Social Work in the Shadow of Death: Divesting From Anti-Blackness and Social Control

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Abstract: *In its current form, the field of social work does not reflect the ongoing reality of Black death and the embeddedness of anti-Blackness in everyday life. This omission leads to catastrophic failures of the profession's most essential tasks: the advancement of social justice and future social workers' education. This paper will discuss why the police's ongoing murder of Black people will not be resolved by simply replacing the police with social workers. We will argue that social workers serving Black people must anchor their work in theoretical perspectives articulated by Black people. Finally, we challenge social work to live up to its social justice mission by divesting from systems of social control and anchoring their work in theoretical perspectives articulated by Black people.*

Keywords: *Defunding police, social work, anti-Blackness, disproportionality, social control*

Nadia King likes to wear her afro puffs in bright pink bows. Photos of her include a bright smile full of baby teeth. In February 2020, police took Nadia King from her school in Jacksonville, Florida, put her in a police car, and involuntarily committed her to a mental health facility. They acted on the request of the clinical social worker from Nadia King's elementary school. The social worker told police officers that Nadia was "a threat to herself and others" (Aguilera, 2020, para. 4). She was having a tantrum, destroying property, and attacking staff. Her mother was not contacted until after the decision was made to admit Nadia and the police were transporting her to the facility (Chavez & Alonso, 2020). On the way to the police car, King asked the officer quietly if she was going to jail. Nadia King was 6 years old. Her mother was not allowed to see her for two days.

Nadia King's involuntary commitment is legal under the Baker Act (2020), a Florida statute which authorizes the involuntary commitment of someone who poses a risk to themselves or others due to mental illness. The Baker Act does not distinguish between adults and children, and it was not written with children in mind. Despite this, in the 12-month period between 2018 and 2019, 38,000 of involuntary commitments under the Baker Act were children (Evans, 2021).

Nadia King's involuntary commitment is especially troubling because the way it was handled was incongruent with the law. The wording of Section 394.459 of the Baker Act (2020) states, "express and informed consent for admission or treatment of a patient under 18 years of age shall be required from the patient's guardian, unless the minor is seeking outpatient crisis intervention services" (Section 3a.1). Additionally, the Baker Act (2020) specifically states that confining individuals is not appropriate when an individual has willing family members or friends who can help. The number of Baker Act intakes rises each year, with police officers enforcing more than half of them (Evans, 2021).

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Nadia King's experience is just one example of the many ways the social work profession participates in criminalizing and controlling the behavior of Black children. The toll of criminalizing Black children is steep. A recent study in *Pediatrics* (Badolato et al., 2020) found that Black children are six times more likely to be shot to death by police than white children. Black children who are not killed by police are still are twice as likely to be arrested and four times as likely as white children to be incarcerated (Puzzanchera et al., 2020). They face harsher sentencing, a greater likelihood of being denied bail, less advantageous plea deals, and an increased risk of wrongful convictions (Puzzanchera et al., 2020). These disproportionalities are not because Black children commit more crimes (Puzzanchera et al., 2020). Officers routinely perceive Black children as older than their white peers of the same age and are more likely to perceive Black children as guilty and dangerous (Goff et al., 2014). With this in mind, we argue that calling the police on a Black child - especially during this #BlackLivesMatter moment, when police brutality is so widely publicized - is nothing less than an act of antiblack violence, which implicates the entire social work profession.

As thousands march in the streets in nationwide protests to end police brutality and the extrajudicial murder of Black people, social workers have found themselves thrust into the national conversation. As the calls to defund the police gain volume, calls to redirect this funding to social work and social services have followed. Many have even suggested that police be replaced with social workers (Foiles, 2020; Kwon, 2020). In the Nadia King case, what does it mean when a social worker calls the police on a Black six-year-old child instead of Nadia's mom? How is calling the police part of a routine procedure? Are the police called on all children who pose a threat to themselves and others? How does a profession predicated on social justice deliver a child to the criminal justice system, thus increasing the possibility of violence, even death? More importantly, if social workers already act as ready participants in systems of social control of Black bodies, how can replacing police with social workers be the solution?

