Marion: If you could just give me your name, what you do and why you do what you do.

TL: My name is, everybody calls me TL. So my name is Talila Lewis. Everybody calls me TL. I always struggle around the question about what I do. Because I do a lot. What I do and why I do what I do. I guess I'll start with why I do what I do and then I'll try to move to some of the things that I do. And I know that I'll - I'll just honor now that I'll forget some of the things or it'll be left out, but, but, I do what I do because, there's a lot of folks who are suffering and because, you know, my ancestors work I feel like will be in vain if we don't carry it forward in some sort of meaningful way.

TL: The work right now, among other things, is trying to get negatively racialized communities - so Black folks, indigenous folks, Latinx folks - to really acknowledge the intersections of a lot of identities, especially around race and disability and class. So disability is the big thing that kind of needs to be discussed and addressed, even if it's discussed in our own culturally appropriate ways, right? And then on the other side, but related, the work is getting white disabled folks to stop erasing disabled experiences and intersected experiences, in Black communities, indigenous communities, Latinx communities. And I also run a - on a volunteer basis - a nonprofit called HEARD, Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of Deaf communities. HEARD - H E A R D. We work on ending combating mass incarceration, ending the hyper incarceration of disabled folks.

TL: So most folks know that mass incarceration is this violent behemoth where we're quite literally caging whole communities. Most people recognize the class and race components of mass incarceration. But what most people don't realize is that over half of the folks killed by cops annually are disabled people who usually have some other intersected identity of marginality. People don't realize that the vast majority of our prison population is quite literally disabled in one way or another - has a history of addiction, has a history of trauma and abuse that had never been addressed, in addition to, again, those other identities that we discuss more often and try to address. So right now the work is just kind of changing the cultural conversations, or maybe enhancing them and making them intentionally, critically intersectional around disability and how specifically ableism and racism are quite literally inextricably linked, always have been and always will be. So that's the short of it.

Marion: Very cool. Yeah, I remember you saying that at the Data For Black Lives conference, that the root of ableism is anti-Blackness and the root of anti-Blackness is ableism and the two cannot be disconnected in our country's context. And I was wondering if you could sort of walk us through that idea a little bit more, because I will like - in full honesty, like, I think disability rights and the disability justice movement are things that I'm new to, and I think it's a huge blind spot for me, just like ability in general, and so would just sort of love to hear more about that concept.

TL: Cool. So the first thing is we want to steer clear of, use of disability as metaphor. So we don't want to say, "are dumb to" or "deaf to" or say "blind spots" and things like that. So, I mean, and this again, this is how ableism is woven into colonial language, right? Because you wouldn't naturally say that - you've learned that from somewhere. And then the somewhere is what needs to be questioned, and the somehow is what needs to be questioned. But quite literally, if you think about what ableism is, and I've actually,

I've been working on a definition and I have a working definition of ableism that goes beyond what white disability communities have created. So if you ask most white disabled folks, and I'll get to the answer to your question through this, you ask most white disabled or deaf folks, "what is ableism?" They will give you a very simplistic, "ableism is discrimination against disabled and deaf people because people think we're less than because we can't walk speak or because we think differently, et cetera, et cetera."

TL: Right? And sure, to a degree, that's correct. The problem is, that doesn't take into account the ways in which ableism is a systemic oppression, i the same ways that we understand racism to be such; and also it doesn't take into account how ableism was quite literally created by white wealthy power holders. And so - I'll start with this, this is my shortened definition of disability, and I might -- I'm paraphrasing, but, ableism is a system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence and excellence. All right. And that those societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence and so-called excellence are quite literally rooted in eugenics and anti-Blackness and in capitalism. Right? And so to unpack that a little bit, and what we know is that my ancestors (I'm the descendant of African enslaved peoples) quite literally were banned from reading, right?

TL: It was illegal. And now, and this has been for quite some time, literacy is some sort of purported metric of intelligence, right? So that's the simplest example where it's like, oh wait, 700 years of deprivation of a particular language. And now there's comparisons between people who had access for 500, 600 years and people who quite literally had eyes gouged out and hands cut off for the acts of attempting to read and write. Right? And English, to be clear, right? So that, that's the simplest example of how we see it. But every single form of oppression is actually rooted in ableism. So if you think about what various oppressions are: Let's just take sexism. Sexism is this idea, this systemic idea that patriarchal presenting or patriarchal folks are inherently superior, right? And that femmes or women are inherently, and trans folks are inherently inferior.

TL: So these ideas of inferiority and superiority are rooted and ableism. And the same is true with racism, right? So we'll jump back to racism. If you understand the roots of racism - It was created by scientists, doctors, preachers, pastors, economists, ethnologists, all of whom came up with ideas around inherent superiority of people who allegedly were white, right? And of course we know that that has changed over time. What is white has changed over time. It's continuing to change. No one seems to be able to put their finger on it except the people who claim to be white, right? And everything else is built around that and everyone else is inherently inferior, right? So, and that's built around whether it's body and/or mind. Another really good example of how you see, and I always say that disability is created. Like, so the question is not -- sure there are things that cause disability, but I think it's important to talk about the creation of disability, the ways in which white folks have created disability for indigenous folks, Black folks, Latinx folks and so on, is by saying that particularized things are required:

TL: Money, job, literacy, educational access, you name it, families to be together -- and quite literally making it impossible for our communities to have those things. Right?

