Practicing Radical Forgiveness in the Political Now:

A Justice Fleet Exhibit Fostering Healing through Art, Dialogue and Play

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Abstract

This essay highlights The Justice Fleet's *Radical Forgiveness* exhibit as one experience dedicated to highlighting the need for active healing through traumas whilst simultaneously fighting against them. The author begins defining social justice and Radical Forgiveness within this political moment, and then turn towards The Ferguson Neighborhood Police Steering Committee and their use of *Radical Forgiveness* as a site for healing post Michael Brown's murder.

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It is no secret that the United States of America is rife with political tensions connected to the deep roots of systemic and institutionalized oppression. And while our current President may exacerbate these tensions, the consequences of living within a system of oppressions are no greater for many people inhabiting this land now than they were during the Civil Rights movement, the Women's Suffrage Movement, or any of the foundational moments that defined this country's political milieu. What is different now is the turn towards self-care and healing as we fight against systemic inequity and social justice. This essay highlights The Justice Fleet's Radical Forgiveness exhibit as one experience dedicated to highlighting the need for active healing through traumas whilst simultaneously fighting against them. I begin by defining social justice and radical forgiveness within this political moment, and then turn towards The Ferguson Neighborhood Police Steering Committee and their use of *Radical Forgiveness* as a site for healing post Michael Brown's murder.

Social Justice

Literature on social justice defines justice according to two norms: desert, rectification (Tiejte, 2015). Desert, the most common form, suggests that rewards and punishment should be proportionate to merit; every person gets what they deserve (Pojman, 2006; Tietje, 2015). Unfortunately, we live in a world where how much merit you may or may not have rests directly on your social identity labels. Rectificatory justice involves setting right injuries inflicted by one person or system on another. Our current justice system operates under this mode of justice, which is evident in the rhetoric of seeking justice for people who are murdered, assaulted, attacked or mistreated by their peers, family, supervisors, or public officials. However, this system's flaws are evident. Tyburczy (2015) delineates what does and does not count as evidence in the court of law concerning Black victims, White police officers, video surveillance, and a multitude of contradictions in storytelling and framing. In the cases of John Crawford, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, and Tamir Rice, police officers told one story to the grand juries, video surveillance told a different story. However, just as officers disvalued their murdered victims, the judicial system does not value their voices and bodies post-mortem. In addition, health care institutions do not value the bodies of the living as seen in the cases of Levar Jones (Tyburczy, 2015) and CeCe McDonald, who were fortunate enough to survive, and Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland, who both died being denied access to health care.

A communication-centered approach to social justice requires a keen focus on the term social (St. Hilaire, 2014). The "social" in social justice refers to a particular type of interaction. "Social justice relies on various modes of action and organizing, including advocating change, building community, improving governance, and reorganizing markets" (Huffman, 2014, p. 8). To be social, one must be "doing" something with others. Albeit engaging in dialogue, community, and/or performance, as social actors, we are doing something within our community contexts; thus, communication is germane to our pursuit of social justice (Frey, Pearce, Pollack, Artz, & Murphy, 1996). "Whether approaching justice as an achievable state, an aspirational ideal, or a process toward said goals, we do well to attend to the interpersonal, organizational, rhetorical, and cultural realities, possibilities, and constraints" (Huffman, 2014, pp. 12-13). While social justice requires all of these moving parts, The Justice Fleet's *Radical Forgiveness*

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exhibit focuses on the interpersonal aspect. The creation of a culture of "social" justice at the interpersonal level requires sharing stories in social interactions more often so that bodies are humanized versus subjected to stereotypes or deemed undeserving of justice. This requires uprooting implicit bias through storytelling and sharing space with those we have formed biases against. As Riggs (2015) reminds us, "exposure to new people when combined with participation in the movement made it possible for people to create new understandings of themselves in the world" (p. 186).

Radical Forgiveness

The Justice Fleet is a mobile social justice museum that fosters healing through art, dialogue, and play. Our first exhibit, *Radical Forgiveness*, is an art therapy exercise that encourages mindfulness around implicit biases through painting and dialogue. Radical Forgiveness is the profound notion that we do not have to live with fear, pain, hostility, or injustice. That we have control over the way we perceive, understand, act, and react in our world. In a socially unjust world, we experience violent aggressions and microagressions towards us for different reasons. We also can be violent towards other people through our words and actions. When we experience these moments, each one requires us to heal. Radical Forgiveness is a fluid and deliberate process that allows us to heal from these moments that keep us from being better versions of ourselves and bettering our world.

When people attend our pop-up exhibit, they begin with five retractable signs that explain what Radical Forgiveness is and is not, why we must engage in it as often as needed, and what that process can look like. Using terms like recall, reprocess, feel, let go, replace, and practice mindfulness, the signs ask us to sit with questions that push us to think deeply about the pain we carry, how that pain is informed by trauma, and whether or not we can begin to let them go.

After sitting with the five signs, visitors are instructed to take a canvas and paint their biases and ask for forgiveness, or paint how others have been biased towards them and grant forgiveness. While visitors paint, we dialogue about the exhibit contents, what we are painting, and how we are feeling through the entire process. After visitors finish painting their canvas, they take pre-cut cord and sew their canvas to the other canvases on the wall as part of *The Forgiveness Quilt*. This act of sewing the canvases together is a powerful display of how we are all connected, whether oppressed or complicit in oppression, and how those conditions live side-by-side in society every day. As the quilt grows, it illustrates the ways in which complicit and implicit bias are intersectional and deeply connected to ALL of us.

