

Book Review: Dreaming in the Shadow of the State: Prefigurative Politics in *Abolition and Social Work* and the We Charge Genocide Campaigns

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ABSTRACT This article reviews *Abolition and Social Work: Possibilities, Paradoxes, and the Practice of Community Care*, and places the anthology in conversation with the 1951 and 2014 “We Charge Genocide” (WCG) campaigns against the United States and the City of Chicago Police Department, respectively. Through these case studies of abolitionist praxis, I explore two key themes of the book. The first theme is the paradox of abolitionist social work, with its imperative to prefigure the world we want from within a professional field that has, since its inception, been complicit in state violence. The second theme concerns abolitionist epistemology that attends to counter-histories of social work, and to anticolonial, Black, and Indigenous theorizations of care. Both WCG and *Abolition and Social Work* demonstrate that prefigurative politics, guided by marginalized histories and frameworks of care, are fundamental to the work of imagining and building an abolitionist future within the trappings of the carceral present.

KEYWORDS abolition, social work, prefigurative politics, state violence, book review

Figure 1. Ric and Breanna, Geneva



Note: From *WCG to UN, Day 1: Ric and Breanna on Our First Day in Geneva!* (WCG, 2014)

GENEVA, 2014. THE MEDIUM IS CYBERSPACE: a YouTube video posted a long decade ago. Two Black young adults sit in frame. Breanna tells the camera that they arrived in Geneva early in the morning after leaving Chicago “at 6 o’clock at night” (We Charge Genocide [WCG], 2014b, 0:27). “It was really frickin’ early,” she says, to laughter from her companion, Ric (0:23). But she says she is getting by because there is “so much positive energy amongst the eight of us that it feels good” (0:42). “And we’re in Europe—this is my first time out of the country, which is a really good experience” (0:47).

“This is my first time leaving the country, as well,” says Ric (WCG, 2014b, 0:51). He describes the logy elation of a tourist’s arrival—thrilling at “hearing people’s accents” (1:01), at taking in “the different cultures and everything” (1:03). He notes distinctions in infrastructure and mass transit, and talks of taking the train, the bus.

“People weren’t checking our ticket all the time,” he says, suddenly staid (WCG, 2014b, 1:18). Breanna nods, adding a resolute “Yeah,” and focuses her attention on him (1:21). He talks of “really just, like, enjoying public transportation for once without worrying about that” (1:22). “I rarely saw any cops, and...no one stopped and frisked me when I was walking down the street, or asked me if I had any weed—I didn’t feel like I was targeted at all” (1:30). Breanna snaps her fingers resoundingly. This poignant shared experience of absence—the absence of police as a fixture of mundane intrusion—marked the pair’s first day outside the United States.

“Some folks did look at us weird” (WCG, 2014b, 1:43), Ric acknowledges, quickly offering the offending voyeurs the reprieve that it was “probably because of the way we talked” (1:44). He chuckles at the idea that their accents had them geopolitically pegged: “Damn, these are *Americans*” (1:48).

Figure 2. Ethan Viets-VanLear, Still from “For Damo”



Note: From *For Damo* (Viets-VanLear, 2014)

Who are these young people, bleary-eyed and exhilarated, hopeful and wary? What brings them and their six companions so far from home? These questions led me to the Chicago Public Library—specifically, the eighteen linear feet of artifacts that comprise the Mariame Kaba Papers. That’s

where I learned about the organization these young activists founded in 2014, We Charge Genocide (WCG), and of the 1951 movement that inspired them.

For one member of the group, Ethan Viets-VanLear, the story of WCG begins with Damo (Viets-VanLear, 2014). But where and when Damo's story begins, for Ethan, is no straightforward matter itself. It is a question he attends to in verse, in a poem that wanders the meridian between life and death, between a hospital bed and a succession of violent institutions, pacing through the years, falling into chorus with the stories of Damo's ancestors, and echoing through the archways and columns of the Geneva campus of the United Nations (UN). *The state had long since claimed his flesh as its property*, Ethan eulogizes, as he traverses the UN grounds in his short film titled "For Damo" (Viets-VanLear, 2014, 1:50). *No one hardly fucking flinched, hearing he had passed on, pressed to those hospital sheets / Him and his ancestors past had long before prophesized his tragic murder* (1:58).

A 2015 op-ed in *Truthout*, penned by three other members of the group, begins this way: "Dominique Franklin Jr. was killed by Chicago Police in May 2014. He was 23 years old and Black. He was loved, and people called him Damo" (Ransby-Sporn et al., 2015). As the article details, "Following his death, a group of Damo's friends, friends of his friends and local Chicago activists came together" (Ransby-Sporn et al., 2015). This group of young organizers of color formed a new collective:

a reiteration of a group of Black activists who in 1951 took a petition to the United Nations. The petition, called 'We Charge Genocide,' cited over 150 police killings of Black people in the United States. We decided to compile a similar report about police violence against youth of color in Chicago and to send a delegation to Switzerland to present the report to the UN Committee Against Torture. (para. 3)

At the heart of the 2014 We Charge Genocide (WCG) campaign seems to have been an embrace of the paradox of inhabiting an "elsewhere and elsewhen" (Moten, 2013, p. 746; Snorton, 2017, p. 5)—fundamentally, the tension inherent in prefigurative politics between structure and agency; between the "nonevent of 1863" and the "asymptote of abolition" (Shange, 2019, p. 90); between the horizons of possibility and the trappings of now. Yet, by staging their radical political acts within the forum of the UN, the delegation explored what prefigurative politics look like "within the social relations of oppressive systems and societies" (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. 284). They differentiated between prefigurative and reformist politics and practice, and imagined how one might practice and build abolitionist futures while embedded within the carceral state. They also engaged the tension and dialogue between utopia and dystopia, between "dreaming in place" (Brown, 2021, p. 1) and "charging genocide," as an approach to dismantling anti-Black state and transnational operations (Shange, 2019).