Forced familial separation. You literally stole our bodies and separated and sold us off, bred us, and then said, "oh, family units are so critically important. If you don't have that, something's wrong with you." And yet, right now, I'm literally just, yesterday I asked somebody where their people are from, right? They look like a cousin of mine. They're not from anywhere I know, but we're literally still searching for our people. Right? But now, oh, that's something that's required to be American, to be in, you know, superior, et cetera. Literacy is another great example. Well, you know, now we're going to give literacy tests and standardized testing. But what we know is that the people who create those tests determine who, what's the makeup of the people who will be able to pass those tests.

TL: Right? So that's why Black folks, low-income folks, indigenous folks, struggle with standardized testing and now we're still using those as some sort of metric of intelligence, of ability. And again, so this is how we see the roots of ableism and racism having quite literally always existed together. If you're talking about a particular group of people being inferior, that is quite literally ableism. But here's how capitalism and productivity come to play, and this is really important. The idea of people needing to produce things to be deemed important, right? So what we know is that our people were inherently important. Everyone is inherently important simply because they breathe and exist. That's disability justice. You don't need to produce anything. You don't need to be active. You don't need to have all of your limbs. You don't need to be able to speak. Your existence means that you are valuable.

TL: What ableism creates is this idea of the need to make the human produce or a commodity, right? So that's how we see things like Barnum and Bailey putting on freak shows with albino Black people. So that's a disabled Black person. Now that's a freak. So they can make money off of those bodies. Post emancipation. So prior to emancipation, our bodies were valuable to a colonialist imperialist through, you know, hundreds of years of labor, right? That's right. So the question then becomes, how do we make value out of these things that are now of no value to us? And that's how we transferred into convict leasing systems. That's how we ended up with the medical industrial complex. And this is really important: in 1840, and this is pre-emancipation and pre-Reconstruction. In 1840, the United States took its sixth census. It was published in 1841. This census is really important because it allegedly was the first time where the United States government was going to figure out how many, and I quote, "insane and idiots" existed in the United States. Okay. They decided that it was important that they would also count Black insane and idiots and give the delineation and enumeration of how many Black insane and idiots existed and how many white insane and idiots existed. And this is the time during there was a Northern and Southern split. So we had free Black peoples in the North and we had millions of enslaved Black peoples in the South - African peoples to be clear,. And go figure, the United States Census said that in 1841 when it was published, it said, oh, imagine, there's more "insane and idiot" Black folks who are among the free Black population than the enslaved population.

TL: So it was then used as pro-slavery propaganda to say "See? Enslavement is better! These poor Black people." And they said that the burden was not on Black people, this whole slavery thing, Oh, you know, poor white people for having to take care of these brutes. And the more you free them, the more they depend on the state. That's right,

insane and idiots. Right? And so again, when you're understanding, and this is the problem with erasure of race in conversations around disability. So if you talk to most white disabled people, there's no analyses around these things. There's no conversation around the fact that disability was quite literally created to further subjugate indigenous and Black peoples. And then there's no conversation around what that means for people who currently live at the intersection.

TL: And I guess the last thing I'll say before I let you ask me more questions, and this is probably the most important component in terms of modern day understanding of these connections. The way Black, indigenous, Latinx folks talk about disability is very different. So I have a good friend, Dustin Gibson, who's working with me. He's Black and disabled too. He's working with me and we're collecting Black music that actually talks about disability. And in none of the songs do you hear the word disability! Right now we're up to 140: hip hop, Soca, Calypso, R & B songs. And the reason you don't necessarily hear Black folks saying, "Oh, I have a disability, I'm in mental health crisis, da da da" is One, because all of that language was created by white folks; Two, because disability is so intertwined with our actual being, right? So like we don't even need to name that it exists because we live through just like it's, it's part and parcel of our lived experience, right? Because we know that trauma and oppression causes disability, right?

TL: So, you know, poverty is a cause and consequence of disability, oppression and deprivation of needed resources is a cause and consequences of disability. And so our lived experiences, literally just talking about being hungry, needing to eat, not having any job opportunities so you got to push on the street, going to the underground economy, all of that is actually conversation about disability. About trauma. About all the things that white folks get paid to talk about and the formalized lingo. And in our cases it gets erased, because we're not using the right words, because we don't have research studies on it, because, you know, no white person has said, "Oh, we agree with what those Black people have been saying this whole time, that's a disability." And actually now we are getting those white people to put their rubber stamps on our hundreds of years of explaining that we've been depressed, oppressed, traumatized, having complex PTSD, et cetera.

TL: And I know I said that was the last thing, but there's one more thing that is really important. Right now I'm working on a piece, I think I mentioned this in the presentation that you witnessed at Data for Black Lives, working on a piece called an Ode to the Runners. So I think I need to give background on that I didn't really have a chance to, and this again goes back to how our disability and Blackness are inextricably linked. What we know is that when our ancestors tried to escape enslavement and did successfully escape enslavement, folks like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman who also was disabled, Frederick Douglass is actually neurodivergent, which is a whole other conversation. Most of the folks whose names we do know, we have to recognize disability in them, and that's a whole other conversation. But white folks called the running from enslavement, drapetomania, they said it was an actual insanity, right?

