The possibilities and dissonances of abolitionist social work

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The normative ideal of justice in Aotearoa New Zealand is dominated by the twin pillars of colonialism and carceralism. The expansion and entrenchment of this colonial carceral paradigm is facilitated by auxiliary and complicit social systems. How can social work respond to its position as an element of these systems?

APPROACH: This article uses the three-stage framework of Emancipatory Social Science to examine the harms of carceralism and carceral social work, to offer abolitionist social work as an alternative, and to begin an exploration of the possibilities and dissonances presented by this alternative.

CONCLUSIONS: Like carceralism, carceral social work is inherently harmful. However, the alternative praxis of abolitionist social work raises questions for our profession regarding the balancing of immediate relief and wider social change, the potential abolition of many currently accepted forms of social work, and the strengthening or building of non-carceral social works.

Keywords: Carceralism, carceral social work, abolitionist social work, fugitivity

If I were to chronicle the violent imposition of colonial carceralism in Aotearoa New Zealand, one place to begin would be the year 1840—while widely known as the year that Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its fraudulent English-language counterpart was signed, it is also the year prisons were first built on these islands. Prior to this, tikanga Māori had no use for these houses of torture and punishment (Jackson, 2017). Since 1840, the colonial carceralism heralded by these early prisons has been expanded and entrenched to devastating effect. One aspect of understanding and challenging this expansion and entrenchment is to examine how auxiliary and complicit social systems feed and fortify its torturous reach.

This article presents the early and exploratory stage of my current PhD project focused on the position of social work as a potential component of these auxiliary systems, and consequently, as a facilitator or challenger of colonial carceralism. Using the three-stage framework of Emancipatory Social Science (ESS) I lay out a critique of colonial carceralism and colonial carceral social work, offer abolition and abolitionist social work as a necessary alternative, and finally, explore some of the potential contradictions of this transformative praxis. As the project is in its initial stages, I conclude with a set of questions for practitioners committed to abolition. These questions are indicative of both the

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dissonance and possibility of abolitionist social work.

Framework: Emancipatory social science

Wright (2010) articulated ESS as an approach to research that holds emancipation at its core and that views social or systemic—rather than individual—change as necessary for this emancipation. ESS contains a three stage process for seeking this socially oriented emancipation. The first stage is *diagnosis and critique*. This refers to "identifying the ways in which existing social institutions and social structures systemically impose harms on people" (Wright, 2010, p. 11). It requires a demonstration that these harms are not just incidental to the current system, but are an inherent part of its function. Following the establishment of a system's intrinsic harm, stage two is *alternatives*. This stage examines alternate ways of organising our society, and of being in relationship with each other – ones that "eliminate, or at least significantly mitigate" the harms we have identified (Wright, 2010, p. 20). Finally, stage three is *transformation*, where the focus shifts to enacting an alternative. This stage is concerned with achievability in a practical sense; it seeks to understand what actions we need to take, the barriers we face, and the opportunities we must seek. With this framework in place, let us turn to carceralism and social work in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Diagnosis and critique: Carceralism and carceral social work

In beginning with *diagnosis and critique*, we must first be clear about the system of carceralism being critiqued. Whilst the central institutions of carceralism, like prisons, police, or courts might appear the most natural focus for diagnosis and critique, carceralism is a much broader system than its most infamous institutions might suggest. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) argued that carceralism is an ideology of

punitive control and surveillance in service of dominant social systems and interests. For Foucault, these dominant interests were largely represented by the capitalist class. However, in Aotearoa New Zealand, a focus only on capitalism is of limited use. The twin forces of colonialism and capitalism must be considered together.