Learning outcomes

While visiting the mobile museum, patrons will be able to:

1. Reflect on the importance of forgiveness and letting go of pain, hate, and fear that stem from our implicit and explicit biases.
2. Apply radical forgiveness in our immediate lives.
3. Begin to see difference as something worth celebrating in an effort to re-humanize people who are different.
4. Engage in dialogue with people who are different from us in an effort to re-humanize those who are different.

Case Study: The Ferguson Neighborhood Police Steering Committee

In November of 2014, the city of Ferguson overflowed with protesters and community members mourning Michael Brown's death, the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, and the city's refusal to hold the Ferguson police department accountable. The Department of Justice (DOJ) responded to Ferguson community members' pleas for racial equity by conducting a study that found explicit evidence of racial discrimination within the Ferguson Police Department (US Department of Justice, 2015). The report illuminated patterns of behaviors in violation of the First and Fourth Amendments, unconstitutional court and law enforcement practices that disproportionately affected African American residents, and how those practices eroded trust – making policing more ineffective, difficult, and dangerous.

Following the release of their report, the DOJ created the Ferguson Neighborhood Police Steering Committee (FNPSC)--a group of Ferguson community members dedicated to creating positive change in Ferguson through a community policing model. Unfortunately, the 90 people who comprise that committee had different ideas about what positive change looked like for their community. Some members wanted to increase police presence and "clean up the streets." Other members used the DOJ report as evidence that an unbiased, alternative community-policing model was necessary. Two years later, the FNPSC failed to make any progress due to constant infighting amongst members.

In August of 2017, The FNPSC made its first unanimous decision, to utilize The Justice Fleet's training model and resources. Members were desperate for a swift change in in-group dynamics that would foster a collaborative environment where they could heal from racial injustice while also generating imaginative ideas for community policing. As a community practice rooted in fostering social justice, The Justice Fleet utilizes a community-based, participatory dialogue model that provides resources and creates spaces for community members to engage in dialogue and capacity building around topics they deem necessary and germane to healing from racial bias and inequity. The process is multi-layered and each component builds on

the previous stages: 1) environmental scan, 2) intergroup dialogue facilitation training, 3) Radical Forgiveness, 4) Racial Equity Training, 5) Radical Imagination, and 6) project implementation and assessment. The Justice Fleet began training with an environmental scan to assess current communication practices. Based on the amount of yelling, finger pointing, and lack of genuine dialogue, it was evident that we needed to begin our work with Radical Forgiveness so members of the FNPSC could begin healing from the traumas inflicted upon their city. Then, Fleet staff trained a small group of volunteer community members in dialogue facilitation and cultivating "brave spaces." In December, The Justice Fleet began working with the entire group. I began with intergroup dialogue training, then created space for healing through the Radical Forgiveness experience. Over a two-hour time period with the FNPSC, I spent thirty minutes lecturing about the process of Radical Forgiveness and walking members of the FNPSC through each sign. Then, as they painted multiple canvases, we dialogued about the different things each person painted, the traumas associated with their canvases, and how they would shift their perception moving forward, if at all.

Painting through such difficult conversations made it easier for members to engage with one another's traumas, stories, and experiences with the Ferguson Police Department and members of the FNPSC.

What came out of that meeting was transformative. Community members began to see how each person approached the FNPSC from different social locators and how that impacted their ideas and perspective. Painting through such difficult conversations made it easier for members to engage with one another's traumas, stories, and experiences with the Ferguson Police Department and members of the FNPSC. Following the meeting, committee members noticed an explicit change in how group members treated one another, engaged in dialogue around difficult conversations, and were able to harness the power of active listening. In March, the committee acknowledged healing from committee-induced trauma and how its group dynamics became generative, collaborative, and healthy. A month later, the committee was able to complete what they could not do in two years, draft their community policing plan and deliver it to the Department of Justice.

Following my time with the Ferguson Neighborhood Police Steering Committee, I conducted a short survey. While I do not have the space to go into specific details, community members were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences, noting that the group felt more

open, communicated better, released anger and frustration, and were more involved and relaxed, which allowed them to make decisions more rapidly.

In addition to working with the Neighborhood Police Steering Committee, The Justice Fleet has popped up *Radical Forgiveness* in over 30 locations around the United States and reached over 2000 people. While my time with the FNPSC was more comprehensive than any single pop-up can allot, this case study alongside other pop-ups and testimonials show the power in using art to educate people around difficult subject matter, and the importance of healing from traumas as we fight against them.

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About the Author

As a scholar/artist/activist, Dr. Johnson's explores the language, exigency, sound, and aesthetics of various social movements. Their research and activism focus on performances of identity, protest, and social justice in digital and lived spaces. As a polymath, their mixed-media artistry involves working with metals, recycled and reclaimed goods, photography, poetry, percussion, and paint to interrogate systems of oppression. Dr. Amber Johnson is an award winning Assistant Professor of Communication and Social Justice at Saint Louis University and the creator of The Justice Fleet ™, a mobile justice museum that interrogates radical forgiveness.