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Book Review

*We Do This 'Til We Free Us:
Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*

By Mariame Kaba

Haymarket Books, 2021, 289 pages.

\$16.95 (Paperback). \$9.99 (Ebook).

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In *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (2021), activist and educator Mariame Kaba invites us to create a new world through abolition. As a multi-genre collection of thought-provoking and liberating articles, essays, and interviews, Kaba's work invites us to imagine collective transformation, beginning with a question: "What can we imagine for ourselves and the world?" (p. 32). For Kaba, "abolition is rooted in imagination and experimentation. We must transform our imaginations to envision and build our way out of oppressive systems," she says, advising that our work should "create the conditions for dismantling prisons, police, and surveillance" (p. 110). The book moves from exploring the

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oppressive and damaging effects of the prison-industrial complex to examining oversurveillance and the deployment of police violence, ultimately tracing a society-wide system that inflicts brutality and trauma on communities of color enacted by police and advocating for its abolition.

Collective organizing to defund the police amplified after 2020's racial reckoning. Critiques of policing, the criminal justice system, and the carceral network in general have only grown since. Social movements have blossomed from these efforts, calling for reforms to end the systemic violence inherent in these oppressive systems. However, for Kaba, reforms are not enough; "some reforms" she argues, "can end up reproducing the system in another form" (p. 124). By merely reforming, we perpetuate violence and harm in our communities because reforms do not provide meaningful justice or disrupt the logic of punishment which suppresses marginalized communities to protect the status quo (Anderson, 2003).

Instead, Kaba argues, we need to render violence within our communities unacceptable by transforming how we identify and address harm (p. 127). Transformative justice – instead of punitive justice – centers responsibility and accountability for one's actions. This approach is a vital alternative to our current system: third parties distributing supposed 'justice,' a carceral network that perpetuates violence, state-sanctioned police terror, and military weaponry to keep social hierarchies intact (p. 122). She begs the questions: What do the police protect? Is it a better, safer, and healthier future? Or do their methods only benefit few?

Through these questions, Kaba points readers to the intersection between individual and human rights. By using criminalization to protect property (and those who hold it), we mutate the state's failure to provide people's basic needs into decentralized, individual responsibility for these problems and the existence of crime itself (p. 20). Ultimately, we must shift our framework to one that values the procurement of safety, creating safe communities through collective responsibility and empathic human relationships that support one another and viewing violence as an unacceptable means of problem-solving.

To help facilitate this transformation, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, is structured to escort the reader toward the horizon of abolition. The first section, entitled “So You’re Thinking About Becoming an Abolitionist,” defines the book’s scope by articulating what qualifies as abolition, deflating conflation of prison abolition with anarchy (p. 32). She argues it is a lack of imagination that inhibits people from envisioning a world without the criminal justice system. Yet, as Angela Davis (2003) reminds us, even the prison system itself started as a reform. Abolition imagination requires us to transcend the limitations of our current structures which have influenced us all in some way or another. Engagement in collective responsibility and action while experimenting with new ways of being is one way to facilitate this creation of a new society (p. 33). Simultaneously, we must reduce people’s contact with the criminal justice system, whether through refusing to utilize the police for community issues or through implementing restorative practices.

The second section, “There Are No Perfect Victims,” explores how gendered and sexual violence permeates the prison-industrial complex. For too long, women have had their bodies and rights violated not only by men but also by the structures that are supposed to protect them (p. 68). Incorporating stories from women and girls who have been sentenced and convicted of crimes for defending their bodies and lives, Kaba emphasizes how Black women consistently do not receive the same protection or guarantee of justice as non-Black populations. When these women defend themselves, legal systems refuse to protect them because these systems “deem that these people have no legitimate selves to defend” (p. 93). Police, meanwhile, are protected by the law, and their calls of “self-defense” defended, reproducing collective anti-Black narratives that Black bodies are inferior and their only purpose is to be controlled and punished (p. 61). Similarly, Kaba reminds us that while women's prisons were started to protect women from gendered male violence, they have become breeding grounds for violence and dehumanization.