Figure 3. We Charge Genocide Artwork



Note. From *We Charge Genocide [Archive]* (Mariama Kaba Papers, 2014)

I found myself returning to WCG’s example again and again recently as I read the inspiring new anthology from editors Mimi E. Kim, Cameron W. Rasmussen, and Durrell M. Washington Sr., *Abolition and Social Work: Possibilities, Paradoxes, and the Practice of Community Care* (Kim et al., 2024). The book aims to “push...the social work profession towards anti-carceral and abolitionist politics and praxis” (p. 23), even as its authors grapple with the inherent contradictions of “abolitionist social work” as a political project. Divided into three sections—Possibilities, Paradoxes, and Praxis—*Abolition and Social Work* dispenses incisive critique of the social work field’s longstanding entanglement with and extension of the prison industrial complex (PIC), while rallying social workers to help imagine and build abolitionist realities.

By putting this anthology in conversation with the 2014 WCG delegation and the 1951 petition that inspired it, I explore two of the book's central themes. The first is the paradox of abolitionist social work and its imperative to “build[] the new within the old” (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. 284), even as abolitionists acknowledge their embeddedness within hierarchical systems, historical processes, and structures of power. The second theme I highlight is the vital importance of abolitionist epistemology that attends to counter-histories of social work, as well as anticolonial, Black, and Indigenous epistemologies of care. As the contributors to *Abolition and Social Work* variously explore, an abolitionist approach to knowledge-making necessitates accounting for the inequalities of power in social work’s narration of its past and present; uplifting historical counternarratives and epistemes that “illuminate the radical imagination and everyday anarchy” of “the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved” (Hartman, 2019, pp. xiii-xiv); and attending to the “overlapping sites” where social work’s “history is produced, notably outside of academia” (Kim et al., 2024, p. 19).

ABOLITION, SOCIAL WORK, AND THE STATE

Out of the inhuman black ghettos of American cities, out of the cotton plantations of the South, comes this record of mass slayings on the basis of race, of lives deliberately warped and distorted by the willful creation of conditions making for premature death, poverty, and disease. (Civil Rights Congress, 1951, p. xi)

These words begin the 1951 petition *We Charge Genocide*, a record of US state violence that implicates “the consistent, conscious, unified policies of every branch of government” and “calls aloud for condemnation” (Civil Rights Congress, 1951, p. xi). The report opens with a page bearing only the title’s three stark words, followed by a harrowing full-page image of the lynching of two young Black men, Dooley Morton and Bert Moore, in Mississippi. The caption calls the two young men “The Face of Genocide,” followed by the line: “Such horrifying violence is only one of the many crimes against the Negro people of the United States which together form the major crime of genocide” (p. xi).

Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide follows, which had been adopted only a few years prior, in 1948, on the heels of the Nuremberg trials. The petition argues that “Every word...voiced [by Justice Robert H. Jackson, the U.S. Supreme Court justice who presided over the Nuremberg trials] against the monstrous Nazi beast applies with equal weight, we believe, to those who are guilty of the crimes herein set forth” (p. xii). The report focuses on the extrajudicial killings of Black people, especially Black men and boys, by state agents. “Once the classic method of lynching was the rope,” the petition reads; “Now it is the policeman’s bullet” (p. 8). Noting that “To many an American the police are the government, certainly its most visible representative,” the petition argues that “the killing of Negroes has become police policy in the United States and that police policy is the most practical expression of government policy” (pp. 8-9).

One might ask why these petitioners selected this international forum and this juridical approach to levy their charges against the US state—wise, as they were, to the ways Western imperialism has structured systems of international law, and racism has been inscribed in rights of citizenship. Many of the petitioners shared a radical, internationalist, anti-capitalist, and anticolonial political vision, one that would see the establishment of “a people’s democracy on a universal scale” (Civil Rights Congress, 1951, p. xiii). As the petitioners put it, “There may be debate as to the expediency of condemning the Government of the United States for the genocide it practices and permits against the 15,000,000 of its citizens who are Negroes,” even as “There can be none about the existence of the crime” (p. 195). What liberatory aims might they have hoped to achieve within the anti-Black systems and structures of international law and governance?

It is a question that might similarly be applied to the project of abolitionist social work, and one that the contributors to *Abolition and Social Work* grapple with throughout the text: what liberatory aims might social workers hope to achieve within a field with an ongoing history of “carceral progressivism” (Shange, 2019, p. 14)—of carceral complicity and collaboration, rationalized through the language of social justice? It is a question that occupied the Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work (NAASW) at its inception. The anthology chapter authored by representatives of the NAASW describes how the group came together amid the uprisings against white supremacy and anti-Black state violence in the summer of 2020, as the profession was being

widely critiqued for “its own traditions of police collaboration and role in the surveillance and discipline of this country’s dispossessed” (Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work, 2024, p. 1). NAASW members engaged in a deep and unresolved “debate about whether we should be working to abolish social work altogether, rather than move forward with a faction of social work practice rooted in abolitionist praxis” (NAASW, 2024, p. 23).