Aotearoa New Zealand's capitalist economic system was (and is) violently imposed through the white supremacist process of colonisation. This is clear in the Doctrine of Discovery that asserted the right of Christian European nations to invade and claim ownership over indigenous lands, "reduce [Indigenous] persons to perpetual slavery," and appropriate land, resources and people for "use and profit" (Nicholas, 2004). As Tina Ngata (2019) established across *Kia Mau*, the Doctrine of Discovery exposes the fundamental, white supremacist tenet of colonisation: the notion that the Christian nations of Europe possess an inherent superiority over Indigenous peoples, granting colonisers unrestricted right to enact genocide and epistemicide via the for-profit theft and extraction of resources that sustain Indigenous life. It was this belief in the right to "use and profit" that led to Cook's mission and secret orders to claim the land of Aotearoa for the British, and to the subsequent and continuing acts of land alienation and cultural suppression—the violence of which cannot be understated. This colonial capitalist system remains in place, and is the system which carceralism and its ideology of punitive control and surveillance seeks to uphold. Carceral logic is the orientation towards punitive control and surveillance to maintain colonial and capitalist interests. The institutions and social relations that use this carceral logic are part of the system of carceralism.

With this understanding of carceralism in place, we can see that carceralism is certainly specific and overt in the form of prisons and police, who protect the colonial notion of private property and profit on behalf of

those who benefit from this system (Rākete, 2023). The predictable result of which is our hyper-incarceration of Māori and those this system holds in poverty. We can also see that carceralism can be widespread and diffuse across many seemingly non-carceral professions—a phenomenon recognised and articulated by many modern abolitionists. Kaba and Ritchie (2022, p. 36) argued that, while police violence is a demonstrable act of carceral logic, it is "not the only grammar of policing". They use the term "soft policing" to describe acts across the medical, education and social service fields that draw on carceral logic of control and surveillance in their interactions with communities they ostensibly support. Davis et al. (2022) drew on Pupavac's (2001) term "therapeutic governance" to describe the use of compulsory counselling or life-skills courses like budgeting, as a form of control over the lives of the poor or incarcerated. Rather than address systemic failures, these forms of soft policing direct correctional and disciplinary solutions at individuals, and in this way "punitive and social service can become indistinguishable" (Richie & Martensen, 2020, p. 14).

Foucault (1995, p. 297) talked about the phenomenon of *diffuse carceralism* as the "carceral archipelago"; each island is connected by the base logic of upholding colonial capitalist interests through punitive surveillance and control. Some islands might be prisons, but others might be a welfare system where an inability to work is a punishable quality, a legal system where collective occupation of ancestral land is criminalised, or a social support system in which social workers are deputised as agents of state control and required to report non-compliance to an overtly carceral arm of the state with the power to punish. This last example might be called carceral social work.

When we understand the breadth of carceralism, two things become clear. Firstly, that it is an inherently harmful system. Colonial carceralism has no space for the full practice of Tino Rangatiratanga; it rejects alternate (non-white supremacist) ways of organising relationships with each other and the land; and it cannot provide reconciliation or a just transformation of relations because it is designed to uphold a white supremacist power structure. Current practices of Tino Rangatiratanga, alternate ways of relating to each other and the land, or justly transforming those relationships occur despite, and in challenge to, colonial carceralism.

Secondly, we can see the way it finds a place in institutions that might seem separate from obvious carceral practices, such is the case with carceral social work. This is a mode of social work practice that relies on, or is complicit in upholding, the carceral logic of control and surveillance. To examine the concept of carceral social work, let us look to the history of the profession. Much of what could be considered mainstream social work can trace its origins to the religious movements for social justice in 18th and 19th century England (Henrickson, 2022). These movements set the stage for the Victorian era of organised charity work with the poor, and for the development of umbrella organisations like the Charity Organisation Society with their campaign to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor (Mooney, 2006).

From the early days of charitable work in Aotearoa New Zealand we have seen the carceral logic that only those who can conform to the social standards of a settler colonial occupation are deserving of support. Those who cannot, or will not, conform will be punished in the form of not receiving the support rendered necessary by colonial capitalism. In this way, these interventions form part of carceral web of discipline and compliance—they are concerned "with disciplining the poor and unproductive, as much as with addressing the impact of social suffering" (Hyslop, 2022, p. 23). I saw this logic play in one of my social work student placements at a social service with

an attached food back. This organisation had a policy that if a community member used the food bank more than twice, they must regularly meet with a social worker and must engage *productively* in work that social worker would like them to do. The social worker and organisation has a kind of control over this person's life, there is surveillance in this work, and there is the possible punishment of refusing access to food if compliance is not readily offered.

