD, shut it down! New Jim Crow, shut it down!" [chanting] "I said No Cop Academy, 95 mil for community!"*

Page voiceover: *"We must disrupt, we must disobey, we must agitate, we must escalate, we must break, we must create, we must abolish, we must transform -"*

Young person voiceover: *"I remember, she was shot by my house -"*

Mariame voiceover: *"In sharing our ideas, we're stronger."*

[Music Lyrics] "Welcome to Chicago, this is home for most. This is the home of the wealthy, making cameos. This is the house of the heartless, the home of the cold. Man, my dog gets more acknowledgement than homeless folks. This is a house, a generation filled in Audy homes..."

[Music Fades]

[INTRO ENDS]

Monica Trinidad:

Hi everybody, we're here again with another episode of The Lit Review podcast. Today we're sitting here virtually with Shira Hassan. And so Shira, we've been in community for quite a while now, in Chicago, and then also just in the larger general community across the country. And when I think of people in my life that I'm like, what would so and so do? I think of people like you, I think of people like Mariame [Kaba], I think of people like Mia Mingus. I just think of so many people and you're one of those people. So I just wanted to say that really quickly before we get started. You're someone I admire and look to for just brilliant analysis and care when it comes to analysis. So thank you so much for being with us today. How are you?

Shira Hassan:

I'm well, thank you. I'm hanging in there pandemic-style.

Monica Trinidad:

Totally. So before we jump into the book you'll be talking about today, we want to give you a chance to just say a little bit about who you are, what you do, and why you do it.

Shira Hassan:

I mean, the why I do it when I saw the questions in advance, I was like, that's the part, right? The why, because the why is like just waking up every day and wanting us all to be a little freer, it guides all the actions and projects that I do. I think that people probably know me in two different ways. One is they know me through work that I've done in my community, which is queer and trans, Black and brown, people in the sex trade and street economy, usually with young people, always in harm reduction.

And then I think overtime, because that work led to work around transformative justice and healing justice, and prison abolition, and because Young Women's Empowerment Project, which was a project that was led by and for Black and brown, young people in the sex trade and street economy, became one of the first, if not the first organization of people with life experience in the sex trade to be vocally prison abolitionists. I think people have started to think of me more as someone who works on community accountability and ending violence, and trying to work towards a world where violence is unimaginable.

Page May:

Do you remember where you were at when you first read *Kindling* by Aurora Levins Morales? And then also, why did you choose to talk about it with us today?

Shira Hassan:

Yeah. It's a little circuitous. So the first book that I read by Aurora was *Medicine Stories* and *Medicine Stories* completely changed me. And I really encourage people to pick up *Medicine Stories*. And one of the reasons why I was drawn to *Medicine Stories*, it was one of those books that was passed between people in my world. And I slept with it under my pillow for probably a year. And I was drawn to it not only because of the stories that she was telling, but also because of who she was telling the stories. I'm always looking for other disabled people, but also other people of mixed ancestry who also are mixed with Ashkenazi Jewish, there's mythology that Ashkenazi's are white. And there's also mythology that you can, if you're Jewish, you're no other, you're not mixed, you're only one thing.

And so she was proudly Latinx, proudly Puerto Rican and Jewish mixed ancestry of this amazing Communist family. And so I was like, these are the stories I want to hear all the time. So that book fundamentally changed me. And then, I guess maybe 10 or 12 years later, I'm not sure of the timeline exactly she released, *Kindling*. And at that time I was a part of Young Women's Empowerment Project. And we were making the decision to sunset the organization because of the anti-trafficking laws. And, *Kindling* is one of the first books, and possibly one of the only books that I know of, that talks about healing justice really explicitly. And the Young Women's Empowerment Project was on the forefront of the healing justice movement. And so Aurora Levins Morales and Cara Page gave us the language and the political framing for healing justice.

And YWEP has always done so much work with Cara [Page] who was helping us figure out if we were sunsetting, right, as Aurora was releasing *Kindling*. It got me at the exact right moment at the exact right time. The other thing about Aurora's history that always drew me to this is, is that, one of the other things that was really unique about the organizing at Young Women's Empower Project is that we had, we were a multi-gendered project that had multiple experiences of the sex trade.