TL: They said - white folks called our work stoppages and protest and resistance of enslavement on plantations, rascality or dysphasia aethiopica. So the word rascal quite literally comes from Black folks refusing to work and protests on plantations. And it was

deemed a mental illness by mainstream doctors and scientists. White eugenicists, right. Quite literally not only was it illegal, so Harriet Tubman's body and mind was illegal. Frederick Douglass, his body and mind were illegal because, and Frederick Douglass had the quote that he was, during one of his presentations, he said, "I appear this evening as a thief and a robber. I stole this head, this body, these limbs from my master and ran off with them." Right? And so that's a statement to the criminality of escape. But what most people don't talk about is the dual diagnosis of mental illness that people like him and Harriet Tubman were given by white slave-holding and wealthy people.

TL: And so, that connects this thing. So fast forward to modern day, what we see is "resisting arrest." Well, you were about to hit me with your club, sir. What would you have me do? And it's a very natural and intelligent response to violence, right? To put your hand up? That's right. Oh, I'm being tased. Oh, stop resisting. Well, I can't control my body right now because there's electricity running through it. Right? So all of these things become resisting arrest. We've seen the "excited delirium" used to justify murder of disabled and mostly Black and indigenous folks in jails and prisons. So Natasha McKenna, who was killed in a, I think Alexandria jail about four years ago, and now I might be a little bit off on the timeframe. She was literally naked, Black, disabled in the midst of a mental health crisis naked, and about seven, white C.O.'s and you know, all their gear, tased her, had her strapped to a chair, tased her to death. And then on her death record, it says that she was, you know, her cause of death was "excited delirium," right? We also see "excited delirium" used on our disabled and negatively racialized kids documents in school when the school is trying to against their will, touch them, put them in restraint and seclusion. Literally on the kid's records it says, oh, "excited delirium." And what we know is that doesn't even exist. It literally was just pulled out of the sky. So what we see is white folks deeming us insane, creating disability by requiring that we have particularized levels of intelligence based on their ideas of what it means to be intelligent. And that is why racism and ableism can't be disconnected. So I could go on obviously for hours about this, but I hope that gives a little bit of context to what I mean by the root of ableism is racism and the root of racism is ableism.

Marion: Yeah, no, that was extremely helpful context. I think I want to say a couple of things in response to that. First. I want to make sure I don't forget to thank you for just checking my language, that was not even something that I was conscious of and so I appreciate you just, I appreciate your grace in pointing that out. It is just sort of wild how much we internalize oppressive and colonized language, so thank you for that. I also was really struck by what you said about the idea that people need to produce things in order to be valuable, and that is something that I had not considered from an ableist standpoint at all. It was something that has, it's something that's bothered me a lot when we're talking about like immigrant communities and how, you know, like activists like to hold up these super productive immigrants and say like, oh, these are the sorts of people that we want to, that, you know, Trump wants to turn away and that's terrible. And always picking people who are like, you know, doctors or, you know, in the armed services or something like showing that, hey, they have value because they're producing something. And that was something that's bothered me for a long time, but I had never considered it from that perspective.

TL: Yeah. No, I appreciate that. And even in France, we saw that, one of our, - I don't remember where the young man was from, but he quite literally had to leap tall buildings in a single bound and now he's deserving. He's a citizen, right? So you can either be hyper "traditionally intelligent" by white folk standards, or if you save a white child, you know, and none of that should be required, right? Freedom of movement, like so like borders literally were created by colonial imperialists, right? Like white supremacist. So the idea that we now all somehow need to be somehow valuable to the country that be is quite literally an ableist construct. And I'll give you an example. When Black folks were purchasing there their legal freedom in the United States context, one of the requirements in many of the states was not just that the Black person would have to pay themselves and their family members off to their master, so-called master; but there also was a fee that the Black person would have to pay to the state so that they did not become, and I quote, a "public charge." And that's the language that we see today about people becoming a public charge. Oh, you know, we can't accept, disabled migrants or anyone who might - I mean, it's not even just abled folks. That means if you have children who rely on the food being provided in schools, if you have, you know, anything, right? And now you're a "public charge." That is ableism. But it's always tinged in the other oppression that's needed to kind of justify it. So in this case you know, alleged race or ethnicity, religious-alleged religious ties, et cetera. So yeah. And people need to be on guard and on notice and people need to start naming that as exactly what it is, which is all of those things. It's not one or the other. And this is why you're the co-host of a podcast called At the Intersection, because if you don't name it, we actually help perpetuate it by simply saying it's just racism or it's just ableism. We have to name it as precisely what it is. And so yeah, you're, you're absolutely right. I don't think most people realize that this idea of productivity, the eight hour workday, you know, the five day work week, all of that stuff is actually enabling them. So yeah, it's, it's quite, quite ironic.

Marion: Yeah. And it's interesting too how much I think our communities internalize these ideas of productivity and how we have to be, you know, like valuable members of society or worthwhile members of society, and can internalize all of these tropes about not needing support and not needing help and being able to do things on your own. Like, the idea that you know, that you could be depressed or that you could have a disability. That's not something that we want to talk about because we want to be seen as strong and we want to be seen as valuable. And it's, I feel like that sort of fear in using those words are acknowledging those truths ends up just sort of being more violence against us.