The book’s contributors share no unified position on what constitutes abolitionist social work praxis, “but instead hope to share a porous scaffolding for bridging politics and practice for those in the social work field who seek to participate in freedom work that actualizes material change and structural transformation” (NAASW, 2024, p. 23). In doing this, they offer a framework that helps social workers locate opportunities to engage in abolitionist praxis by analyzing the ways that their work interfaces with the state (classified as work that’s done *against, outside of, inside, or around* state carceral institutions) (pp. 28-29; also *Interrupting Criminalization*, 2023; Chavez, 2020). Social work done inside carceral institutions, they argue, is fundamentally in conflict with abolitionist aims.

Yet the book also pushes social workers to look beyond the state institutions and functions typically recognized as *carceral*, to dream and build new approaches to *care*. As Ramona Beltran and co-authors write in the chapter titled “Indigenist Abolition,” “At its core, abolition is about imagination and creation beyond the colonial and carceral state” (Beltran et al., 2024, p. 46). The relationship between social work, abolition, and the state is addressed most directly in the chapter penned by Mimi E. Kim and Cameron Rasmussen, titled “Abolition and the Welfare State” (Kim & Rasmussen, 2024). Acknowledging the deep entanglement between “the carceral state and the caring state” (p. 101) and the “necessary and contradictory role” that the welfare state has played “in the maintenance of racial capitalism” (p. 107), they pose Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie’s question from *No More Police*: “Is there an abolitionist form of stateness? What might a state look like if it’s unyoked from racial capitalism and explicitly organized around abolitionist priorities?” (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, as cited in Kim & Rasmussen, 2024, pp. 102-103).

It is a question without a simple answer for either set of authors, though both agree that abolition and the racial capitalist, carceral state cannot be reconciled. Citing the work of Dean Spade and William C. Anderson, who argue that subjugation and violence are necessary and constitutive features of the state (Anderson, 2021; Spade, 2015), Kim and Rasmussen pose the critical questions,

If, as Spade and Anderson have argued, the state will never exist to support self-determination, collective care, and widespread well-being, what can come in its place? How can the practices of mutual aid and collective care meet the scale of needs that exist in modern society? What is needed to remake our social relations such that this shift away from the state becomes more possible? And how then should abolitionists approach what the state is already offering vis-à-vis social insurance and the rudiments of basic needs? (p. 106)

While the authors nod to the fact that “There is much to learn from the study, politics, and organizing of anarchism and socialism” (Kim & Rasmussen, 2024, p. 106), substantive engagement with these political philosophies and movements regrettably lies beyond the scope of the chapter. There is no lingering discussion, for instance, of the difference between the centralized nation-state and highly organized, self-governing, autonomous, networked communities; nor of the features of the state that might be worth holding onto in the eyes of those who presume it better equipped than collective care to meet “the scale of needs that exist in modern society” (when, indeed, it never has). The chapter is meant, instead, to prompt greater attention within the abolitionist movement to the

welfare state, opening the door to a broader discourse about what it will truly take to build a society freed of white supremacy and colonial domination, one structured around mutuality, autonomy, and collective well-being.

Other chapters in the volume take up the task of developing what social work praxis might look like in the shadow of the state. Alan Dettlaff writes that social workers must disavow and “act outside of our professional organizations” like the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), “completely remove ourselves from [carceral] systems” like policing and child welfare, and “work outside toward their abolition” (Dettlaff, 2024, pp. 112-113). For instance, he urges schools of social work to alter their curricula to teach histories of carceral systems and social workers’ ongoing complicity in their record of harm; he also suggests that schools cease offering practicum experiences within these systems (pp. 113-115). Joyce McMillan and Dorothy Roberts lift up organizers working together to “support each other and survive [the child welfare] system and get their children back” (McMillan & Roberts, 2024, p. 117), while striving to abolish family policing. They call for social workers to denounce and disrupt the child welfare system, and for policies that end mandated reporting, strengthen families’ rights to refuse coercive investigations, and redistribute resources from violent systems to households to use as they see fit. Sophia Sarantakos echoes the call for a refusal of mandated reporting, as well as other institutional norms like neoliberal and ableist university disability services and pathologizing academic metrics like “recidivism” and “criminogenic risk” (Sarantakos, 2024, p. 137).

The book’s final section further elaborates “quotidian examples of abolitionist praxis,” providing “concrete illustrations of efforts that are aligned with the bridging of abolition and social work” (Kim et al., 2024, p. 5). For instance, Shira Hassan begins her chapter on Liberatory Harm Reduction (LHR) and transformative justice (TJ) asking provocatively, “How do we end social work’s addiction to the state?” (Hassan, 2024, p. 143). Hassan writes that Liberatory Harm Reductionists respect people’s decisions to engage in stigmatized and criminalized survival strategies, and TJ practitioners work to end violence and practice accountability without relying upon carceral systems. The chapter ends with a discussion of tensions between abolitionist (LHR and TJ) and professionalized social work praxis, where she prompts social workers to consider how, for instance, they will honor survivors’ choices to use illegal drugs or go off prescribed medications, refuse the cooptation of LHR and TJ frameworks by violent institutions, prioritize people’s autonomy and wellbeing over liability laws, and resist forced hospitalizations and mandated reporting (pp. 154-155).