So we had an enormous diversity of voices inside our project, around our experiences of both force, fraud, coercion, trafficking and some people who are self-employed, who are involved in survival sex, who own their own businesses. And because we had this enormous cross-section of voices, we had so much incredible richness in the way that we thought about the sex trade. And we thought about it so differently than most people. And Aurora also thinks about it differently because of her experience being trafficked as a young person, and also holding the complexity of people's body autonomy as adults, and having the sort of Communist framing of class, and race, and where, how we all become involved in self-preservation and commodification.

Monica Trinidad:

Yeah. You mentioned Aurora's really incredible Communist family, and I also want to give a shout out to Ricardo, her brother, who is just a really prolific movement artist that I've looked to for decades. I mean, I took 100's, maybe 1,000's of posters that Ricardo has created. And so, yeah, shout out to Ricardo if you're listening. So Aurora's book *Kindling* is a book about body and specifically her experiences with her body, and body as a site of pleasure, and of pain, and of political struggle. Can you talk a little bit about how she shapes her narrative within this book *Kindling* and what is this book exploring deeply?

Shira Hassan:

Yeah. I mean, I think what *Kindling* does that very few books do is talk about the way our bodies become sites of, and the expression of, so many things. And so I've often thought about people in the sex trade and people who do sex work, like pretty much everyone that I know and love, including myself, that our bodies are a unique place to think about the impact of misogyny, racism and capitalism all at once. And then when you add layers of sexual trauma, which don't necessarily come from the sex trade, they can, but when you add layers of sexual trauma and then you add layers of disability, and then you add a classed analysis, this is one of the few books that breaks all of that down.

And the journey from the individual experience to the collective experience, to her healing process, back to the sort of analysis around the larger framing of healthcare and what health means, and what care means, in the U.S, is something that we get at in sort of political debatey gobbly gook, but we don't get at, in such a personal way. And one of the things that she's

amazing at is, there's parts of the book that are actually her journal, her recovery journal from her stroke, her healing journal from a trip that she takes to Cuba to become well in one of the most renowned healing centers that treats people for free from many places. And so you really follow her individual journey. And then she does a beautiful job of contextualizing that inside rape culture, inside capitalism, inside historical generational trauma, inside really intense racist structures and how all of that plays out on her body, in her body, with her body, and the way that she makes it actually about all of our bodies is something that you just don't get to experience that much.

Page May:

Why are these things that we don't talk about more? And also just more of, can you tell us more about what are these patterns of individual and collective body stories or experiences that are sort of lifted up? Can you say more about what this actually looks like and what shared in this book?

Shira Hassan:

Yeah. I mean, thank you so much for that thinking. So, first I want to talk about sort of the larger framing of healing justice and how that connects back to prison abolition. And I also want to talk about the individual experience. And so I think that when capitalism makes our bodies sole purpose to produce and earn, that we have to disassociate in order to be alive in the world. And I think that because disability and disability justice has to counter a capitalist narrative, because our bodies have to exist as whole, as separate from what we can provide and produce.

It invites all of us to rethink how our bodies can be and how we can be well in our bodies even when we're disabled. So I have seven different autoimmune disorders. And two of which changed my life expectancy, and two of which change my daily functioning every day. So those two things are rheumatoid arthritis and I have something that's like borderline lupus, which probably people who are listening, some of you may be familiar with, it's something that affects a lot of women of color and it happens because they can't quite diagnose it as lupus because you have so many other things wrong with you, that they can't quite trace and figure out what it is. So they call it borderline lupus. And I also have fibromyalgia, which for many years wasn't even acknowledged by the medical system.

And I think that the way that we are, and I know that the content of this podcast may be triggering for some people, because I am going to be talking a lot about sexual violence and also disability, and bodies. But the ways that our experience living in rape culture interrupts our ability to connect with our body is something that is a truth that we don't often get to. We know it intellectually, but we don't really understand what it means to hold and have bodies that violence is projected onto every single day. And that I think is real for every single body.

And so I think all of that really takes us out of our bodies. And on top of it, I feel like there is this reality, this imperative that we have to get us more free. And so it isn't about necessarily stopping working and in some cases we have to work as hard as we can all of the time. And for me that has looked like doing it from bed, right? Like I have literally worked from bed for months at a time. And Aurora talks about having worked from bed for years at a time. Right? And so there's a weaving of this that feels really important that I think we often don't do consciously and publicly, except in disability community, where we do it all the time because we have to. I think able-bodied people often... Part of the privilege of being able bodied is not thinking about your body.