TL: I think you're right and I, but I, I want to put the onus back on where it belongs. So we have only internalized that because we've been forced to, right? Our communities at their heart did not exist in the ways that they currently exist as a result of colonialism or imperialism. So, interdependence is part and parcel of most indigenous communities' roots. Right? The idea that we're all going to be working together, the idea that we're not putting grandma in any sort of a medically industrialized space, we're just going to work together to support grandma until she passes away. All of those things were quite literally the root of most indigenous communities. We'll have some people who go out for the hunt, some people who stay to make sure that they're prepared to cook, you know, and, and that's perfectly fine. There was no problem with that. The reasons we've

had to internalize a lot of this is for quite literally survival purposes, right? So we had to force our children to work as hard as possible so they weren't sold off. That's a real concern. That's a real valid response to violence. If you know that your child who's disabled will be, you know, slower than the other folks, we have to figure out a way that that child can now speed up their process or help slow down the other people to keep everybody in pace. So when we see a convict leasing prison songs, when we actually hear so-called slave songs, a lot of them were centered around work and keeping pace, keeping time. And the reason for that was because they didn't want anyone to come back with more or less than the other for fear of the whip or death or selling off. So we have had to create survival strategies, most of which have centered around productivity, for various reasons.

Marion: And that moves on to today. Like that's why our parents say you've got to do really well in school, because they know what happens to Black children who "don't do well in school." They know better than having their kids labeled as disabled because for Black children labeled as disabled, we ended up in the class that holds us back as opposed to getting provided support. So our parents are very aware and even though they don't necessarily have that language to understand the oppressive system in which they'd come up in, all they know is that they're trying to save us. Right? And so it also just gives us more grace to them and for them and for their approaches, their often hard line and sometimes violent approaches to rearing us. Right. You know, and love comes in many forms, but when you're operating under systems like this, the love often has to be harsh and it has to be unforgiving. And we often take that out on our people and our elders, but they're doing it quite literally to save our lives. And then that doesn't justify any violence. It just again puts the onus where it needs to go. , we can unlearn some of this behavior, but not until we're able to name, what is happening and why is it happening. , and what's problematic about the root of that behavior, if that makes sense.

Marion: It does. Yeah. And it's true, like the idea of having to show our family and our loved ones grace for just sort of how they reared us and the harshness in a way. Like, I think of - that wasn't something I was able to do until I became an adult and realized, the reason that my mom was so strict about how I was doing in school and how my brother was doing in school was because I was square in that group of girls who, because we weren't hyperactive, our ADD wasn't diagnosed as children. But it was definitely something that I had; and my brother, he's 10 years younger than me, but he also, since he was "hyperactive" he was easier to spot and easier to diagnose. And that was my mom's great fear, right? That if somebody labeled us that way, they would use that as an excuse to not support us, not allow us to be at that school, to hold us back in some way and to sort of keep us from having the things that they came to this country to give us. And so a lot of the way she raised us was out of that fear and was out of that desire to keep us safe in a really hostile environment?

TL: Yep, Yep. I find that when I'm talking with especially Black folks of the entire diaspora, it doesn't matter where in the world where I'm talking to folks, where they're from. But we have a very common experience, with, with our elders, when they are harsh, they are doing it, you know, out of often fear. And you have to, we have to figure out ways to have a lot of those conversations there. So important. And I think that they would help us heal from a lot of the traumas that actually were caused as a result of some of, what

could be viewed as abuse, so-called discipline, et cetera. , that, you know, they really felt was necessary. And you know, that can be argued what any way you want to cut it. But I think just naming the genesis is really important.

TL: And related to that, this Ode to the Runners that I'm working on, I specifically talk about how natural response to -- it's not always that we fear law enforcement, it's that we know that they fear us, right?

Marion: And if they act out of that fear, we're dead

TL: . Right. And they have the power to kill us. Right? And so we, it's the fear of the power that they hold. And, there's one, I think it was W.E.B. Dubois actually who said "I am not afraid of you. I am a victim of your fear." And so I feel like that gives a lot of credence to our natural responses to run or freeze or whatever the natural response for each individual person is to law enforcement. But to discount it as some sort of resisting arrest, as some sort of inane behavior is able to them and it's racism, and it's a complete misunderstanding of our past and our current lived experiences. And it does not give Black people especially, and indigenous folks especially, the benefit of being human, right. , it doesn't allow us to have any sort of expansive humanity. And that's always been what ableism and racism and classism and all the isms have done, is shrinking people's humanity. Shrinking our ability to exist and have the same reactions as little Sally, which, okay, Sally's crying because the cop is making her nervous. Oh, Sally, don't worry. You go ahead and have a great rest of the day, but get Jermaine in there shaking. Oh, now you look guilty of something. What's going on? Do you have a gun on you? Yeah. So it's, you know, I just think it's really important that we understand. , and also the gaslighting of Black responses, right?

TL: So often what cops will say, I'm speaking of Jermaine, there was a man named Jermaine Rush in Asheville, North Carolina, close to where you are. Last year in the spring or summer, who was literally walking home from work. And, it's late at night. He explained to the police on camera, "I just got off of work. I'm exhausted, I'm trying to get home." And he said, "Why are y'all always harassing me?" And the two white cops, one looks at him and says, "This is all in your head." Now mind you, this is 12 o'clock at night, he's walking up the street, they're busy talking about he's jaywalking, trying to give him a ticket. , and yeah, sure enough, within a minute and a half he was beat to a pulp, tazed et cetera, for nothing. Quite literally for being "voice-y" with them or chatty with them, talking back, so called, right.