We can also see carceral social work in historical and current iterations of our child protective social work. Child protection social work shares this Victorian origin with its belief in the deserving poor and the subsequent carceral orientation towards surveillance and compliance. In our colonial setting, the surveilling gaze of social work falls particularly on whānau Māori as community members who sit outside of settler colonial norms. Early child protection work often targeted whānau Māori as not being able to provide for kids in the same way it was assumed that Pākehā would be able to. In the latter half of the 20th century, closed adoption of tamariki Māori into Pākehā families was often encouraged (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2023). These adoptions were carceral in that they served as both a punishment for Māori not meeting standards of Pākehā-ness and as a method of control to ensure that the next generation of tamariki Māori were brought up conforming to this standard. These adoptions also occurred alongside the mass removal of tamariki Māori from their communities for placement in the directly carceral borstal system (Stanley, 2016). The active participation in this surveillance, punishment, and what amounted to the torture of these young people, is part of the carceral history of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand.

We still see elements of this carceral history in a child protection system where sitting outside of a settler colonial norm (Pākehā contributing to the formal economy) is predictive of increased contact with this system (Keddell, 2020). Additionally this modern system is one orientated towards the "identification of risk to individual children" (Hyslop, 2022, p. 25). Such a tendency to avoid risk can mean that decisions about child welfare can resemble a punishment of a parent rather than a desire to work with the parent and their community. This is especially true when perceptions of risk are linked to settler colonial norms, and thus, surveillance to ensure parental compliance with settler colonial norms is associated with risk reduction. Any modern child protection that is oriented towards this control, surveillance and punishment to maintain colonial and capitalist interests is carceral in nature.

Just as we know that carceralism, with its orientation towards upholding colonial and capitalist interests is harmful, we must also concede that carceral social work is harmful. Though it is not often termed "carceral social work", there is an acknowledgement of the harms of this kind of practice within the profession. For example, supporting Rangatiratanga for whānau, hapū and iwi, and Mātātoa or moral courage in challenging situations, are included as Pou in Ngā Tikanga Matatika of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (2019). Embodiment of these Pou in practice would constitute a challenge to carceral social work. Although carceral social work is a distortion of the values expressed in this Pou, it remains a significant presence in our profession. Given our diagnosis and critique of carceralism and carceral social work as necessarily harmful, we must seek an alternative.

Alternatives: Abolition and abolitionist social work

The standard debate following the recognition of the harms of carceralism is that of reform versus abolition. Reformist rhetoric often opines the promise of gradual change towards a less harmful system.

Since the establishment of Aotearoa New Zealand's first prisons in 1840 there have been over 100 reforms in sentencing laws, capital and corporal punishment, life sentences, parole, probation and community service (Newbold, 2007). Despite this, we remain in a system in which two years after release, 49% of formerly incarcerated people will be reincarcerated (Nadesu, 2008); torture regularly occurs within prison walls (Lamusse et al., 2016); and over 90% of those within prisons have had a mental health or substance use diagnosis (Department of Corrections, 2017). The carceral system is not motivated towards that which genuinely reduces its reach and negative impact on people, but rather, towards that "which increases its effects while diminishing its economic… and political cost" (Foucault, 1995, pp. 85–86). The gradual reform of the carceral system is itself part of carceralism, and part of what sustains this behemoth of colonial torture. The alternative to carceralism cannot be reform, it must be abolition.

Use of the term *abolition* to describe a systemic approach to addressing the harms of an imposed social order was inherited from the efforts of slavery abolitionism. The relationship between these movements is not one of simple analogy, but is that of genealogy (Davis et al., 2022). Just as the current prison system is the direct descendant of slavery, so too, is carceral abolitionism the direct descendent of slavery abolitionism. While there is not space here to lay out the breadth of carceral abolitionism, I will provide a brief overview of its core tenets with a view to establishing how this has been translated in the literature into frameworks of abolitionist social work practice.