Charlene Carruthers, founding member and former Executive Director of Chicago-based Black queer abolitionist youth organization BYP100, uses the example of a nonprofit’s tax-exempt 501(c)3 status to make the paradoxically reassuring case that the very real challenges of advancing abolitionist politics within state structures are, nevertheless, rarely exceptional or insurmountable (Carruthers & Kim, 2024). Instead, they simply reflect the challenges of working under oppressive, systemic conditions like capitalism and white supremacy. Drawing on the legacy of “Black folks and our history, our several centuries in this country, even before it was a country, and the various restrictions that were placed on people trying to change their lives,” she states, “There have always been barriers. The question is, how are we going to navigate them? What are we going to do?” (pp. 166-167).

Tanisha “Wakumi” Douglas further elaborates tensions that arise when working with the state, drawing from her experiences co-leading a diversion program that supports system-involved Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) girls and gender-nonconforming youth in a

“precharge, postarrest community accountability process” (Douglas, 2024, p. 173). She writes of the program’s potential—to embody abolitionist praxis and “end girls’ criminalization and incarceration in the city altogether” (p. 174)—as well as its “tensions and contradictions” (p. 175), such as the state’s unyielding “law-and-order focus” (p. 176), its anti-Blackness, and the coercive nature of participants’ involvement in the program (where the alternative to participation may be conviction). Nevertheless, she observes that her organization’s “ability to see beyond the ‘power over’ dynamic and find our own power in the partnership was at the root of our flexibility” (p. 181), and that their intimate involvement with the carceral system made them wiser and more strategic as they worked towards abolitionist goals.

Despite the impressive scope of the volume, one abolitionist issue scarcely explored is the carcerality of state borders. The robust exception is Stéphanie Wahab’s chapter on Israel’s use of apartheid against the dispossessed people of Palestine (Wahab, 2024a). Opening with the painfully timely observation that “There may be few issues that test social work’s stated values of social justice, human dignity, and worth more than the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine” (p. 184), Wahab describes the settler colonial and carceral violence of Zionism, “a European colonial project that grew into an imperial project sustained by the United States” (p. 186). The chapter makes the case that the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement should be recognized and supported by social workers as abolitionist praxis. Wahab writes that BDS provides “an entry point for Palestinian solidarity work, one that offers explicit activities and practices within the context of a broad social movement, led by those most affected by the violence of settler colonialism in Israel” (p. 195). While Wahab’s chapter was penned before the current escalation of Israel’s violence against Palestinians in Gaza, in a follow-up article she wrote for *Truthout* in February 2024, she argues that the horrors of the ongoing genocide only intensify the need for social workers to support BDS (Wahab, 2024b). Though she focuses on boycotts, the exigencies of the moment also demand solidarity with the movement’s more radical forms of resistance, such as economic blockades of ports and highways; solidarity encampments; and the occupation of administrative buildings on campuses worldwide.

Finally, Nev Jones and Leah A. Jacobs write of involuntary hospitalization, which they demonstrate to be “one of the most overtly carceral yet widely accepted interventions deployed in social work practice” (Jones & Jacobs, 2024, p. 197). Their chapter includes specific strategies for implementing abolitionist values like “transparency regarding policies and procedures,” “shifting away from adherence/abstinence thinking,” “validation of clients’ explanatory frameworks,” “validation of structural violence,” and “accompaniment” of clients “in their journeys, including mental health crises” (p. 199). Speaking to the paradoxes of working towards abolition in a field where practitioners and service users alike are deeply entangled with (and some literally captured by) the state, they write that their argument is based:

on the premise that social workers should simultaneously work toward abolition (e.g., by ensuring the social and economic needs of clients are met, eliminating the involvement of police in involuntary hospitalization, contributing to the development of voluntary and service user-driven alternatives to involuntary hospitalization), while also reducing harms caused by involuntary hospitalization as it continues to be deployed and impact millions of youths and adults in the United States each year. In the words of Mariame Kaba and André Gorz, we therefore include “nonreformist reforms,” while keeping “abolition...the horizon.” (Kaba, 2021, p. 96, as cited in Jones & Jacobs, 2024, p. 197)

As for the 1951 signatories of the *We Charge Genocide* petition, whatever “nonreformist reforms” they hoped to achieve amid the hostile body of the UN—for instance, to intensify international pressure to overturn Jim Crow laws, or to forge transnational pro-labor coalitions—what seems clear is that prefiguration of abolitionist promise was a likely aim. The petitioners left what *Abolition and Social Work* contributor Sam Harrell refers to as a “record of dissent and radical possibility” (Harrell, 2024, p. 44), which Harrell defines as “records of practices, tools, and innovations that moved us ... closer to the possibility of freedom” (p. 44). Indeed, the history of the first *We Charge Genocide* petition served as just that to the young coalition who followed in their predecessors’ footsteps generations later, to again charge the US police state with genocide. The campaigns were abolitionist praxis: the indelible enactment of liberation, even in the heart of empire.

