



Book Review

Mariame Kaba. *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021. 240 pp. \$16.95 (ISBN 9781642595253).

Ameena B. X. Ruffin

Ameena.ruffin@louisville.edu

MA Student

Department of Pan-African Studies

University of Louisville

Mariame Kaba's essays, interviews, and fictional prose in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, deliver a timely and illuminating exploration of prison-industrial complex (PIC) abolition, transformative justice, and community care. Kaba asserts that policing and prisons are institutions of historical and contemporary quotidian violence worthy of sustained attention and collective intervention. Disrupting notions of abolition as a novel social development, Kaba casts the recent wave of mainstream dialogue around policing and interest in abolitionist organizing as part of a more substantial, decades-spanning movement. Referencing lessons from years of organizing, Kaba offers accessible analysis and avenues of action to guide those interested in joining movements for PIC abolition.

A foreword by Naomi Murakawa and an editor's introduction by Tamara K. Nopper begin Kaba's seven-part collection. Co-written pieces with Kelly Hayes, Brit Schulte, Andrea J. Ritchie, Erica R. Meiners, Tamara K. Nopper, and Rachel Herzing

reflect the collaborative praxis embedded in Kaba's abolitionist thinking. *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* also places Kaba's ideas in conversation, through interviews conducted by Kim Wilson, Brian Sonenstein, and Sarah Jaffe, with Shira Hassan, Jeremy Scahill, John Duda, Autumn Brown, adrienne maree brown, and Ayana Young, Damon Williams, Daniel Kisslinger, Eve L. Ewing, and the *Rebel Steps* podcast.

Skepticism about the feasibility of abolition is addressed head-on in the first sections. Kaba identifies and refutes common misconceptions about prison abolition and insists on society's capacity to address harm without relying on systems of violence. With clarity and confidence, Part I questions the effectiveness of incarceration in reducing violence and crime. By delving into the roots of policing in the United States, Kaba exposes the violent roots of the police. She defies the reformist notion that more community engagement with the police will solve issues of criminalization and hyper-surveillance. Instead, Kaba critiques attempts to reform the police and advocates for reducing public contact with law enforcement to diminish police violence. Drawing on her vast experience, Kaba presents community organizing, continuous learning, openness to transformative growth, and hope as essential pathways to building a more just future. In her resolute call to action, defunding and ultimately abolishing the police are prerequisites for genuine transformation.

Part II centers the experiences of Black women as victims of violence and their interactions with the criminal legal system, examining societal norms that constrain their access to notions of respectability, bodily autonomy, and agency. Kaba shares her involvement in supporting Marissa Alexander's fight for freedom, reconciling her commitment to abolishing the PIC with her strategic efforts to achieve legal victories through organizing. Through the analysis of the stories of Marissa Alexander and Cyntoia Brown, Kaba offers profound insights into the pleas of Black women for protection and their rightful claims to self-defense.

In Part III, Kaba discusses Larry Nassar, the former team doctor of USA Gymnastics. While the sentencing of Nassar may have provided some solace to survivors and those seeking justice, Kaba argues that they do not align with the principles of transformative justice. Instead, Kaba emphasizes the imperative of undermining punitive impulses, addressing the broader issue of oppressive policing, and investing in collective healing, repair, and accountability.

Part IV focuses on collective demands, opening the section with a guide for evaluating so-called police reforms. Kaba provides valuable context on the development of prisons in the United States and sheds light on how the criminal legal system targets young individuals through the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP). Addressing the connections between education and imprisonment, Kaba frames restorative and transformative justice practices as alternatives to punitive disciplinary policies in educational institutions and communities. She highlights numerous organizations and social movements' commendable efforts to dismantle the oppressive carceral state and foster equitable and thriving public educational systems. Further, the book's fourth section condemns police militarization in the United States while balancing analysis of such spectacular violence with recognition of day-to-day experiences faced by marginalized communities. Kaba vividly describes the pervasive surveillance and monitoring endured by young Black and brown folk in Chicago. She firmly asserts that the prison-industrial complex is not merely malfunctioning but rather functioning precisely as intended. Mass criminalization, she proffers, is not a result of system failure but rather a deliberate perpetuation of white supremacy through the criminal punishment system.

Kaba discusses ongoing protests against police violence in Part V, giving attention to efforts in Chicago, including those seeking justice and reparations for police torture survivors. Kaba attends to the power of language, the importance of speaking out against injustice, and concrete ways to demand accountability and resources for survivors and their families. Kaba revisits the concept of defense campaigns as a practice of abolitionist care. Community members organizing and demanding accountability on behalf of Marissa Alexander, Bresha Meadows, and Rekia Boyd sustain Kaba's hope in the possibilities of abolition.

Part VI reminds readers that abolition cannot be so flexible as to condone harm—even in the case of R. Kelly. Distinguishing transformative justice from punishment and underscoring the importance of genuine accountability, Kaba stresses that there are just responses to violence beyond the state or social services. As an alternative to the PIC, collective care generates prevention strategies and develops nuanced understandings of victimization and perpetration.

"Justice: A Short Story" closes Part VI. In this fictional entry, Kaba envisions an accountable community's quest for justice. Set in the close-knit community of Small Place, Kaba skillfully contrasts dynamics fostered in environments of trust and those

fostered in environments of conflict. Through the protagonist, Adila, the story illustrates the power of open communication and circles in addressing issues. This thought-provoking tale invites readers to reflect on the importance of community and the pursuit of a just society.

Part VII issues the answer to readers who ask *what is to be done* about the PIC. As an educator and organizer fighting to dismantle carceral logics, Kaba calls her audience to join her. Mariame Kaba's change-making goes beyond activism and allyship, and she implores those committed to justice to similarly organize in solidarity with abolitionist efforts. Her work intends to offer pathways and lessons to new and active organizers alike. With contributions and praise from global thinkers and community organizers, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* is essential for anyone interested in transformative justice and PIC abolition. Kaba's insightful critique of the PIC and unwavering commitment to collective liberation provide a roadmap for dismantling oppressive systems and building a future rooted in healing, accountability, and justice.