TL: So it's the gaslighting. And then after the white cops brutalize him, they say, "This is your fault. Why did you make us do this, man? Why'd you make us do dah dah dah?" So it's the gaslighting of us for our real, natural responses to these things. And then to pretend that it was all your fault, that you just got shot in the back because you ran from me. Why would you do that? Why'd you make - and the question is,

Marion: Like the bullet in the back isn't reason enough.

Marion: Right. And the provocation is all wrong and it's been all wrong all along. The question is not, why did you run? The question is, why can't you see my humanity? Why did you shoot? Why are y'all holding my people captive? Why are we stuck on your plantation, right? So drapetomania, call it what you will, but running from things like that, it's the highest form of resistance. It should be honored, right? I'm like, yo, you're literally communicating, "I want to live, I want to go home. I want to see my family. I want, I want to survive." That's what you're literally saying. And we've criminalized and deemed it insane, right?. And so again, I don't know how people are trying to have conversations about racism without talking about ableism, have no idea how all these white disabled books are trying to have conversations about ableism without racism. I personally just cannot separate them in my mind and heart and my body. And so that's kind of where I stand on that.

Marion: I think that's real. I guess one question that just comes to mind, like this, the work that you're doing and just sort of like, the fact that this work lives in you in a very real way. How do you just, how do you take care of yourself?

TL: That's honestly...it's a struggle. And I'm trying to undo ableism and racism, like within my own person. It's a large part of my work. Cuz I still have all of the things, right? All of the feelings that you mentioned. Oh, I never really, I knew there was a concern around this idea of "productivity" and I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I put my fingers on it and I'm still trying to get it away from me. Right. I'm still clawing at it, trying to move it further from me. Trying to really dismantle all of those things within myself. So part of my self-care practice is talking to folks who understand disability and racism in ways that I can expand my own understanding. So folks like Dustin, Leroy Moore, a lot of folks who are Black and indigenous and disabled.

TL: So it's like, where do you find your solace? It's usually in people who are connected to your identity in some way, at the intersections with you, you know, living with that experience. , I just, I have a support that I've put in place who literally writes food into my eating. You know, it seems seems very simple, but writes eating into my calendar. So I remember to eat. I have accountability partners who check in on me to ask me if I drink water and go to the bathroom. And in many instances people would think that that makes you less than, again, that's ableism. But really I just, I do some things well and I don't do other things well. And that's true about everyone and there's nothing wrong with that. Some people need a little bit more support in areas and some people need less.

TL: My partner who passed away Ki'tay Davidson has a quote, and I'm paraphrasing. Ki'tay would say that the difference between the needs of people who've been labeled as disabled and the needs of people who have not been labeled as disabled is that the needs of those who have not been labeled as disabled have simply been normalized. So by that, I'm like, so we're all interdependent. So if you think about the clothes that each of us are wearing right now, the chair that we're sitting on, think about the last time you asked a loved one for advice on a particular decision you needed to make. But if you happen to not to be labeled as disabled, people are like, oh, you just need help deciding what apartment you wanted to rent, or how much you were able to pay. You just needed to talk through that. And the same is true if you look at in university or classes,

the moment a child who is labeled as disabled has a question for the professor or the teacher, Oh, you need additional help. Like this is a problem. But if it's the so called high achiever, Oh yeah, let's go sit down and do coffee. No problem. But that is support. So we've normalized those kinds of supports for people who are not labeled as disabled, for people who are not Black, for people who are not low-income, Houseless. Oh, now all of a sudden your need for shelter over your head becomes a problem, whereas everybody needs that anyway.

TL: And so I guess with my definition of ableism, the most important part of my definition, and this gets missed often in most of the disability community, is that you don't have to be disabled to experience ableism. And in fact, if you live at the intersections of any identity, you will experience ableism because women are supposed to produce more, you know. Disabled people can't actually be disabled, you need to produce something and you can't be a public charge. Indigenous people, oh, they're all out there not doing anything they're supposed to do. Yeah. So all of us have actually experienced ableism whether or not we're disabled. If you live at the margins - trans folks, LGBTQAI folks, you know, all of that. And I think that's the most important part of the definition, because once you understand that ableism is what's undergirding most of these other forms, if not all of the other forms. I've challenged people to have me talk through each, each form of oppression that they can name, and quite literally, there hasn't been one that I haven't been able to figure out how ableism is quite literally at the root. And so yeah, it's radical by its nature. And it's so amorphous that you often don't see it, because it's, it's I dunno, it's like a chameleon the way that it operates.

Marion: It's constantly shifting the goalposts. Yeah.

TL: Yeah. So.

Marion: It's weird, I just like - and this isn't necessarily connected to anything specific that we've talked about already, but - I've only recently awoken to the fact that I'm disabled. I have arthritis, and I don't have any cartilage in my left knee. And like this is something that has taken me---this has been true since I was like 17 or 18, but it's not something that I've been able to fully acknowledging until recently. And yeah, sort of my self perception and just like the idea of me being physically capable and physically productive. Like, I used to be an athlete, and so the fact that I can't do things that I could do when I was younger. Part of that is just because I'm 31 and like, I'm not a teenager anymore. But part of that is just because I have less ability than when I was younger. And yeah, trying to unlearn all of the toxic ideas about productivity and what makes me valuable has been, it's been a real journey, I guess. Like I'm still working on it and there's some days that I just feel like...I just use terrible language about my body and what it's able to do. And my wife has to be like, "Listen, you're not, your worth is not bound up in what your body is physically capable of doing." And I mean, god bless her, she's a wonderful person. But like, yeah, it's hard to really believe that some days, and then some days it's easier, and some days I'm just like, yeah, I can't have this be unlearned today. Do you know what I mean?