Shira

Okay. So then I want to go back to healing justice and how that connects to prison abolition. And so the thing about healing justice, healing justice is probably one of the most misunderstood pieces of our movement right now. I would argue that transformative justice is unbelievably misunderstood as well, but healing justice people are completely flummoxed. And healing justice is not actually about self-care, healing justice is not actually about a massage. Healing justice is based on five core pieces. It's based on environmental justice, it's based on transformative justice, prison abolition and community accountability. It's based on reproductive justice. It's based on harm reduction. And it is rooted in... The way that healing justice formed is as an intentional confrontation with the State.

And it grew through healers as organizers who were responding to the impact of hurricanes, Rita and Katrina and the south. It's specifically a Black women's lineage that was confronting the outlying of midwifery, that was confronting the multiple systemic impact of environmental racism that exists to confront all of these things from an organizing perspective. It is part of why Aurora's book is so important, is because it helps people weave together how all of this lives in one person's body and why it's part of our imperative to operate and use this as a framework, as a lens, as a value system, as we continue to challenge and confront the state. And so, one of the things that she does, for example, is track... She's chemically injured. And so she has a variety of what people call chemical sensitivities.

And for her it gets traced back to industrial farming and being exposed to chemicals through industrial farming. And the way that that affects her liver and the way that that ultimately leads to migraines and a stroke is part of this broader understanding that we need to have about how trauma, how sexual violence, how illness can come together in one person's body. And that, that is a systemic design. We are kindling and that's what she's talking about in the book.

She has epilepsy. And one of the ways that scientists study epilepsy is to create it in laboratory animals. And they do it through a process called kindling. And so they create epilepsy in animals in order to study how epilepsy works in the body. And so the pesticides that they use to create

epilepsy are the ones that she was exposed to and were the same ones that were actually developed by Nazis, that were then repurposed for commercial use, after World War II ended. And so she names the book *Kindling* because there's a way in which that's what we've all become.

Monica Trinidad:

Wow! That's intense. One of our questions was to ask about what the title meant and it's both of you also sharing just your stories about your bodies and, yeah, your lived experiences with your bodies also makes, calls me to share how, for a while I was so sick and physically just, I had a lot of physical pain, and I went to... This was in 2013, I kept the journal and I saw 30 doctors to just figure out what was going on and did several testings. And, at the end it was like, oh, you have... Well, literally they said, "We can't figure out what you have. So we're going to say you have fibromyalgia and here are some antidepressants."

But I think it, it really brought out for me how much our bodies are harmed and physically impacted by oppressions so much, and how much we hold that in our bodies, but we're not... So much has also been taken away from us and how we hold that grief. Right? And what was intentionally taken away from us as a mode of repression and as a mode of keeping us down. And so I think about that a lot. And I think about how you named how so much of this is systemic, it's a systemic impact and how yet our... We know this in our broader movements, not... I mean, disability justice work talks about it all the time, our larger movements often neglect to talk about this or address this in ways that feel important. And I'm wondering what my question is, but I think, why is this? Does Aurora touch on ableism in movement spaces in this book or is she just mostly focusing on telling her narrative and telling her story for disability justice community and for her own healing process?

Shira Hassan:

Yeah. I'm sorry that that happened to you and it's happened to so many people that I know. And you're not alone in that experience, especially in the diagnosis of fibromyalgia. It's so painful. I think that she doesn't create a pushback on ableism explicitly in word for word, but the book itself is an indictment of ableism, and of the ways in which we particularly ignore chemical injury and the ways in which we ignore the intersection of sexual abuse, sexual trauma, and disability. I think that for years in my community, that link has been so evident. Those of us who survived childhood sexual abuse, so many of us have disabilities. I'm not going to try to say that it's causal, but I will say that there's lots of... Even sort of the most mainstream world knows that there's a relationship between those things.