In this paper, we utilize Afro-pessimist theory to suggest that the commitment of a Black child to a mental health facility without her mother's consent and the impulse to call the police on a six-year-old Black child is rooted in a system of social control anchored in anti-Blackness and "bold and wanton disregard" for Black life (Bell, 2020, p. 750). We suggest that whatever protocols led a school social worker to take these actions function for the expedient control of Black bodies, rather than this child's safety. This incident could have ended fatally, like so many others, when the police are called (Bell, 2020). For social workers to even begin to do more good than harm, we must understand how real this threat of death is for Black people. We also must understand the sociohistorical context under which this threat of death persists.

The police killing of people of color has become shockingly commonplace, even expected (Shullman, 2020). On average, police officers kill about 1,000 people annually in the United States (Dewan, 2020). Since 2015, 5,935 people have been killed by police (Tate et al., 2020). Of those killed, 2,418 of those deaths were Black and Latino individuals and the vast majority (97%) of them were male (Tate et al., 2020). In the majority of shootings, police are cleared of all charges. It is rare for a police officer to be convicted of killing someone (Ross, 2020). Since 2005, only 121 (2%) police officers have been arrested for

murder or manslaughter (Dewan, 2020). Of the 95 cases when a decision was reached, only 44 (46%) were convicted but often for a lesser charge than murder or manslaughter (Dewan, 2020).

There have been widespread proposals to defund the police and revert the money to funding social workers and social services (Kwon, 2020). The purpose of this conceptual paper is to explore the reasons why replacing police with social workers is problematic, given that social work itself is a profession in need of reform. In many ways, the police and social work professions are grappling with many of the same issues. Both systems cause racialized harm and dehumanize people of color who come in contact with them. Both systems were designed as mechanisms of social control. Both systems have racist histories rooted in anti-Blackness.

According to Muñoz-Guzmán (2015), in the 1960s social work embraced liberatory and antiracist practice in which they fought against structural, economic, and politically oppressive forces disproportionately affecting certain groups. Social workers must renew their commitment to liberation theory and antiracist practice if they are to affect the systemic change needed to eradicate the police sanctioned killing of people of color (Muñoz-Guzmán, 2015). Until social work can come to terms with its history, the treatment of Black and Brown people, and the ways social work is a mechanism of social control, replacing police with social workers will only exacerbate the problems proposals to divert funding from police are trying to solve.

Afro-Pessimism

In this conceptual paper, we utilize Afro-pessimism to discuss why Black people will be made no freer or safer by replacing one system of control (police) with another (social workers). Antiblack sentiments and widespread police killings are destructive forces in mainstream society requiring the social work profession to call attention to oppressive practices and structures contributing to and often harming the most disadvantaged groups (Muñoz-Guzmán, 2015). Afro-pessimism is a theoretical perspective articulated by Black people (Wilderson, 2010; Sexton, 2016) that can benefit social work research, practice, and education.

> Afro-pessimism theorizes that Black people exist in a structurally antagonistic relationship with humanity…The very technologies and imaginations that allow a social recognition of others' humanness systemically exclude this possibility for the Black….The Black cannot be human, is not merely an Other but is other than human…Antiblackness marks an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of social or cultural regard. (Dumas, 2016a, p. 13)

Afro-pessimism reveals a more in-depth and fundamental understanding that globally, there is contempt for Blackness, which results in the sanctioning and acceptance of violence against Black people (Wilderson, 2010). Central to this theory is the idea that the process of transatlantic slavery stripped Black people of their humanity, and it has never been meaningfully restored (McKittrick, 2006; Wynter, 2003). Slavery necessitated an institutionalized system—still prevalent today—that regarded Africans as not less than

human but something other than human entirely (Wilderson, 2010). Our conception of the human is historically produced and inextricable from transatlantic slavery (McKittrick, 2006). During the transatlantic slave trade era, enlightenment philosophers created definitions of the human that excluded the enslaved (Sorentino 2016). To be human was to be free and able to reason, two traits violently and systematically denied to the enslaved (Sorentino 2016). Being "human" has been positioned as *not Black* (Wilderson, 2010). Freedom is understood as *not slavery.* Under this calculus, the death of Black people is expected and deserved. According to Dumas (2016a),