Hold a systemic critique of carceralism and carceral social work

The foundation of carceral abolitionism is a strong critique of carceralism as a system, and particularly, a situating of carceralism in relationship with other systems of oppression like colonisation, white supremacy and capitalism (Davis, 2005; Kaba, 2021; Lamusse & McIntosh, 2021; Mathiesen, 1974; Quinney, 1977). In the same way that writers like Du Bois (1935) rejected the idea that slavery could be disestablished in isolation from the adjacent social systems, modern colonial-carceral abolitionism challenges the notion that carceralism can be disestablished without also addressing the injustices of the surrounding social systems that funnel criminalised populations into the torturous carceral web (Davis et al., 2022). Holding this systemic critique is fundamental to carceral abolitionism.

A corresponding systemic critique is also foundational to abolitionist social work (Brock-Petroshius et al., 2022; Jacobs et al., 2021). The practitioner and organisation must have an understanding of the sprawling nature of carceralism and the harm enacted by carceral logic. Brock-Petroshius et al. (2022) particularly argued that an abolitionist lens, rather than a social justice lens, is vital for social work's understanding and critique of carceralism because of de-radicalising enmeshment of social justice with hegemonic liberalism. They argued that this proximity to liberalism, and the subsequent ambiguity of the concept of social justice, allows social workers to claim social justice in their practice without necessarily understanding or critiquing the capitalist, colonial and white supremacist orientation of our social systems.

In contrast, an abolitionist critique includes an understanding of the history of our police as a colonial force intended to support a colonial government in its work of separating Māori from their lands, and an understanding of how this orientation is still in place today. It means understanding that the totalising nature of carceralism undermines Tino Rangatiratanga, and that to support carceralism means being in breach of Te Tiriti. Vitally, it also means understanding the harms of carceralism in its diffuse forms across the carceral archipelago—whether in healthcare, education or social service

(Jacobs et al., 2021). For abolitionist social work, this means a recognition of both our harmful history and of our continued capacity to enact the harm of colonial carceralism (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Sonsteng-Person et al., 2023). Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong (2019) argued that much of professional social work maintains colonialism through its logics of conquest, management and pacification. By contrast, abolitionist social work must recognise and critique our own use of control and surveillance to maintain colonial and capitalist interests.

Act to dismantle carceralism and carceral social work

These underlying critiques form the vital foundation of abolitionism, and therefore of an abolitionist social work. However, as the authors above agree, abolitionism is not generated through critique alone; it cannot exist in a solely discursive realm, it must be an embodied praxis. In the context of what is typically termed *social work practice*, I use praxis to mean that which "transforms the world in which the practice is carried out" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 25).

A common element across organised abolitionist praxis is direct aid and support of those who are trapped within the carceral system, so that they are not abandoned to its torturous confines. This could include advocacy for measures that make "incarceration less burdensome for the inmate" (Mathiesen, 1974, p. 68); the provision of legal aid support to avoid the imposition of prison time, or to shorten the prison time that had been imposed (Davis & Aptheker, 1971; Du Bois, 1935); or the immediate challenging of police brutality in the moment of its occurrence (Newton, 1967). In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, we have seen support for those in the carceral system demonstrated by the actions of the Polynesian Panthers in challenging acts of police brutality (Anae, 2020), in the court monitoring and provision of legal aid by Ngā

Tamatoa (Walker, 2004), and in the current advocacy work of People Against Prisons Aotearoa (PAPA, n.d.). Abolitionist social work must likewise challenge and disrupt the regular functioning of the carceral system, so that there may be relief from its labyrinth of torment.

While the provision of this support is vital to the abolitionist movement, it is equally important that the provision of such support does not sustain or reinforce the power of the prisons system (Davis, 2003). Thus, abolitionists seek the fine balance between substantial support for those captured by carceralism without supporting carceralism itself. This balancing act is achieved in part by what are termed negative or non-reformist reforms. Here, abolitionists distinguish their actions from reforms that appear to improve the situation of an individual, yet further entrench the wider power of the carceral system. Instead, the term *non-reformist reforms* describes a kind of refusal of carceral logic, which leads to systemic changes that are both practical in an immediate sense, and that ease the harms of carceralism through an unravelling and reduction of the power and reach of carceral control (Gilmore, 2007a). For example, in acknowledging the harms that the carceral system has on trans people, reformists offer the solution of prisons (or prison wings) specifically for trans people. While this may ease the immediate harm of a prison sentence for an individual, it is an entrenchment of the right of prisons to incarcerate. In contrast, PAPA (2016) advocated for the cessation of the incarceration of trans people—an act that would reduce the harm of the carceral system through a reduction of its reach and control.