Page May:

This is just really beautiful and like full, like you're saying sentences that have 80,000,000 million things from them that I can tell I'm going to wish I'd asked more follow-up questions

about after. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit more about the healing that Aurora did find, and it sounds like Cuba is a part of that. And just, I'm thinking about this last year, that of COVID and like how in the U.S, the healthcare system, I think was under a different kind of criticism that I have seen. But it's I don't like the... It's hard for me to vision. Right? What would it mean, to, yeah, not have to go to 30 doctors and still not have answers? And what would it mean to have quality healthcare, but also like the care part of it?

And I can't think of anything like that, just of what it would mean to go to a doctor and feel cared for is, it's so funny because we call it healthcare. And I don't know if I just hadn't really thought of the importance of that word until the way you said it earlier. So, yeah, what are some of the stories that she shares and sort of the larger, maybe, I don't know if they're visions or just frameworks that she gives about what health*care* might look like for people?

Shira Hassan:

There's a couple moments in the book where she's talking about the care center that she's in, in Cuba. And about how one of the things that's really different there is that there's not the same level of patient confidentiality, because people aren't... There's not constant threats of lawsuits and liability. And so what this allows is for patients and doctors to be really collaborative, and mutual in the way they're talking about how this person's recovering and will that work for you, and how I can help you in that moment. And there's a true mutual aid that develops from all of the patients and doctors not having a level of secrecy around what's happening that's so fundamentally different from how we function here, where our right to privacy is kind of replaced for dignity.

We kind of sub that out and this is the opposite, right? She's talking about how the removal of that, because there's no threat of lawsuits means that there's a collaborative nature to how we all actually care for each other as we are sick and disabled, and recovering together. And then there's this other piece that's just reframing how we think about disease and illness, that's this quote that I really love, it's short.

"What if we told a different story about, say diabetes? What if we said the pancreas had gone on strike from loneliness, from homesickness, from uprootedness and isolation? What if we created healing cells made up of four or five diabetics whose job was to help restore each other's roots and cultivate group solidarity? What if they shared meals cooked for each other twice a week, went on walks together, strategized about protecting their bodies from the stressors in their lives, cried enraged about what's been awful, unfair, practice listening to their bodies deepest hungers as a guide. Tenderly chopped and cooked and seasoned what made them feel most at home in themselves? What if their story was not one of defective organs, unruly appetites and laziness? What if it was a story of homecoming?"

Monica Trinidad:

Yeah. I love that quote. And I think a part of me, I'm trying to connect a lot of dots here in this conversation. And I think you're really helping me think about the ways that capitalism victim blames every day. And I think about how, not only was I so angry about just like this healthcare system. Right now I'm thinking about the word healthcare in totally different ways, but it made me angry at the healthcare system for not being able to help me. But then I was also finding anger at my own... I was redirecting the anger toward my own body because I was mad that my body wasn't able to keep up with production, keep up with the world moving at the pace it's moving and what my body was just trying to tell me was just, slow down and just sit, and be. But that's so anti-capitalist.

Page May:

So I actually went and grabbed my copy of *Medicine Stories*, because there had been this part, which is another book that Aurora Morales wrote, I believe, at least a decade earlier, it sounds like. And, yeah, there had been this part in here, the truths our bodies tell and there was this one line that just, I remember when I read it a couple weeks ago, it just said, "Where does your body want to lead us and how would the world be different if it did?" And just this reframing for me of like, it's not that my body is broken or wrong and that it's not about, yeah, I have a lot of chronic pain that would be great to, like, that's not great, I don't want to romanticize that, I prefer to not be in pain.

But that it's not about fixing things to be able to be productive, which is so much of like how I was thinking about things, was just like, damn this is getting in the way of the work that I'm trying to do. And instead thinking about it's not trying to fix it so that I can get about fixing the world or rather like how much... Imagine the world, if it was instead about fixing our bodies to fix the world, it was about fixing the world to embrace our bodies and our differences and make and making room for us to be different. Right? And that to me just feels so feminist, I just it's... And I think you've already tied that in, but, I guess it's healing justice feels like it's one of those things where it's like, can you be a feminist and not an abolitionist or someone who is thinking about and trying to work towards healing justice? They feel so interwoven where it's about building worlds that allow for difference.

Yeah. And so my brain is thinking about that. And, I guess I'm curious to hear more about how this book impacted your organizing work as someone that I really respect and admire for the ways that you sort of weave together all of these really big things and seems to be really rooted in love in a practice of love for people? Yeah. And so how has this shaped the ways that you approach, organizing and existing? Right? Because I don't want it to be just about doing work. Okay. There was a question in there, I think.