ABOLITION, SOCIAL WORK, AND THE PRODUCTION OF HISTORY

In the preface to his classic text *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes:

We are never as steeped in history as when we pretend not to be, but if we stop pretending we may gain in understanding what we lose in false innocence. Naiveté is often an excuse for those who exercise power. For those upon whom that power is exercised, naiveté is always a mistake. (Trouillot, 1995, p. xxiii)

Among the many objectives of *Abolition and Social Work* is an accounting of the inequalities of power that shape social work’s narration of its history, and an attention to the “overlapping sites” where social work’s “history is produced, notably outside of academia” (p. 19). At stake is understanding of the ways power and hierarchy constrain social work’s possibilities, and an attempt, in the authors’ attention to praxis, to “lay claim to the future” (Carby, 1995, p. xiii) by taking the field’s history “in their own hands” (Trouillot, 1995, p. 153).

Indeed, the book offers perspectives on social work history too often marginalized within the field’s professionalizing institutions. For instance, some contributors turn to the contrasting historical examples of Jane Addams and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, two figures often raised up as founders of the profession. Cassandra Frederique argues that professional social work in the tradition of Jane Addams must be abolished, its history confronted and the discipline uprooted (Frederique, 2024). She quotes Addams describing the settlement house as a “neutral space within which different communities and ideologies could learn from each other and seek common grounds for collective action,” and counters that “Poverty isn’t neutral” (p. 82). Her chapter challenges social workers to abandon the myth “that social work was good before and that it somehow got captured” (p. 85). Charlene A. Carruthers likewise compels social workers to “become students of the profession and students of the profession’s history,” including the prevailing political and economic conditions out of which the profession was forged (Carruthers & Kim, 2024, p. 162). For Carruthers this means looking beyond and before Addams at the institutions and practices—formal and informal, carceral and liberatory—that shaped what care work would become. Accordingly, Justin S. Harty, Autumn Asher BlackDeer, María Gandarilla Ocampo, and Claudette L. Grinnell-Davis propose a framework for knowledge about social work called the “Critical Historical Antiracism, Anticolonialism, and Abolitionism Framework” (Harty et al., 2024, p. 65), committed to confronting

social work's historical and ongoing coloniality and racism, working to abolish various "racialized systems of colonization affecting all populations of color," and striving to "meet common and divergent goals of BIPOC populations" (pp. 75-76). The authors draw on 1970s archival records from the Council on Social Work Education's five Multicultural Task Forces as "*explicit sources of evidence* representing direct concerns and recommendations for social work to address racism, colonialism, and abolition" (p. 70).

Sam Harrell uplifts Wells-Barnett as representative of abolitionist (versus carceral-reformist) praxis (Harrell, 2024). "Although both Addams and Wells-Barnett wanted to see an end to lynching," Harrell writes, "Addams accepted the logic undergirding lynching—that Black men are predatory and a danger to white womanhood," whereas "Wells-Barnett rejected the association between Blackness and violence, instead redefining the problem as the violence of state-sanctioned white supremacy" (p. 34). Later in the chapter, Harrell again draws on historical example to deepen their critique of social work's carceral-reformist impulse, turning to PIC abolitionism's precursor, the movement to abolish slavery. Harrell recounts how nineteenth-century radical abolitionists fought against gradualism—the political movement that encouraged white opponents of slavery to purchase and free enslaved individuals, rather than organize for an immediate end to the entire system of racial bondage. Writes Harrell, "Those who advocated gradualism limited their goals and aspirations only to what was rational and practical within the institution of slavery" (p. 36). Abolitionist reform, on the other hand, is based not on what is deemed possible within the logics of racial capitalism, but on "what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands" (Gorz, 1967, p. 7, as quoted in Harrell, 2024, p. 40).

Like Harrell, Mariame Kaba organizes her introduction to *Abolition and Social Work* around Wells-Barnett's legacy, which she calls "a touchstone for me for years" (Kaba, 2024, p. vii). While Kaba admits that she finds herself "deeply ambivalent and even conflicted about social work as a profession" (p. viii), she nonetheless concludes that "Ida Wells-Barnett...and the contributors to this book, show that social work can do more than just tape some cushions to the bars. It can work to pull them down" (p. xii). However, Kaba makes it clear that this will require radical transformation of social work praxis, which will invariably come with material costs. She recounts how Wells-Barnett's politics were "too radical for most funders" (p. xi), resulting in her mutual aid organization, the Negro Fellowship League (NFL), closing for shortage of funds. Kaba cautions that "For social workers in our day as in Wells-Barnett's, you can choose to receive adequate private and state funding or you can do abolitionist work. To do both is rarely an option" (p. xi).

Of course, the suppression of radical social work that Kaba describes is itself a response to the work of organizers like Wells-Barnett: that is, to social work's history as a site of abolitionist possibility and praxis. Take, for example, Angela Davis's observation in the first chapter that in the decades following slavery's abolition, Black women were largely denied jobs outside of domestic and agricultural work, and that many, therefore, "deposited their dreams and aspirations into the fields of teaching and social work" (Davis, 2024, p. 10). These fields, further,

promised to provide a refuge from the threat of sexual violence that saturated domestic and agricultural work—a refuge both in terms of the economic security they represented and also in terms of the knowledges they could generate about the institutions and structures responsible for the production and reproduction of violence. (p. 10)

Davis recounts how, decades before the creation of the National Organization of Women and other milestones that get periodized in mainstreamed histories as the “women’s movement,” Black women (like Wells-Barnett) had long been organizing against sexual violence and against the racist deployment of the rape charge. Describing the stakes of social work’s historicization to the aims of abolition, Davis counsels that “genealogies should always be questioned because there’s always an unacknowledged reason for beginning at a certain moment in history as opposed to another” (p. 11). She highlights the abolitionist insights gleaned from work towards the liberation of trans prisoners, and asks, “how does our view of gender violence, family violence, community violence change if we look at it from the vantage point of Black women, Indigenous women, poor women?” (p. 14).