TL: Yes. I mean, what you're saying is so real. There's two things I want to respond to to that. One is I just want to honor that you are literally on a journey and that that journey

will continue for the rest of your life. And that's a gift. And so what folks who are in the disability justice community don't say it's like, "oh, everything's fine and hunky-dory about being disabled." We acknowledge that being disabled has it's pros and has it's cons. You have to ask the person. And even from day to day, like one day you'll be like, "Oh, doesn't bother me at all." You're out swimming. And the next day you're like, "Oh my God, I can't move, this is hell on earth." And that's real, and it should be acknowledged. So a lot of disability rights folks are like, "I'm disabled and proud and everything is great with disability." Like, that's actually just not like a real lived experience, and kind of how people experience disability, like, some disability is very painful. Some disability makes our youth die early, you know, these sorts of things. And so that has to be acknowledged. So I wanna - you're being vulnerable and honest about exactly what your experience is and that's a good thing. You want to, you do want to do that on your journey. The second thing is that, what I'll say is related to just this feeling of - okay. Sometimes you're not ready to learn or be positive that day. I have a piece that I wrote called "Disability Ain't For Ya Dozens." And there's a part in there where I write -- this was a piece I wrote specifically for Black folks -- and there's a part in there where I talk about the fact that ableism has convinced even those of us who know better that some particular people are smarter than us or better than us.

TL: Like, I know better than that, but some days I, I do find myself saying, "Well, maybe, gosh, maybe they're all right." Like, you know what I mean? And that's because this is generations of this, it's learned behavior, generations into it. And so we're not going to get rid of it overnight. It is a journey for every single one of us. Even those of us, I know better than to think that, I know better than to...but sometimes you, I quite literally can't help myself. And that's how you know that, that something is a systemic problem, right? When it's not about you, the individual, saying, "Oh, I, you know, I'm sad about that." It's like, the system has made me believe this thing that I know is not true. You know? So I think we have to, again, put the onus back on the system where these thoughts and feelings often are coming from. And then also your own body where it's like, "Yo, this really just hurts, and I'm really sick today, and I can't function, and that's not a good feeling." And so, giving your body and your mind grace around that too. But yeah, I just want to honor your journey and I I appreciate you being so vulnerable in this conversation around that.

Marion: Yeah. Well thank you for saying that. I guess vulnerability's also like sort of a difficult, it's a difficult thing to sit in. It's just not like, it's not my typical mode and something - that's another journey that I'm kind of on, just being okay with being vulnerable about just anything.

TL: Hmm. That's real too.

Marion: I know we don't have a ton of time left and I feel like you said so many like nuggets that I want to dive into, but I like, I want to be respectful of your time. , I think my one, like I do have a question just about the difference between disability rights as a movement and disability justice, because you mentioned that these two groups have different language and sort of different priorities in how you talk about disability. And so I'd love if you could just shine a light on that.

TL: Yeah. So where do I begin? In large part, the disability rights movement has been informed by the law. It's this idea that disabled people have particularized rights because they are inherently human, and then the law bestows these things upon them, right? So it's rights-based justice, so called. And so the legal definition of disability is, and I'll say it a little bit slowly, "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity." Now, what you and I have just discussed is that many of our marginalized communities, in fact, most if not all of marginalized communities, we quite literally function day to day without any sort of substantial limitations, at least that we can acknowledge because we literally lived our whole lives with trauma, pain, CPTSD, whatever, whatever the disability is. And it's so innate in us that we don't, that the system, the legal system doesn't acknowledge that our disability exists simply because it doesn't fit that narrow definition. Right? So our kid who's hungry at school gets labeled, you know, unruly, but that's actually, if you want to call it a disability, being hungry every day is kind of a disability. You can either address that hunger issue or say, "Oh, you know, well, Jermaine doesn't have a formal IEP and doesn't have a formal diagnosis, so therefore they're not going to get those accommodations." Right?

TL: And so what happens under the disability rights framework is that people who have money, who have health insurance, who have parents who know how to navigate these systems, and will have time to navigate these systems, get the supports, people who are in contact with attorneys who are disability rights attorneys - ask them to take on a case, right? But the people who don't have diagnoses because our community don't have insurance, we don't talk about disability in the same way, because it's so normalized in our community that we don't even recognize that there's a thing there that might be deemed disability, don't get supports, Aand once, for example, you mentioned that your mom probably recognize that you and one of your siblings had maybe a developmental or learning disability and decided kind of, "Ah, let's not really talk about that." With one of you did, and with the other of you didn't, and made some conscious decisions around that based on her understanding of the systems at the times in which both of you grew up. Those are the kinds of calculus that our parents have to-- it's almost like a roulette really. "Do I want to, do I not want to, what can be, what are the negative ramifications of those things?" And under the disability justice framework, so disability justice is a practice that was created by all Black or negatively racialized folks with disabilities. And the reasons folks had to come up with this practice is because disability, it's a holistic understanding of justice that not just-- Disability rights focuses on "independence," focuses on access. Disability justice focuses on interdependence focuses on access, yes, as love, but love as proxies, focuses on anti-everything. So anti-racism, Anti-trans antagonism, anti-Semitism, focusing on all of the things because we recognize that folks who are disabled are experiencing all of these things at the same time. You can't simply focus that and then the person is still being beat down in other ways, right? ,