Shira Hassan:

No, totally. Thank you. That was beautiful. Okay. So I want to restate the thing that I was saying earlier about healing justice, because I messed it up a little bit. So this is the corrected version. So, part of how this is one of the few books that we have that is about healing justice, it's one of the few Aurora Levins Morales and Cara Page are sort of the, I guess I don't want to age them, but grandmothers, mothers of healing justice and they name it and they lay it out for us really clearly. And it's work that grew out of Black healers and organizers in the South after Katrina and Rita. And it was a call to healers who were operating as organizers, always and organizers who were operating as healers, always, to push back on sort of the combined impact of these five things, and use the values of these five things: Transformative justice, disability justice, reproductive justice, harm reduction and environmental justice. And these, because healing justice grew from the intentional combination of these five things, as an intentional systemic organized pushback on the state and state violence, and its impact on Black and brown people, queer people, trans peoples lives, healing justice is so misunderstood as a massage, right? It's so misunderstood as an opposition to grind culture. That is not it at all. It is not saying what we all need to do is just get a massage and rest, that's not it.

Yes, wouldn't it be a good thing if we could prioritize self-care? And can we look at the systemic reasons, and the work that we're doing that gets in the way of that? And can we organize, for example, one of the main campaigns that's happening, that's an example of a healing justice campaign? Right now is the campaign to shut down the detention center in Georgia that was forcing sterilization on women who were crossing the border. And so that is a healing justice campaign that's being led by healer organizers. We also have examples of that in Chicago though. And so at home, here we can see like for the Trauma Center Campaign was one of the most amazing healing justice campaigns, that I think we've seen. Young Women's Empowerment Project was also one of the forerunners of healing justice. And we did this in a couple of different ways, but one of the things we did was learn how to make herbal medicine, Tanuja Jagernauth, who is a doctor of Chinese medicine, an acupuncturist taught the young people at Young Women's Empowerment Project, how to make their own pills.

And so we had three different pills, herbal pills that we made and distributed throughout Chicago. We identified that young people were seeking help from doctors because of the impact of the medical industrial complex and the linking of the medical industrial complex with the prison industrial complex, for example, who's the first person you see when you go to the emergency room? Is it a doctor? No, it's a security guard.

Monica Trinidad:

Security guard. Yeah.

Shira Hassan:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). When you're being screened by a nurse and you, for example, have visual markings of self-injury, do you get treated for the flu or do you wind up in psych? Right? And so the intersecting of the medical industrial complex with the prison industrial complex led us to come up with something that addressed the immediate harms that we were experiencing, while at the same time doing a campaign to push back against the way that young people who were perceived as being involved in the street economy and sex trade were treated by institutions.

So the pills were made to address depression, to address pelvic pain, to address anxiety and to address flu symptoms. And then distributed along with helpful information about how to do a self-exam. And if you have to go to the doctor what to do, while at the same time doing another aspect of the campaign to get doctors and medical professionals, and social service providers to understand what it meant to be in true solidarity with young people, and to interrupt this idea that just because a young person walks into an emergency room with say, PID doesn't mean that a cop should be called to see if she was participating in the sex trade, for example.

Monica Trinidad:

Wow! I just wrote a big note in my notebook that is like, medical industrial complex, times prison industrial complex, intersections and underlined that a lot because there are so many ways that our organizing work can meet at those intersections. There are so many opportunities for lack of a better word to confront and disrupt these harmful things in our lives. So it's making me think, and I would love to hear your thoughts on the current moments that we're in, with COVID-19 and the pandemic, and what connections this book can offer us, in this moment, around how we move in our organizing work. I mean, and I'm thinking a lot about how the first people who were sort of ringing the alarms for me on social media, when the pandemic first hit, were folks like Kelly Hayes or folks like Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha.

And I'm thinking about the ways that disability justice organizers immediately were giving us tips on what type of face masks to wear. And while the CDC was saying, "You don't need to wear masks." Right? And I'm thinking about how we learned so much in this moment from disability justice organizers who have been doing this for a long time. And I'm thinking about how we will continue to move forward once the pandemic is over. Right? And once we return to physical spaces and hoping that we don't forget a lot of the things we learned in this moment that impacted everybody.