> There is no precise historical moment in which there was a break between slavery and acknowledgment of Black citizenship and humanness; nor is there any indication of a clear disruption of the technologies of violence—that is, the institutional structures and social processes—that maintain Black subjugation. (p. 14)

As long ago as 1903, Du Bois wrote that the abolition of slavery had not resulted in "real" freedom for most Black Americans, who continued to live in the shadows of slavery, in abject poverty, and faced the ongoing ill effects of imperialism, capitalism, and racism. Du Bois lamented, "A people thus handicapped ought not to be asked to race with the world, but rather allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems. But alas! […] the very soul of the toiling, sweating black man is darkened by the shadow of a vast despair" (Du Bois, 1903). The enduring afterlife of slavery has positioned Black bodies as a fundamental threat to authority. Control of Black bodies, then, is "the definitive reinforcement of security and order" (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 434). From this impulse come the ready justifications for the extrajudicial deaths and a highly visible suffering of Black people. We see the workings of social control in these all-too-familiar statistics: Black people are disproportionately shot and killed by the police (Fox et al., 2019). Black people are approximately 13% of the U.S. population, yet they account for more than 25% of those killed by police. This disparity is even more pronounced for unarmed Black people (Fox et al., 2019). Unarmed Black men are four times as likely to be killed by police than unarmed White men (Fox et al., 2019).

Social Death

Afro-pessimism is concerned with what Saidiya Hartman (2008) calls the "afterlife of slavery" (p. 6). Slavery transformed Africans into a racialized group stripped of its humanity and rendered as property. The result is Black ontological death, or *social death.* It is the mechanism by which Black people become unrecognizable as human. It is the mechanism by which what is human becomes defined in terms of what is not Black.

Patterson (1982) defined the process of social death as including three key, dehumanizing features: natal alienation, gratuitous violence, and social dishonor. Natal alienation refers to the process of severing enslaved people from all land and family. Enslavement tore apart family ties and rendered enslaved Africans a people without a homeland. Descendants of slaves are left with incomplete histories with irreparable gaps in family histories that continue to wound into the present. Hartman identified this wound

as an "essential inheritance of slavery" (Hartman, 2008, p. 28). Afro-pessimists would identify this wound as a characteristic of social death.

The second dehumanizing feature, gratuitous violence, refers to the systematized violence required to maintain and uphold Black inhumanity. "Gratuitous violence" is inclusive of the indescribable violence enacted during transatlantic slavery to maintain Black people as property. It is also inclusive of the indescribable violence enacted against Black people into the present. Douglass (2018), for example, wrote about Korryn Gaines, a Black woman murdered by police whose filmed murder went viral online. In the wake of her death, reporters and commentators online speculated about what she might have done to deserve her death. This story is not unlike six-year old Nadia King's, whose brush with police was justified because she was "out of control." It is not unlike hundreds of stories that never make the news. Social death acts as a perverse loop that cycles in new violence, new victims, new perpetrators, but always the same script. Always the threat of violence or death, or the threat of death itself. As violence becomes routinized, so too is the inhumanity of Black people reified and upheld.

Christina Sharpe (2016) argued for an understanding of Black life as always lived in proximity to social death, as "deathliness" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 9). Sharpe connected the endless, highly visible spectacles of Black suffering with the same ongoing catastrophe that began with slavery. She referred to the coverage of natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Haiti's 2010 earthquake as examples of the media reducing Black suffering to the same anonymous and inhuman spectacle yet again, even now. If we look to Nadia King, again, we see the function of social death. King's suffering is unsurprising because she is a Black child; indeed, it is only possible that she could suffer this way because she is Black. These spectacles of suffering contribute to an endless reified status of social dishonor, which Ray et al. (2017) described as "Blacks' low status in every corner of society" (p. 150).

Diverging From Other Critical Theories

Afro-pessimism diverges from other critical theories, including critical race theory, in its centering of anti-Blackness. Afro-pessimists insist no other racialized group has experienced a system of control and dehumanization so enduring, total, and global as has risen from North American chattel slavery. This dehumanization has produced a system of anti-Blackness different from other forms of racism. Rather than a Black/White binary, Afro-pessimism suggests our society is ordered along a Black/non-Black continuum that positions all in hostility against those who are Black. This framework acknowledges a society ordered around anti-Blackness, where proximity to Whiteness is awarded, and proximity to Blackness is punished.