In abolitionist social work praxis, non-reformist action would mean we do not support reforms that see us step in and simply take the place of a directly carceral institution (Jacobs et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2023). This is particularly important in conversations around social workers

responding to mental health crises where police may otherwise attend. Abolitionist social work requires that this only be done if it reduces interactions governed by a carceral logic. If social workers step into this space, working closely with police, and governed by a contract written with carceral logic, we are not reducing the reach of carceralism, we are instead giving it a new face. Abolitionist social work is a refusal to collaborate with methods of carceral control, a refusal to be responsiblised for carceral control and punishment through contracts with carceral institutions, and a self-critical awareness and refusal to let carceral logic into our own praxis.

Alongside the refusal of carceral logic as exemplified by non-reformist reform, abolitionism contains a more generative and creative refusal of carceral logic through the active (re)building of a society that can manage conflict and harm by non-carceral means. This is a commitment both to the regeneration of systems of managing harm that existed prior to colonisation, and to the generation of new systems of conflict and harm management. It is via this (re)generation, this "constellation of alternatives," that abolition renders prisons obsolete (Davis, 2003, p. 107). Du Bois (1935) termed this systemic approach *abolition-democracy*, and viewed it as vital in the reconstruction of society after the nominal abolition of slavery. Abolition Democracy requires not just the negation of the practice of slavery, but the creation of institutions and modes of social relations that support the freedom and power of Black people across society. Likewise, carceral abolition seeks "not so much the abolition of prisons," but through the (re)generation of alternative social systems, "the abolition of a society that could have prisons" (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 42). Embodied here is the notion that we must "build the future from the present" (Gilmore, 2018, p. 14)—the conviction that acting as an abolitionist now is what makes abolition possible in the future.

In abolitionist social work praxis, this means a radical decentring of the social worker and social work organisation in favour of the true elevation of community voices, and the strengthening of community capacity to manage conflict and harm (Jacobs et al., 2021). Sonsteng-Person et al. (2023, p. 12) argued that this requires a "strategic disinvestment from social work power structures"—or what Brock-Petroshius et al. (2022) and Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong (2019) respectively called a forfeiting and a relinquishing of power and expert status to the community experiencing harm. Given social work's role in inflicting this harm, we may be called to significant accountability in this process. Sonsteng-Person et al. (2023, p. 11) emphasised the importance of prioritising justice as determined by those who are most marginalised "above our own fears about retribution". Thus, abolitionist social work contains an absolute commitment to the disestablishment of systems which currently give mainstream social work its mandate and power, in favour of Indigenous and community self-determination.

Transformation: The possibilities and dissonances of abolitionist social work

Having laid out the demonstrable harms of colonial carceralism and carceral social work, and the consequent necessity of abolition and abolitionist social work as the alternative, this section is more exploratory in nature. It examines some of the possibilities and dissonances contained in the abolitionist social work outlined above.

Can we balance the macro and micro demands of abolitionism?

As noted above, an essential element of carceral abolitionism is the commitment to relieving the suffering of those trapped in the carceral web. Social work is well positioned to provide advocacy for this relief. Our professional requirements

commit us to advocate against injustice and our professionalised position grants us access and power not necessarily available to community members and abolitionist activists. The immediate dissonance that arises in this space is that "service is not liberation," that is, social service work does not necessarily create social change (Kivel, 2007; Richie & Martensen, 2020, p. 15). There are two facets of this dissonance that I will discuss: Does a focus on micro-level service make the development of macro-abolitionism more difficult?; and Are these acts of micro-level service part of what sustains carceralism?

Firstly, there is significant potential for micro-level social work to be responding to constant crises generated by the violence of colonial carceralism and the neoliberal abandonment of communities (Kivel, 2007). While this practice focuses on the real and imminent needs of individuals or whānau trapped by carceralism, it may also narrow our focus away from the necessity of abolitionist macro social work praxis. The overworking of social workers in micro-level practice can lead both to a lack of energy to engage with, and opportunity to develop skills in, macro-level praxis (Darroch, 2017). In this landscape of micro-focused, crisis-response practice, we face the real potential of becoming trauma cleaners for the system of colonial carceralism, and it can become increasingly difficult to engage in macro-practice that addresses the systems that generate this torture.