TL: But also just that, you know, disability rights quite literally doesn't reach us. And that's because again, our disabilities have been erased, and because disability is so fluid, right? So disability, your, ADHD for example, looks different than Billy's ADHD. Someone's Black autistic child looks a little bit different than the white autistic child, right? Everyone's cancer is not the same. Even if you both have the exact same kind of cancer. So we understand that with other disabilities, but we don't understand that with

emotional, traumatic, trauma-induced, poverty-induced disabilities and white folks in positions of power tend not to understand most of the disabilities that are wrought by environmental injustice, economic injustice, racism. So those just get kind of pushed to the wayside when those are the kinds of violences that are creating a lot of the disabilities in our communities that need to be addressed.

TL: So disability rights is just lacking in a lot of ways. And that's not to say that it doesn't have value. Right? And you understand that often when I have this conversation with white disabled folks, they're all, you know, offended and yeah, I can't believe you would say that. Look at what the Americans with Disabilities Act has done. And, and yes, we, we of course that's been of help, but to fail to recognize that this is just not working for everyone again, does a disservice to everyone. And again, this is why you have this podcast called At the Intersection.

Marion: Yeah. You can't just pull out one thing at expense of all the others because that means you're, you're not honestly looking at the one thing, because you're forgetting all of the other things.

TL: Right, exactly. You're actually perpetuating a lot of the problems that occur. And just understanding that the law, this is kind of really important and I think people miss this so much and this is across the board, not only related to disability or race, but people who look to the law of some sort of end all be all salvation. Litigation is only going to get you so far. And it usually, in the disability context, just helps entities figure out ways to avoid being sued next time, right? That doesn't mean that they're going to be, that doesn't mean there's anything beyond what they're legally required to do if the line is what they're basing this off of, right? So you get that and, so sure, that might help the one person who sued that one time, but how long will that last? Who gets to sue? Right? If you look at most of the cases that are coming forward, majority wealthy, upper echelons, less-than-marginalized people have these great disability rights law suits. And I don't know that they're benefiting the vast majority of disabled communities. And what I'll say about disability, and I probably should have opened with this, is what we know is that in every single marginalized community, disability is disproportionately represented. And that is because of the oppression that each of those marginalized communities experience and the violence that each of those marginalized communities experience, whether or not it's named as disability. What we know is that low-income folks, women, trans folks, gender nonconforming folks, Black folks folks, even in Jewish communities, which is a whole other conversation as well, but necessary to have, have as a result of years and years of oppression or deprivation of particularized things that are needed to survive and thrive have higher rates of disability.

TL: And often those higher rates of disability are discounted, are erased or ignored or gaslit or blamed on us. And so I think that's really important framework to understand why talking about disability is critically necessary at the intersection of any marginalized identity and disability is really the tie that binds all of us, right? Any race can have a disability. You can be white, indigenous, whatever. It's, it's the one thing that cuts across every single identity, quite literally all the time. So indigenous folks, because of the violence indigenous folks continue to experience have higher rates of disability than even Black communities. Right? And it makes sense if you actually think about a lot of

these things. It's a really wretched, wretched way of making sense. But it makes a lot of sense that, you know, addiction disabilities would be higher, in communities that have been traumatized and need an escape.

Marion: Yeah. Like, this stuff lives in our bodies. It's like everything that you mentioned, like environmental injustice, economic injustice, you know, all of these things end up living in our bodies. And so they show up as, you know, like higher rates of disability and higher rates of hunger and higher rates of addiction disability -

TL: Heart disease. All these, all these things.

Marion: And then, you know, people will turn around and say, "Well, it's because of the Bojangles." It's like, well, I mean, first of all, hands off my Bojangles, this is what I need to be happy. But like, second of all, this isn't my doing. This is the entire system that has conspired to keep us marginalized and keep us away from freedom, basically to keep us from liberation. And that's what's showing up. It's not the Bojangles. It's not.

TL: That's right. It's often not even hereditary. And the ways that a lot of white people's research likes to try to show, right? It's literally, it's from the, so people refused--white folks especially who are doing "research" around heredity in disability forget that oh, that child, that mother, that grandmother, that great grandmother are literally living in the same community, experiencing the same traumas. Now you're going to say, "Oh, they all just have some heart disease. It's genetic." As opposed to, "I wonder what's going on around them in their community that all four of them, one's a baby at the age of five already has heart disease. Oh, you mean it's the economic and nutritional and violent conditions? Oh, there's that." Right? So it's this, again is this urge to figure out how to blame our communities for things that quite literally are foisted upon us by very powerful and destructive systems. So yeah. Yeah. It's something else. It really is something else.

Marion: Well, something that my friend and mentor Omisade Burney Scott says, is that if pain and trauma are part of, like if we inherit pain and trauma from our ancestors, we also inherit their joy and their resilience and their liberation. And so, you know, it can be easy to get bogged down in the fact that like, we are living in the trauma of our ancestors and living in the trauma of our communities. But there's also so much joy to be found and so much strength and power, and that's something I try to try to hold onto when I feel like, wow, I just cannot, I just cannot win in this system.