Afro-pessimist theory critiques "people of color" as a construct and emphasizes the centrality and historical specificity of anti-Blackness in the wake of transatlantic racial slavery (Sexton, 2008). This lens understands other marginalized, racialized groups in terms of their social proximity to Blackness. It acknowledges the anti-Blackness carried out by other groups, including efforts to distance themselves from the social consequences of Blackness. Other marginalized groups may adopt the language and tactics of the civil

rights struggle but have ultimately abandoned coalitional approaches where better outcomes can be obtained by distancing from Black people (Sexton, 2008). In this way, Afro-pessimism extends critical race theory's idea of "interest convergence" to include any group with social distance from Blackness. Interest convergence refers to the legal trend where civil rights advances only occur when Black interests and white interests converge (Bell, 1995). Afro-pessimism argues that all racialized groups benefit from interest convergence with white interests, even when they may diverge from Black interests.

Controversially, Afro-pessimism does not seek solutions - indeed, it is pessimistic about whether any meaningful solution to global anti-Blackness exists. Rather, its theoretical task resides in an "epistemology of mourning" (Dumas, 2014, p. 26), where Black suffering itself is investigated in its own right, rather than in a cost-benefit analysis. The motivating question becomes how Black people and communities navigate suffering, because suffering is inevitable in a society predicated on anti-Blackness.

It is precisely because of this theory's aversion to finding solutions that we believe it is of value to social workers. It is not the task of this paper to convince social workers to abandon hope that their profession can be agentive in social change. Instead, we ask social workers to break from their relentless pursuit of the solution to racial inequality to better understand how racial inequality works in the first place We believe if all social workers were armed with a robust understanding of anti-Blackness's scope and history, our profession would necessarily become a radical one.

Histories of Social Control

Another similarity between the police and social work professions is that both have origins rooted in social control. Social control is defined as "the entire range of actions and pressures which are designed to lead the individual to function within society without threatening to disrupt the social order" (Goroff, 1974, p. 19). Police forces in the northern United States emerged to regulate disorder from the "dangerous classes," which at the time were considered to be "poor, biologically inferior, morally intemperate, foreign immigrants, unskilled, uneducated, underclass, and free Blacks" (Potter, 2013, par. 2). Disorder consisted of public drunkenness, hooliganism, public disorder, political protests, worker riots, and prostitution. The primary reason for controlling disorder was the burgeoning economic interests, which were more concerned with social control rather than controlling crime. Profitable business required a stable and orderly workforce and environment (Spitzer & Scull, 1977). Therefore, policing was focused on controlling "bad" individuals (e.g., Black people), which remains the focus today (Potter, 2013).

An early form of policing in the Southern United States was known as "Slave Patrols" (Platt, 1982). The Carolina colonies established the first organized slave patrol in 1704 and they remained commonplace across the Southern states until the Civil War ended slavery in 1865 (Potter, 2013). The primary function of slave patrols was to track down, apprehend, and return runaway slaves. The intent of these "slave patrols" was to create organized terror to deter slave revolts, and maintain slavery (Potter, 2013). After the Civil War and with the end of slavery in 1865, slave patrols in the South evolved into police departments, serving a similar role in the lives of newly freed slaves. Police in the U.S. Northern and Southern

states were responsible for controlling freed slaves and enforcing Jim Crow and other racist laws to maintain the workforce needed to keep the southern economy afloat (Potter, 2013). The police were the only authorized entity to use force to maintain law and order. The mere presence of police was meant to prevent crime through surveillance and observation (Potter, 2013).

Similar to the history of policing, since the inception of social work, social control has been a primary function of the profession (Day & Schiele, 2013). Social work practice is one of the many ways society attempts to socialize clients to comply with the norms and behavior deemed acceptable by White middle-class cultural norms (Abbott & Wallace, 1990). Social work has created, upheld, and strengthened oppressive systems (Social Service Workers United-Chicago [SSWUC], 2020): "The history of psychiatric hospitalization, drug treatment, child welfare, and immigration programs and services cannot be divorced from America's history of creating systems to control and harm people of color" (para. 22). The government is one of the largest employers of social work services. How do social workers advocate against the very entity that is paying their salary? They do not! Kivel (2007) reported,