The third section, “The State Can’t Give Us Transformative Justice,” analyzes the state’s role in perpetuating systems of oppression. To Kaba, policing is inherently oppressive, and its tactics are intentionally harmful,

"rooted in anti-Blackness, social control, and containment," and therefore unredeemable (p. 84). To maintain this struggle, we must continue "to organize with those people and communities that are most impacted by oppression" (p. 85). Small wins – like Chicago legislation providing reparations to the Burge police torture survivors, leading to the city becoming the "first municipality in the United States to legislate reparations for survivors and victims of racist police violence" (p. 134) – are they key on this continual march toward abolition. It is how we take the long view on the arduous journey to transformative justice.

In the fourth section, "Making Demands: Reforms for and against Abolition," Kaba maps the difficult process to reach abolition. The section begins as a guide for individuals who want to start working toward abolition. For most non-abolitionists, reform seems like the first step.¹ However, by opposing reforms that increase police and their funding, organizers can begin to use that money to explore alternatives to policing. By understanding that hurt people hurt people – those who experienced trauma are likely to inflict it on others – we can examine how scarcity and lack of human services generate harm. Meeting needs reduces harm; people are less likely to engage in behaviors leading to harm once their basic needs are met.

The book's final sections present the theory and practice of abolition through movements that have made positive changes by practicing new approaches to community harm and violence. She highlights popular social movements, high profile legal cases, case studies, and grassroots level campaigns that have organized for transformative justice – best exemplified by her inclusion of the Free Joan Little Movement, "the only example of mass mobilization against state violence on behalf of Black women in the US to date" (p. 141). This campaign used "defense campaigning," a strategy that focuses on systemic causes to the terrible prison conditions rather than just the individual narratives.

¹ Although Kaba does not advocate for reform, she does offer a guide called "Police 'Reforms' You Should Always Oppose," which is an invaluable resource for those who want to begin their abolition journey (p. 98).

These last sections are integral. They give readers practical ways for how to begin to create change within our communities. They encourage us to work toward specific, concrete outcomes: supporting bail reform, letter writing, financial support, prison visits, and collective organizing (p. 138). Further, her inclusion of the reparations framework, which outlines five elements of reparations – repair, restoration, acknowledgment, cessation, and non-repetition – is an invaluable contribution to the radical imagining of the concept of transformative justice and what it can possibly look like (p. 95). These actions, when strategically deployed, are the praxis for a more just and humanizing world.

As an educator and social worker, this book provides justification and strategies for the proliferation of human rights education (HRE) in my classrooms, in universities, and beyond. HRE's goal is to challenge unequal systems of power, uplift the oppressed, and eliminate the causes of inequality (Ishay, 2004). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), meanwhile, recognizes the “equality of all humans, the right to self-determination, and the freedom from tyranny, oppression, and exploitation” (Grant and Gibson, 2014, p. 5). Through teaching human rights and using HRE methods, we are challenging and transforming systems of power that reproduce oppressive practices within our spaces of learning. Moreover, as an educator and social worker, not only does the prison-industrial complex dehumanize, oppress, and deny people their basic human rights, the school-to-prison complex does much of the same. Social movements must center on collective rights that welcome differences, foster inclusion, and value human dignity (Glendon, 2001; Coysh, 2017). This education can be delivered at the community level through individual educators, grassroots organizations, and non-profits, leading to the increased development of human rights-oriented social movements (Bajaj, 2011). Kaba's book, then, partially functions as a “how-to” guide for abolition work, and partially as a model of how our world could look with less prisons, police, and surveillance.

Unfortunately, because the imaginations that have molded our world have been racist, sexist, and oppressive in nature, it is difficult to envision a world without police. But there is hope. Through discipline and collective

organizing that build strong and compassionate relations between one another, we can persevere in our struggle for liberation. We can offer an education that results from and displays the power of collective action and love for our fellow human beings.

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