Secondly, there is potential for this crises-focused practice to lend legitimacy to the broader system of carceralism. While our professional title may afford us an expanded opportunity to advocate for those entrapped by carceralism, it also affords the carceral system an opportunity to claim ethical practice through proximity to a profession ostensibly concerned with social justice. It expands the attempt at an ethical façade into community organisations. There is potential for advocacy from professionals

to lend legitimacy in a way that advocacy from community members does not. The potential of further legitimating carceralism is a genuine concern and dissonance in the journey towards abolitionist social work.

These dissonances do not, however, necessitate an abandonment of micro-level practice—there is also possibility in this space. As Kivel (2007) reminded us, the problem is not necessarily the provision of micro-level service, but rather when this social service occurs to the detriment of social change. Social work must therefore consider how we might structure a micro-level practice that may not itself generate change, but that contributes to the abolitionist aim of reducing immediate suffering without entrenching this suffering in the long-term. To this end, we must seek a framework of anti-carceral micro practice, to be balanced with our abolitionist macro praxis. This leaves us with the question: Is this achievable in the current social work paradigm, or might that paradigm be irrefusably carceral?

Is social work irrefusably carceral?

As discussed above, the history of social work as a profession is bound to the classist origins of English charity. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this includes the particularly colonial construction of charity that foregrounded the *benevolence* of white womanhood in supporting Māori communities to assimilate into Pākehā societies (with accompanying punishment for non-assimilation). This history continues to impact the current construction of mainstream social work and gives rise to the concern that the profession, or at least some of our prominent practices, are irrefusably carceral.

One such area of potentially irrefusable carceralism is that of statutory social work. I want to be clear that I am not commenting on individual social workers who work in this space—in fact, abolitionist praxis

requires us to hold systemic critique alongside empathetic relationships with people (including ourselves) who staff these harmful systems (brown, 2020). Therefore, I am focused on the system of statutory social work and its position as *part of* the colonial government. The legitimacy and mandate for statutory social work is provided through legislation, and thus it is beholden to the bastion of colonial power that is the Crown. While individual decisions can be, and are, made that attempt to refuse the carceralism of the Crown, these decisions remain part of a system of colonial governance—a system undergirded by colonial carceralism. The statutory social work system is a branch of the colonial carceral government. Therefore, to assert that statutory social work *as a system* can refuse colonial carcerality is to assert that colonial carceralism can refuse colonial carceralism; it does not make sense. Without significant transformation away from its current construction, for example, through the abolitionist process of decolonisation (Fitzmaurice-Brown, 2023), the system of statutory social work is irrefusably carceral.

It is important to be clear, however, that this potential irrefusablity of carceralism in social work is not limited to the statutory system. In fact, it is worth considering whether the construction of statutory social work as a separate entity from non-statutory social work, is part of what allows non-statutory social workers to position ourselves as refusing carcerality simply by working for a non-statutory organisation, rather than having to examine more deeply the ways in which non-statutory social work has the potential to maintain carcerality. In rejection of this false dichotomy, let us examine the carcerality of non-statutory social work.

Carceralism is extended into the system of non-statutory social work through third-sector responsibilisation for the carceral desires of the colonial system. Government contracts provide the majority of funding for many non-statutory social service organisations, and a full ecosystem of

non-statutory organisations has developed around contracts with the directly carceral arms of the state like Corrections, Police, and Youth Justice. This ecosystem is critiqued as being part of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC). Critics of the NPIC argue that organisations are de-radicalised through a financial tethering to the state that can irrefusably position them as contractors of carceralism rather than drivers of liberation (Gilmore, 2007b; Rodriguez, 2007). There is a need for more research around the NPIC phenomenon in Aotearoa New Zealand—though it certainly stands as a potential dissonance for social work in taking on abolitionism, given that it would require the abolition of non-statutory social works that are made irrefusably carceral through co-option or complicity.