TL: Yeah. You know, it's like, okay, there's this, the popular quote that "we are our ancestors' wildest dreams," but they did, they dreamed about us! Like, we were their dream. Like, most of us aren't even supposed to physically be here. Genocide by colonialists, whether from Germany to Dutch people, "Americans," England or Britain. They literally were trying to kill pretty much all of us off. So the fact that we're even here is like a miracle in and of itself. But like, but yeah, and then just in the joy of it, like Black joy is real. So like even if you look at how we laugh, like our laughter, like we'd be running around the room, we just, we live to our fullest. Our music, like there's so much to have joy in and around, and I feel like our ancestors had to, had to have that to survive.

TL: And again, this is why when I talk about how our experiences, like it's, yes, they were living in deep, deep, deep throes of violence, but they also had to find joy in things like, or they wouldn't have survived because there wasn't medicine, there was no doctors' couches. There was no, like they had to figure out how were they going to survive. And that means that joy existed in some meaningful ways. And we have evidence of that all over the place. I think in our bodies and in our hearts is kind of where it exists the most. But we also do have a musical evidence of that and we have cultural evidence of that, and it's something that should be honored as well. For sure. Yeah.

Marion: I feel that. So I have one last question for you before we sign off. And this is a question that we like to ask all of our guests. So, how do you want your reparations?

TL: Hmm. Okay. Okay. Ooh.

Marion: It's a doozy.

TL: Hmm. Okay. Give me a second to process that.

Marion: Yeah for sure.

TL: Okay. Okay. Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Right. Okay. That's such a,wow, such a gift of a question. Yeah, yeah. Okay. Yeah. You know, it's going to sound...I would, it's going to sound a little bit selfish, but again...

Marion: I think we deserve to be a little bit selfish.

TL: I want to, I don't want to be doing the work that I'm doing. Yeah. Fix Your Shit. Like, work that we are doing right now is literally, was literally caused by people who are not my--well, they're my ancestors through rape, but are not my chosen ancestors. And here I am hundreds of years later doing precisely the same work as those who came before me, in a little bit different of a way, and I'm beyond tired. I'm beyond in a rage. It's the injustice of, of doing this work to try to free people from cages and free people from unjust material conditions hundreds of years after my ancestors landed on this stolen land after being stolen from our homeland. Like it's, you can't put it into words. There's no language that encompasses the feeling of never knowing what my name is. Like I literally still have the name of people who owned my people. Like there's no, there's no words to explain to explain it. And it makes sense that our people are angry. And , I think reparations for me is that not just that I shouldn't be doing any of this work. That all of the things that are wrong need to be made right however possible. But like that my children and their children and their children should never be where I am mentally at this point in my life as a result of people who are not my people. So it's like, yo, like make this stop. Like don't, I don't know, the reparations for me is like, I shouldn't be doing this like that. There's no reason for me to still be doing this when my ancestors have put in all the blood.

TL: So I dunno, I guess it's not selfish at all. It's like, tired. We're tired. The folks in positions of power, have to really step up and change this and we'll be, you know, we could do

this for seven more generations and, and they'll be reading what I wrote and as sad as I am and whatever the word that is, that I had this emotion that I had that I can't put words to, whatever that is. I don't want them to be feeling that seven generations from now. Like that's just wild. And that to me is liberation of like, it's not just my personal, it's like creating our unborn or yet unborn. I don't even have children right now. I'm kinda like, "oh, I don't want them to feel this." Like, and then even not my children, cause you know, in Black and indigenous communities, we have children who are not our own that we kind of take care of.

TL: And so, you know, I just, I want, I just want an end to all the violence to all the injustice. , and I, you know, reparations for me, I wish I knew my name. I don't, I don't even know my name. I don't know my people. Yeah. I hate talking to white people about it because they'll say ignorant things like, "Oh, just go get a DNA test." I'm like, you don't even understand. Like you're missing, you're missing, first of all, I'm not even gonna talk about how those, those tests are used against people. But second of all, it's like, it's not, it's about the culture. It's like the loss of, like, my story. Yeah. And in that way, I think that reparations can never be repaid. Like I'm literally still trying to find my kin, like, and all of them, all of the generations will be continuing to do that.

TL: Where are your people from? That is something that can never, unless they were to find all of the records of all the people they just sold as, as chattel. And then, that's the thing, they didn't even keep track because we were, we were not even humans. Yeah. No. And so far as property is concerned, we were, we were quite literally the brutes. Wwe were literally lumped into categories with cattle and horses. So yeah, I want to know my name. I want to know my people. I want to know my culture. Obviously I have a culture now, right? And I don't want to discount or de-value that, but I think you understand my point. And then the second is to like free up the next generations from this kind of toil and labor and exhaustion from doing the work that they should never have to do. So, yeah.

Marion: Well that wasn't remotely selfish. I think you set it up to be like, "One giant diamond that's just for me."

TL: Nah, not at all. Yeah. Okay. Well thanks for that question though. I wasn't ready.

Marion: I can appreciate that and I really appreciate your time and your wisdom and your vulnerability today. I think it has, this has been really illuminating for me and it has been very emotional for me and so I appreciate you just engaging in this conversation with me.

TL: It's been, my honor. Thanks so much for inviting me to be with you and be present. I really appreciate the work you're doing as well to bring about some more clarity to some of these conversations that need more nuance. Well, thank you.

Marion: Thanks very much. All right.