This, fundamentally, is the question taken up by each of the volume’s contributors. Dorothy Roberts describes meeting with Black mothers in Chicago fighting to get their children back from the child welfare system; they “described their experience as a form of slavery and kidnapping of their children,” a counterhistory that Roberts credits with “help[ing her] understand what this system was really about” (McMillan & Roberts, 2024, pp. 117-118). Stéphanie Wahab draws on her history of Palestinian activism to critique “most social work academics, students, and practitioners in the United States” for “know[ing] very little about the history and present of Palestine,” ignorance driven by “Orientalism, settler colonialism, anti-Arab racism, and taken-for-granted Zionist myths” (Wahab, 2024a, p. 185). This ignorance results in social workers’ “silent bystanderism” amid “Israeli necropolitics and the necrocapitalism of Zionism” (p. 185). And Beltran and colleagues argue that “Social workers need an understanding of the legacy of settler colonialism and its historical and current impact on Indigenous peoples to develop responses to remediate this legacy” (Beltran et al., 2024, p. 54). Yet, they write, “Although historical truth telling is a first step, it is also essential to uplift the many ways that Indigenous and other minoritized communities not only survived these attempts at annihilation but continue to imagine, regenerate, create, and thrive” (p. 55). This is an approach to history, rooted in their lived experiences as Indigenous women (p. 46), that resists the settler-colonial myth of Indigenous extermination, as well as the notion that historicizing is a positivist endeavor, a collection of facts about some settled past. Instead, their story work prefigures a “preferred future” shaped by Indigenous practices and worldviews (pp. 63-64).

Without question, the importance of abolitionist historicizing echoes throughout the volume, making it clear that abolitionists must not only fight for an abolitionist future and present, but past, as well. This involves challenging capitalist, colonial, white supremacist myths, as well as uplifting the examples of ancestors and forerunners whose liberatory praxis is too often silenced or distorted by the formal archive.

Figure 4. Asha, Geneva



Note: From *WCG to UN, Day 2: Ethan and Asha on Presenting To The UN* (WCG, 2014)

ABOLITION, SOCIAL WORK, AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Another WCG video dispatch from Geneva offers reflections from Asha (WCG, 2014c). It is easy to see why Breanna and Ric expressed their excitement at reuniting with her upon arrival in the city. Even mediated through a YouTube video, Asha's presence is unmistakable.

Recapping the delegation's third day before the UN, Asha celebrates her comrades, describing Ethan's "really inspiring speech" before the UN Committee Against Torture as "definitely a turning point in the day" (WCG, 2014c, 3:33) that, alongside Breanna's "equally moving story about her brother" (4:12) had "a lot of us...in tears" (4:16). Contrasting Ethan's testimony against formal presentations given by other groups and officials, which involved "a lot of statistics" (3:13), secondhand analysis, and "references to different treaties" (3:47), her comrade "brought some poetry into the space, brought experience and brought story" (3:52). Asha speaks to a different way of knowing the truth of torture, within the "White male-controlled social institutions" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 251) and white supremacist episteme of the UN. She celebrates, instead, what Patricia Hill Collins calls the "subjugated knowledge" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 251) of Black feminist thought. It is a theoretical tradition that values wisdom from "lived experience as a criterion of meaning" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 257) and, in the words of Barbara Christian, "theorizing...in narrative forms, in the stories [Black feminists] create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language" (Christian, 1987, p. 52). It is also a tradition *Abolition and Social Work* contributor Charlene A. Carruthers draws on in her abolitionist work. Speaking to Mimi E. Kim of the abundant wisdom of Black queer feminist scholarship, practice, literature, and art, Carruthers prompts social workers to "get curious" (Carruthers & Kim, 2024, p. 169). She continues:

To me, the Black queer feminist lens and taking it up in social work is about cultivating a deep curiosity for what has happened before you came into this work and what's happening now... Study. Build relationships with people. And know that none of it's going to be perfect, and you might even get your heart broken at some point. This work is about a lifetime commitment. (pp. 169-170)

The approach to truth claims modeled by the WCG delegates in Geneva also shares characteristics with the Indigenous “talk story” method employed by Beltran and colleagues in their chapter titled “Indigenist Abolition: A Talk Story on Ideas and Strategies for Social Work Practice” (Beltran et al., 2024). They write that talk story is derived from Indigenous story work, coined by Stó:lō First Nations scholar Joanne Archibald, which entails “listening with your ‘ears and heart’ and is grounded by the notion that stories can uniquely educate the mind, body, heart, and spirit” (Archibald, 2008, p. 76; Beltran et al., 2024, p. 50). Further, story work “centers thrivance” (Beltran et al., 2024, p. 50) rather than “damage narratives” (p. 63), and is “reciprocal and relational” (p. 50), rather than hierarchical and “objective.” The authors’ method, talk story, builds on these principles to create “an approach to research using dialogue and exchange of personal narratives based on mutuality” (p. 51). Modeling this method in their chapter, the authors demonstrate that talk story aligns with abolitionist praxis, as an approach to knowledge production that is collective, provisional, rebellious, anticolonial, and, crucially, imaginative. It differs starkly from the positivist, social scientific approach that has been so favored by social work’s professionalizing institutions, patterned, as they are, by configurations of wealth and political power. Indeed, Beltran et al. write that Indigenous scholars increasingly urge social workers engaged with Indigenous communities to incorporate story work into their research and practice (p. 50).