Shira Hassan:

I don't know if I can do it in three minutes. Is it okay that we go over? Okay. My mind is going a bunch of different places. I'll speak personally. So one of the things the pandemic gave me was a moment for the pace that my life normally goes to be in sync with so many other people around me who suddenly were moving at the pace that I always moved at. And so, I think this period of

quarantine provided such a platform for astonishing ableism, and there were so many opportunities for solidarity. And so I experienced a lot of solidarity in this time. And I also experienced some of the most astonishing ableism I've ever heard and seen. And, I think we're seeing it now, so many of the things that... I was just asked to commit to teaching in the fall, in person at University of Chicago. And I was like, I actually can't commit to teaching in person yet.

From almost the first month of the pandemic, this is the moment that I have been fearing, which is that, the minute the world goes back, the rest of us who are going to be still either moving at the same pace that we were before or moving at a slower pace, because of the impact of COVID, are going to be so left behind. And so I've already started hearing about in person gatherings being planned and conferences being organized. And I'm like, I hope they have a Zoom link, it's going to be a really long time for me, this isn't done yet. And so I think, something else I've been thinking about too has been, the way that vaccines are being pitted against disability community, at the expense also of being pitted against Black and brown communities.

And so the way that we are being positioned against each other, I think Aurora does create complexity in the book around that. And I think the ways that people with disabilities are pitted against, for example, environmentalism, I don't know if you all remember something that happened, I think in 2019, which feels so long ago now, but with the banning of straws, and how all the white environmentalists in particular on the West Coast were talking about how we have to save the oceans and people who use straws or X, Y, and Z. And disability community was like, hello, can we talk about where straws even come from? They were invented for the purpose of people with disabilities being able to eat and drink on their own.

And so I see that alive right now. And I see the way illness is used against people all the time, how our experiences surviving trauma that was caused by systems of the state, and that the choices we make to survive, and how we survive, we then get blamed for. So we get arrested if we're involved in the sex trade, if we don't want vaccinations we're targeted. We are in a no win situation. And the only win is solidarity. The only way to come out alive is with each other.

I'm going to take a risk, but it kind of comes back to something that you were saying in the beginning, Page. And it relates to some of the ways that people confusing, healing justice and self-care. And so, one of the things I've been really concerned about, and I personally have struggled with it for years and only recently been verbalizing it with friends, is the ways that we think about embodiment. And it's so troubling. The way that we, even, for example, start a meeting by having people drop into their bodies or do some sort of breath work. And this is packaged in all kinds of ways. And we call it all kinds of things.

I have always resisted it. And now that we've been on Zoom for so long, I can mute and turn my camera off. I've always been uncomfortable in it. And the reasons I'm uncomfortable in it is because, in order to be present in this meeting, I can't be present in my body's pain. I actually can't do both. Right? And similarly, I survived lots of complex trauma, and the gift of dissociation has been something that I have honed for years. And there's times where I haven't wanted to be dissociating and I can't control it, and I've spent lots of time healing and working on that. But there's other ways in which dissociation has become a survivor's right. And I think the way that we need to trouble some of these practices of forced embodiment, that we are naming as healing or that we are naming as self-care.

And we need to begin to ask ourselves, why we think of embodiment as the antidote for state violence in a meeting, that doesn't make sense. It does make sense that we focus, it does make sense that we come into connection with each other. It does make sense that we drop whatever the meeting was before, so that we can be more available to what this content is that we're about to do together, but to demand embodiment, there's some inherent ableism in that. And there's also an anti-survivor, anti-victim blaming in that, that feels challenging. Because I know that a lot of us who are leading that and I've led that myself. I've usually done at the end and not at the beginning. So usually at the end it's like an opportunity to refocus and I haven't actually ever led anything that's about getting into your body. What I've led is connection back to the people in the room and back to the environment that I'm in.