> We committed to building an organization that could contribute to ending violence through community prevention and education, not just reforming individual perpetrators…Nearly 30 years later, I look around and see many shelters and services for survivors of domestic violence, but no large-scale movement to end male violence…We could continue doing what we are doing for another 100 years, and the levels of violence would not change. (pp. 129-130)

This pattern will not change because all too often, social work focuses on meeting the needs of individuals affected by the personal and devastating impact of institutional policies and practices as opposed to fighting against the root causes of the institutional policies and practices (Kivel, 2007). Most social work interventions focus on individualistic causes and explanations to social problems, distribution of resources that ensure compliance and acquiescence, and regulation of Black people, other communities of color, and lower classes via surveillance and observation (Abulhul, 2021). Social workers have long been tasked with "policing the boundaries of welfare" (Humphries, 2004, p. 93). Social workers are the enforcers, gatekeepers and arbiters of state policies such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), welfare, and public assistance housing, yet we are rarely the architects or the opponents of those policies. Enmeshed in social work profession are mechanisms of surveillance and supervision that have been present since its inception. Social work's earliest ideologies were influenced by eugenics, and the impulse to separate, police and socialize the poor (LaPan & Platt, 2005). Social workers in the early 1900s were responsible for forced sterilizations of vulnerable people under their care, including inmates and mentally ill clients (LaPan & Platt, 2005). LaPan and Platt (2005) argue that "the race, class, and gender biases permeating eugenics left an enduring legacy in the profession" (p. 141). Child welfare shares a similarly troubling past. Black children were excluded from child welfare services until the end of World War II. Once African American children entered foster care during the 1950's, their numbers soared. Cooper (2013) writes, "It is no coincidence that foster care policies became more punitive precisely when African children entered the system" (p. 234).

Despite the profession's claims that they are working in clients' best interests and believe in self-determination, social workers often find themselves in the position of exerting control, rather than care (Abulhul, 2021). Social work practice has been reduced to individualistic explanations of social problems or "the least complex, narrowest, most 'doable,' private or internal aspects of cases" (Meyer, 1993, as cited in Long, 2000, p. 67,). According to Warde (2017), "In becoming a profession, social work concentrated its practice focus on casework with individuals and families (micro) and de-emphasized concern with institutional causes and social reform (macro)" (p. 11). De-emphasis on the macro leaves the profession toothless against the problems it seeks to correct and complicit in the entrenchment of "interventions that neither disrupt the White supremacist racial hegemony, nor threaten the capitalist economic order" (Dumas, 2016b, p. 108). In other words, social work has become an arm of the government to establish social control.

Disproportionality

The final similarity between criminal justice and social work professions is that they both have high disproportionality rates. Disproportionality is defined as "the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared to its percentage in the total population" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021, p. 2). In 2018, Black people made up 13.4% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (United States Department of Justice, 2020), Black people were 27.4% of the individuals arrested (United States Department of Justice, 2020). In terms of mass incarceration, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world (Carson, 2020). Black men have the highest incarceration rates of any group (Carson, 2020). In 2018, the incarceration rate of Black males' was 5.8 times higher than White males, while the incarceration rate of Black women was 1.8 times the rate of White women (Carson, 2020).

Despite social work's explicit commitments to antiracism, the field still disproportionately engages with communities of color and Black communities in particular (Dettlaff, 2021). "Black children are involved in reported and substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect at approximately twice the rate of white children" (Drake et al., 2007, p. 471). In 2018, there were 435,052 children in care, 262,204 entering foster care, and 249,980 exiting foster care (Puzzanchera & Taylor, 2020). For Black children, rates of disproportionality range from 1.52 to 1.66, while White children range from .93-.98 (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Disproportionality in Child Welfare*

2018	Total	Black children (15.1% of the population)	White children (52.5% of the population)
In care	435,052	25.2% (1.66)	48.9% (.93)
Entering foster care	262,204	23.5% (1.55)	51.2% (.98)
Exiting foster care	249,980	23.1% (1.52)	50.9% (.97)

Disproportionality in child welfare and other social work-related fields is an ongoing problem, yet child welfare is one of the remaining sectors still dominated by social workers (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021; Dettlaff, 2021). Fluke et al. (2011) offer four possible explanations for disproportionality in child welfare: 1) high rates of poverty create disparate needs among children and families of color, 2) racism, discrimination, and bias by individuals throughout the child welfare system, 3) system-related factors such as the race of workers, social support, and resources available to families of color increase the likelihood of children of color becoming involved with the system, and 4) the region, state, and neighborhood where children reside increases the likelihood of their involvement with the child welfare system.