Indigenous approaches to knowledge production also lead Tanisha “Wakumi” Douglas to employ a framework that Douglas refers to as “what we now call restorative justice,” abbreviated WWNCRJ (Douglas, 2024, p. 171). She writes of the National Association of Community & Restorative Justice conference held in Oakland, California, in 2017, where “conference organizers [brought] spiritual ways, music, dance, art, storytelling, and the healing ways of various Indigenous groups” and “created an intimate circle space for WWNCRJ practitioners and advocates to literally sit at the feet of Indigenous elders to listen and learn” (p. 172). One insight a panelist shared was that even the language of “restorative justice” is “colonized and violent,” leading the panelist to propose the WWNCRJ framework that Douglas employs. As Douglas writes:

How do we talk about a process, a system of being well with one another that is a people’s way of being—not a program or a solution to a white supremacist problem? What words in the English language can capture this Indigenous relational and spiritual technology? (p. 172)

Douglas likewise draws on “Afrikan-centered psychology, an Afrocentric worldview [that] calls for diunity, both/and thinking, versus Westerners’ dichotomous, either/or thinking” (p. 181), which, she writes, helps abolitionists embrace tensions in the work and avoid a colonial obsession with utopian purity.

Nev Jones and Leah A. Jacobs likewise draw on “non-Anglo-US” (Jones & Jacobs, 2024, p. 211) Indigenous epistemologies as they imagine abolitionist alternatives to psychiatric violence like involuntary hospitalization. They cite the work of critical scholar Joseph Gone, enrolled member of the Aaniiih-Gros Ventre Tribal Nation of Montana, on Indigenous cultural practices to promote community wellbeing (p. 205), as well as South African Sangoma and Japanese Morita and Naikan healing paradigms that, they write, “are rarely even introduced to students in the context of mental illness, much less seriously engaged with” (p. 211). They write that these, along with the neurodiversity and mad pride/mad justice movements, offer alternative frameworks of “psychiatrized experiences as religious, spiritual, aesthetic, or philosophical in nature rather than narrowly psychiatric or psychological” (p. 211).

Abolitionist praxis is built on epistemologies like these that resist the colonial frame. In her digital missive, Asha celebrates having “the opportunity to speak to representatives of the US government” (WCG, 2014c, 4:26), around two dozen officials from the Department of Justice and the State Department. She says, with a slight, knowing smile, that “the US got an opportunity to defend themselves” (4:43), the third-person pronoun bespeaking her exilic status vis-à-vis the nation-state whose passport she carries. She exclaims with incredulity that the US “defense” was “just so weak!” (5:10). Rejecting their alleged “reforms” and “watery” proposals that “really aren’t solutions to any of the problems that we’re talking about” (4:55), Asha says that she told the delegation, “we’re not accepting any favors and we’re not accepting any apologies” (5:05). When, at one point, a US delegate offered an insultingly feeble defense of police accountability, Asha says, “We kind of said, ‘Ha!’ very noticeably, and everyone just got up and we walked out of that room. It was definitely felt by those state representatives, they were definitely kind of squirming in their seats” (5:30).

The WCG delegates’ protest seemed to implicate the US representatives with the question, “What are you pretending not to know today?” (Sarantakos, 2024, p. 135). This question, from a Toni Cade Bambara essay (Bambara, 1996), is offered by Sophia Sarantakos in *Abolition and Social Work* to prompt abolitionists to “interrogat[e] the stories we tell ourselves about our external world” (Sarantakos, 2024, p. 135), and the ways that such stories circumscribe possibility and reproduce violence. WCG was engaging in abolitionist praxis when they refused to pretend not to know that, as Sarantakos put it, “the United States is a fascist nation-state committed to death and destruction, particularly the death and destruction of marginalized people and communities” (p. 136). WCG did not come to debate the United States; they came to inform the world, and by refusing debate, they resisted the implication that the US lie and their truth were on equal footing. Their assertion of the truth they knew, of the state’s genocidal violence against young people of color, was an enactment of freedom, the prefiguration of a world in which denial of that reality is so inexcusable that it deserves no hearing.

We Charge Genocide was, therefore, about reckoning US atrocities—and so much more. Returning to her theme of the relationship between narrative and curative, Asha describes “a side event ... that was a kind of healing space, just really people telling their stories” (WCG, 2014c, 5:51). Unlike the global forum, this space “was really just for us, and that was really emotional” (5:56). Recounting some of the testimonies of state violence and the psychic toll of hearing and sharing them, Asha says that “we’ve tried to, you know, keep our energy, at least, together, if not, you know, keep our souls well” (6:21), suggesting that while spiritual wellness might be impossible under present conditions, the collectivity might sustain them all yet.

