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The Idea of Abolition: Ending Social Work Sanctioned State Violence Commentary submitted to The Journal of Social Work and Social Welfare Policy

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Introduction

Since the murder of Mr. George Floyd in 2020, because of state-sanctioned police violence, social work literature abounds about the concept and implementation of abolition [1-6]. Abolition is the end of oppressive and violent policy based institutional action, shattering a quality-of-life existence for all people, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, and gender. It is the intentional practice to cease institutional systems that are violent, oppressive and maintain racial status quo racial economies in correctional facilities, child welfare systems, juvenile justice detention centers, and child support enforcement. "Of particular concern to abolitionist social workers is the steadily expanding reach of carceral institutions beyond even the traditional scope of police, courts, and prisons, into the social service domains of schools, substance use treatment, homelessness outreach, and mental health care provision" [5]. The social work profession needs to acknowledge that abolition as a theoretical concept and practice evolves from the Black Freedom Struggle dating back to the 19th century to cease the human trafficking of African people in the bondage of enslavement. The abolitionist movement has roots in the struggle against white supremacy, racism, colonization, and reparations, for Black human rights in the 19th century, coalescing into the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century, underscoring theoretically the Movement for Black Lives in the 21st century.

Indeed, if we ground ourselves in abolition's rich history, the retreat and backlash to the glimmers of transformation that erupted in the summer of 2020 become more comprehensible. A close reading of abolition and its genealogies tells us that any destruction divorced from long and short-term visions of eradicating epistemological harm at the root will sputter and recede back into the same cycle of oppressive logics [7].

While reading content in abolitionist social work practices, one learns about 'harm reduction', 'community safety', and 'transformative justice', yet seldom raised is the clarion call to address abolition as institutional 'anti-Blackness', racially segregated practices, wealth gap and reparations.

Reformation of violent and oppressive systems seems bleak, as there is no national imagination for new systems that benefit Black people equality to Whites. How does reform work when institutions are created to maintain a racial hierarchy in all things American? Furthermore, the curricula in which social work students are trained in have only tapped into the concept of 'anti-racism', let alone including abolitionist practices, which would render social work to cease as a practice profession. It would mean the re-imagining of a profession that is totally committed to addressing anti-Blackness as foundational to how America functions and addresses poverty and racial capitalism. It would mean the re-imagining of a profession that is totally committed to dismantling carceral institutions as the only alternative to human and family disruption. It would mean re-imagining a profession that is intentional to include its complicity in anti-Blackness and White supremacy in policy implementation and functionality. It would mean that social work would become a profession to end state-sanctioned violence in all forms of the human condition. Abolition will only be an idea on paper. Abolition will only be a theoretical and conceptual framework in the Black Freedom Movement that is referenced in social work, for there is no imagination beyond the words on pages.

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