And I think there's something about all of us as survivors, some of us with complicated bodies and disabilities, why we think embodiment is the strategy that we're all sort of collectively in right now. It's something that's become a go-to, that I think is really troubling. And Aurora troubles it a little bit in the book, where she talks about the power of dissociation. And how, if you could just disassociate for a minute out of the pain, what you could do instead. And I just want to name the gifts of dissociation and the ways in which we have to function, and ask us to kind of trouble this strange thing we've all picked up and started doing around getting embodied. I don't even know what that means. I'm not kidding. I asked a friend the other day, "What's embodiment? I don't get it." And that's not a critique. I'm just seriously puzzled. I don't know how I would get embodied. Not in a critical way, in a genuine way. I don't know what that means. And I don't know why I have to do it, to be present at the meeting.

Page May:

Yeah. I appreciate you for sharing that. And you're not the only person I've heard. Yeah, for me, it's still a lot of the collective breath is a big thing that happens a lot, where, yeah, it's just for some people that's the... I really just need to not do this right now. And to have the whole world pause, and force me to like go into my mind, and into my body is like... Yeah. I hear that and appreciate the... I hope as folks are listening that it helps maybe shift some practices that we've taken as the new norm that don't have to be.

Monica Trinidad:

Yeah. I would far rather have five minutes to do, like just to take a break or get some water, do whatever you need to do, that for me would be much more beneficial for all of us than this forced embodiment or this forced collective breath where we... Yeah.

Shira Hassan:

And if we need a collective practice, because I'm a sucker for a collective practice. I love things we do together, but what can we chant? What can we hum? What can we create? What are the options for me to participate without some sort of strange notion that my body is the basis for every successful interaction to come? I'm puzzled. The people on the podcast can't see my face, but I'm literally scratching my head and crinkling my eyebrows, I don't get it.

Page May:

Thank you, you're brilliant, you're amazing, I appreciate you. I appreciate the ways that you think and are helping us learn. And so thank you for your time, and for sharing everything that you just did. And I hope that to see your face, not in another five years or however long it's been since I've seen your face.

Monica Trinidad:

Thank you, Shira.

Shira Hassan:

Yeah. I just want to thank you for inviting me. I'm the person that people ask to come figure out a problem. I'm more of a fixer. No one ever asked me what I think about a book. No one has ever asked me what I thought about a book. I have a friend who writes, who often sends me things to read before she publishes them. And other than that, literally no one has ever asked me what I think about a book. And I'm not a scholastic person, so it makes sense, people think of me. People ask me nail polish and heels and how to stop an abuser, but not what I think of a book. So thank you.

Monica Trinidad:

You're welcome. That's what we're here for.

Page May:

Yeah, absolutely.

Shira Hassan:

"What are bodies? My mothers and yours, and mine, require in order to thrive is what the world requires. If there's a map to get there, it can be found in the outlets of our skin and bone, and blood, in the tracks of neurotransmitters and antibodies. We need nourishment, equilibrium, water, connection, justice. When I write about cancer and exhaust, and irritable bells in the context of treeless slopes of my homeland, of market driven famine, of xenoestrogens and the possibility of extinction of bees, I'm tracing that map with my fingertips, walking into the heart of the storm that shakes my body and occupies the world as the rising temperature of the planet births bigger and more violent hurricanes from the tepid seeds.

I'm watching the needle of my anger swing across its arc, locating meridians, looking for the magnetic pulse points of change. When I can hold the truth of my flesh, as one protesting voice and a multitude, a witness and opponent to what greed has brought, awareness becomes bearable. And I rejoice in the clarity that illness has given me. As my aching and the storm racked body of the world, tumble and spin around me, I enter the clear eye at the heart of all of this wild uprooting, the place our sick bodies have brought us to, where light breaks through and we can see the pattern in the broken forest, and swollen waters, and aching flesh, the still and shattered place where transformation begins."

[OUTRO]

Thanks for listening to another episode of the Lit Review, a podcast where we interview people we love and respect about a book that has shaped their organizing work. We are your co-hosts, Monica Trinidad and Page May, two Chicago-based abolitionists, cultural workers, and cat mamas who love nerding out on books and creating spark notes for our movements. Production this season is by Benji Russelburg, intro music is by David Ellis with production by Ari Mejia, and social media support from Alycia Kamil. If you like this episode, give it a shoutout on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook, and if you like our podcast, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts to help widen our reach. Financial support for the production of this podcast season is thanks to the Field Foundation of Illinois, and our amazing Patreon subscribers. Learn more about becoming a patron at Patreon.com/thelitreview. Keep reading!