For WCG, the abolition of the anti-Black carceral state is a long-term endeavor that demands that we “rehearse towards the world we want” (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. 283) and “Build the new within the old” (p. 284). “Not only *can* we live in this future,” Kaba and Ritchie write in *No More Police*, “we *must* live in it” (p. 284). We Charge Genocide is about inhabiting that future, even within the symbolically charged center of so-called advanced liberalism, the United Nations. For Asha, that requires holding space for care. She speaks to this praxis when she describes the group’s activities, once they left the UN headquarters and returned to “the spot where some of us are staying” (WCG, 2014c, 6:47). There, they:

just kind of had a circle. You know, went around affirming one another...recentering ourselves and what our needs are from each other. And, you know, we talked about feeling really

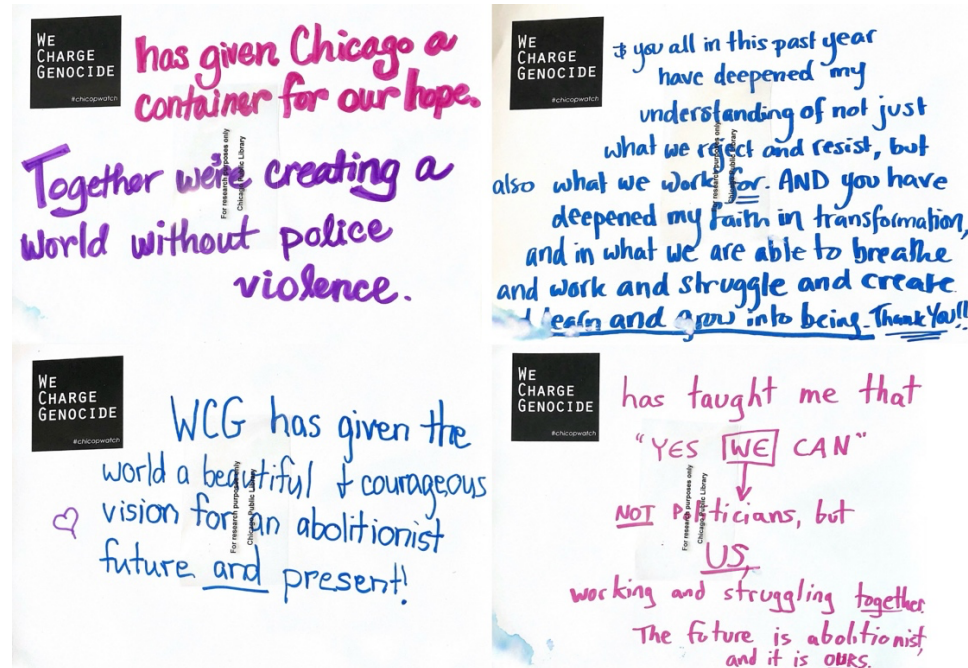
affirmed, and that knowing people in Chicago are supporting us, people around the country back home are paying attention and showing their love from afar, and that felt really good. Yeah, so overall, just really feeling the collective and feeling the energy that we all have together and, um, I'm really happy to be in this with the people that I am, and happy to know we have the community that's even bigger than just the eight of us. (6:50)

CONCLUSION

The 1951 We Charge Genocide campaign is “all but forgotten and unknown,” lamented one historian (Jacobs, 2017, p. 125)—though the 2014 delegation that followed in their footsteps would suggest otherwise. Both campaigns were remarkable undertakings: of organizing, research, and contestation over the public memory of slavery and its afterlives in white supremacist state violence. Collective remembering in the public sphere stages the politics of the present (e.g., Scott, 1991; Trouillot, 1995), and the 2014 delegation’s “history of the present” (e.g., Foucault, 1977; Trouillot, 1995; Hartman, 2002, p. 4) before the UN Committee Against Torture seized a platform through which the activists strengthened and built collectivities and staged experiments in abolitionist praxis. That they did this within what might be the symbolic heart of international, military, (neo)liberal, and capitalist power could hardly have been beside the point. Their movement was, in short, a prefiguration of alternative and extraterritorial worldmaking as much as it was, at least formally, an appeal for the extension of citizenship and human rights to peoples who have always been excluded from state categories of citizen and human. Indeed, it might be argued that the group’s aim through charging genocide was, in fact, to destabilize the liberal humanist subject altogether.

They therefore provide a beacon to social workers grappling with the tensions between the profession and abolitionist praxis, tensions explored expansively in the pages of *Abolition and Social Work*. Like WCG, social workers committed to abolition find themselves staging prefigurative politics within a hostile field, one that has for over a century defined its professional bounds as those legitimized by the carceral state. To be sure, complicity with state structures of domination, including and extending beyond the PIC, is a central and ongoing history with which all social workers must reckon. But as the radical tradition shows, it is neither the only nor the whole story. Both WCG and the contributors to *Abolition and Social Work* demonstrate that attending to marginalized histories and frameworks of care is fundamental to the work of imagining an abolitionist present and future. And as both movements make clear, imagination, even in the shadow of empire, is the heart of abolitionist praxis. It illuminates new relationalities, new collectivities (e.g., Brown, 2021, p. 159), and new “no-state solutions” (Azeb, 2019, p. 17) from which the world we now prefigure must emerge.

Figure 5. Notes from One-Year Anniversary, 2015



Note: From *We Charge Genocide [Archive]*, Mariame Kaba Papers (2015)

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