Divesting From Social Control and Anti-Blackness

We must acknowledge that anti-Blackness—the devaluing and dehumanizing of Black life - functions in social work's everyday mechanisms. Anti-Blackness is so enmeshed in social work practice and policy that it has become hard to see it could be any other way (Bell, 2020). When the school social worker called police to collect six-year-old Nadia King before calling her mother, it was an example of anti-Blackness—an act of casual cruelty we would never think of imparting on a White child. If Nadia King had White skin and blonde pigtails, she would not have been "out of control." She would have been a child having a tantrum, and her mother would have been contacted prior to any action taken by the school. Anti-Blackness is what renders King inhuman and "out of control" at 6 -years old.

What would it mean to divest the social work profession from its intricate commitments to social control and anti-Blackness? We cannot answer that in one paper. To attempt to prescribe solutions would be to understate the scope and scale of the problem. Yet, we know that we must begin with a sense of urgency. The slow, incremental, and highly individualized modes of "change" prescribed implicitly by social work do not address the ongoing catastrophe of anti-Blackness. The scope of the problem requires more potent tools than personally investigating and confronting one's own biases. On this subject, Dumas (2016a) wrote, "This is different from a broad stance against intolerance or racism, or an admission of the existence of White privilege" (p. 17). While necessary, these first steps cannot be where social work education ends.

Afro-pessimism asks us to investigate the internal logics we take for granted. Are we intervening in the lives of individuals, or are we dismantling root causes? We hold the Black families we interact with up against standards that do not take into account the afterlife of slavery—the irreparable rupture from which all new wounds burst forth. That we work with police officers is an indicator of our collusion. That we continually reproduce disproportionalities is an indicator of our complicity. Those we seek to serve in Black communities often fear us (DeVoe & Smith, 2003), an indicator of our capacity for terror. Afro-pessimism suggests that these failures are not mistakes; this is how the gears of anti-Blackness remain well-oiled.

Schools of Social Work

Our first and most enduring socializing force as social workers is schools of social work, and anti-Blackness is enmeshed here. Whiteness remains the cultural standard and currency of social work (Nylund, 2006; Harney & Moten, 2013), despite the psychic turmoil this inflicts on Black students. Proximity to Whiteness - fashioned as "professionalism"—is rewarded, while proximity to Blackness is treated as wholly unwelcome in the university setting. Black social work students are othered, their ways of being and knowing sidelined, and their perspectives decentered. In a 2011 study on the experiences of Black social work students, Bernard et al. found that students in their study experienced:

> derogatory stereotypes and hostility from practice assessors and other staff members; feeling excluded and isolated; being expected to work harder and to be more capable than their White counterparts; being placed in agencies where racist practices were in evidence; and being subject to racist discrimination by service users, and, on occasions not being supported by other staff members in challenging this. (p. 72)

Afro-pessimist theory invites us to look beyond quantifiable outcomes and investigate the everyday suffering of Black people. The ordinary suffering of Black students in schools of social work is well documented. Black social work students still face constant, fatiguing microaggressions from professors and peers (Bernard et al., 2011). Social work curriculums still center and cater to Whiteness (Nylund, 2006). Generally, social work schools cannot promise that social work students' field placements will not be racist (Brown et al., 2019). Cumulatively, these everyday wounds are anchored in anti-Blackness and uphold the dehumanization and devaluation of Black people and Black life.

In addition to the anti-Blackness these students experience, anecdotal evidence suggests that Black social work students feel beleaguered by the profession's pathways to social change. Many of us come to the profession seeking radical change, and we are offered no meaningful pathways to enacting it. This is exacerbated by our lived experiences of anti-Blackness. We come to social work to free ourselves from the structural racism and anti-Blackness and find that social work is no different from anywhere else despite its social justice commitments.