Despite the dissonant presence of carceralism in both statutory and non-statutory social work, there is also possibility in the abolition of particular forms of social work. There is also possibility in strengthening modes of social work that already exist outside of this carceral web, and in the creation of new kinds of social working. In both cases we are talking about a kind of fugitive or unprofessional social work that refuses carceral logic and refuses to be responsibilised for carceral desires. Sonsteng-Person et al. (2023) drew on Bey (2019) to propose that fugitive social work requires a cessation of attempts at acceptance by the carceral system. They argued that fugitivity instead demands that acceptance-seeking acts be replaced by: ethical illegality; working outside or against contracts; and a movement "toward the *under*throw of the world" (Bey, 2019, p. 55).

It must be immediately noted that many Kaupapa Māori services (both Iwi / Hapū and Māta Waka), by their very nature, are often relegated to fugitivity by a colonial government. Likewise, their practice is often framed as unprofessional (Lewis et al., 2023). Although this relegation to fugitivity is accompanied by a racist under-

resourcing of these organisations, there is also power in operating from a foundation of refusal of colonial structure and carceral logic. Through an abolitionist social work lens, the possibility here exists not in social work asking for Kaupapa Māori services to be brought into the non-fugitive centre, or to be seen as highly professional, but instead, in challenging the value of colonial professionalism and in working to resource these services to strengthen their fugitivity in challenge to the carceral centre.

Alongside the strengthening of fugitive Kaupapa Māori services, abolitionist social work seeks to create, develop, and strengthen the unprofessionalism of other social works. Forgoing the idea of professional distance, fugitive social work requires a "restructuring of the 'helping' practices of social work back under the control of communities themselves" (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019, p. 437). Abolitionist social work requires full trust to be placed in marginalised communities and their ability to (re)build alternatives, and a commitment to supporting this work (Brock-Petroshius et al., 2022; Richie & Martensen, 2020). This is work that supports true community autonomy and devolves the professional power of social work to the fugitivity of community creation. Perhaps there is dissonance here in that this mode of practice calls for the abolition of many mainstream social work practices. Yet, possibility exists in the skill of collective refusal of professionalised carceral complicity. Further possibility lies in the fact that all social workers are part of their own communities in which their skills can become a thread in this community tapestry—that is to say, living our social work, or social work as living, might be one form of abolitionist praxis.

Concluding questions for abolitionist social work

Supported by the framework of ESS, this article has moved through a three-stage examination of social work in our broader context of colonial carceralism. At the *diagnosis and critique* stage, carceralism and its logic of surveillance and control in the service of colonial capitalism was found to be inherently harmful due to its attempted denial of Tino Rangatiratanga for Māori and its rejection of transformative change. Social work that takes on this carceral logic through complicity or responsiblisation is also inherently harmful. At the *alternatives* stage, some core tenets of abolitionism were explored and used to establish fundamental elements of an abolitionist social work. This is a social work that holds a strong critique of carceralism and its co-constructive systems, with a particular awareness of carceral social work (histories and presents) in this space. In praxis, this amounts to a social work that supports those currently trapped within the carceral web, without further entrenching this system through our participation as professionals. It is a social work that works towards the abolition of the carceral elements of our own profession, and that moves away from the idea of profession towards fugitivity.

The final stage of *transformation* recognised that there are uncertainties and inconsistencies alongside the opportunities and promise of abolitionist social work. In providing an initial exploration of these possibilities and dissonances I believe some fundamental questions are raised for social workers committed to abolitionism:

1. (How) can social work balance anti-carceral practice with abolitionist praxis?
2. What are the implications of abolitionist social work calling for the abolition of a significant amount of what is currently accepted as social work (both statutory and non-statutory)?
3. How can mainstream social work divest from itself and invest in Kaupapa Māori practices, fugitive social works, and community-led creation?
4. What can large-scale carceral refusal look like in a currently highly professionalised sector?

Attempting to answer these questions is central to my current PhD project. However, it is important to note that unanswered questions should not stop social workers pursuing abolitionism—for it might be that acting as abolitionist social workers now, makes abolitionist social work possible in the future.

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