Schools of social work must take more serious their duty to create agents of change. An earnest and honest look at the scope and scale of anti-Blackness should have a radicalizing effect on every student who graduates with a degree from a program claiming to promote social justice. Yet, we routinely train students who do not understand their work as countercultural, radical, or transformative. Even worse, we release these students into communities without a complete and robust historical understanding of the legacies of violence, historical trauma, and social control that led society to this current political moment. Schools of social work need to offer social work students an unflinching introduction to their capacity for racialized harm. How are we conceptualizing and contextualizing our role as enforcers to social work students? How do we fit our standard policies and practices into the longer historical narrative of Black social death? While there

are no simple solutions to anti-Blackness in social work schools, beginning with those questions is a good place to start.

Resisting Carcerality in Social Work

Divesting from antiblackness in social work also requires divesting from police-social work collaborative models and carceral social work practices. Jacobs et al. (2021), define carceral social work "as a form of social work that relies on logics of White supremacy and that uses coercive and punitive practices to manage BIPOC and poor communities" (p. 39). Carceral social work includes direct partnership with police, but also implicates the profession in the myriad of "tactics dependent on the same White supremacist and coercive foundations as policing" (Jacobs et al., 2021, p. 39).

The social work profession is complicit in paternalistic practices of oversight, regulation, and punishment of Black populations in ways that mimic and work in unison with law enforcement (Jacobs et al., 2021). Police and policing have no place in a profession that espouses a commitment to social justice. Inequality is strengthened through police and policing. Policing contributes to the increase of mass incarceration and sustains minimal educational and economic resources. Within social work programs, collaboration with police provides further pipelines to the criminal justice system in communities that are already disproportionately surveilled and policed (Jacobs et al., 2021). Richie and Martensen (2020) propose that social work take on an "abolition praxis" which "avoid[s] even the most subtle or indirect reliance on the punishment industry as a way to restore equilibrium to individuals or groups" (p. 14). Abolition praxis, or anti-carceral social work (Jacobs et al., 2021) is anchored in transformative and restorative justice approaches and community-centered solutions to social problems. A shift toward abolition praxis would require the profession to embrace mutual aid traditions, adopt alternatives to policing, and transition away from individualized practices toward collective solutions (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Call to Social Work to Embrace its Radical Roots

The killing of Black people at the hands of the police is an ongoing catastrophe. According to Howard (2017), "social workers are in an advantageous position to join with Black and [Brown] communities to shepherd this unrest into social change" (p. 81). However, social workers would need to be more active and vocal if they want to effect change (Howard, 2017). At various points in social work history, "Black social workers worked to deconstruct racist systems of inequity and to empower the Black community" (Howard, 2017, p. 83). Unless social work can return to these early practices and live up to its social justice mission, replacing police with social workers is not the answer to this pandemic. According to William De Maria (1992 as cited in Reisch & Andrews, 2001),

> The social work radical has philosophical leanings towards the importance of discovering the causes of oppression (or injustice or disadvantage). However, that is only half the story and many social workers who are called radical end here. The next stage is to transform the insights gleaned from the foundation material into

> immediate social action…to move from structural analysis to structural practice. (p. 5)

There are three underlying principles of radical social work:

1. Structural and economic inequality is the primary source of clients' problems.
2. Social work and social service agencies have become instruments of social control, co-optation, or stigmatization.
3. Social workers need to focus on structural and internalized oppression (Longres, 1996, as cited in Reisch & Andrews, 2001).

Conclusion

We must acknowledge the totality and embeddedness of anti-Blackness and our complicity in the control of Black bodies. For this reason, the field's explicit antiracist commitments do not interrupt the normal function of social work—to reproduce and reify (every day) acts of violence in an anti-Black society. With anti-Blackness as a tool, we can begin to see racial disparities in the field as unsurprising. We can begin to critically assess whether our social justice goals can be meaningfully mitigated without broader, more radical change. We can begin the process of reimaging social work as an emancipatory project, rather than an endless series of band-aids ill-equipped to stop the bleeding. When Audre Lorde (1984) wrote, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," (p. 110) social work was not excluded. We either dismantle oppressive systems, or we maintain them. We cannot do both. Social workers cannot achieve their mission—social justice—without being disruptive.

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