

# Reading & Discussion Guide

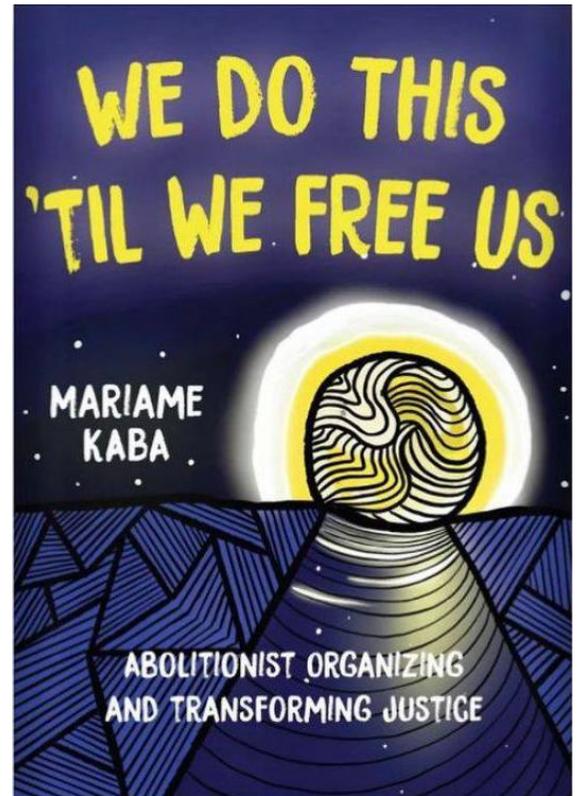
## We Do This 'Til We Free Us

Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice

by Mariame Kaba

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“No matter where and how you enter the conversation, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* brings all of us infinitely closer to creating a world premised on genuine and lasting safety, justice, and peace.” – Andrea J. Ritchie



## Guided Reading & Discussion Questions

1. What is your personal definition of safety? How might your definition of safety differ from other peoples' definitions of safety? Why do many people equate safety with policing? What are some of the messages—in the media, in popular culture, and in your community—that have contributed to the idea that prisons, police, and surveillance contribute to safety?
2. What is the purpose of prisons and jails as they currently operate? What are some ways that prisons and jails have failed to prevent, reduce, or transform harm within your community? Do you believe that it is possible to reform the prison industrial complex? Why or why not? Have you seen any evidence that reform will address the inhumanity and harms of the prison industrial complex?
3. Have you ever had an experience calling the police? Are there existing resources within your community that could serve as alternatives to involving the police? Are those resources sufficiently supported, funded, and staffed? If not, what actions could you take to build greater support for alternatives to the police within your community?
4. Why does abolition require creative and collaborative imagination and action? How can cultivating intentional relationships and participating in collectives help us to imagine new worlds? What intentional relationships would you like to nurture or build? As you participate in this work, what are some ways that you would like to transform as an individual?

5. How is Blackness criminalized in the United States? What are some of the invisible and ever-present harms impacting young people of color that Mariame Kaba describes in “The System Isn’t Broken”? How are young people of color denied the right to be afraid? Why are the police incentivized to make arrests?
6. In “The System Isn’t Broken,” Mariame Kaba identified ten steps to reduce our reliance on policing. Is your community working to accomplish any of these steps? Which of these steps do you feel energized to support? Do any of these steps feel difficult to accomplish in your community? Why or why not?
7. Have you ever referred to the criminal punishment system as being “broken”? How does language that describes the criminal punishment system as broken steer us away from abolition and toward reform? Why do Kaba and other abolitionists assert that it is impossible to reform the police? How will you respond the next time you hear someone say that the U.S. criminal punishment system is broken?
8. What have you learned about the historic origins of policing in United States? Why do police spend most of their time responding to noncriminal issues? How do policing, punishment, and prisons fail to address systemic causes of violence? How can directing resources towards health care, housing, education, and economic development reduce reliance on the police?
9. How was Tiffany Rusher’s life impacted by carceral violence? Who is responsible for Tiffany Rusher’s death? Why are stories like hers often buried beneath headlines of high-profile convictions? How does policing perpetuate sexual violence?
10. Have you ever believed that prisons, police, and surveillance are inevitable solutions to crime? Why or why not? Why does Kaba emphasize that hope is a discipline rather than an emotion? How can you practice hope? How can you practice imagining new solutions and possibilities for responding to harm?
11. What is the difference between self-care and collective care? How can you increase or improve the ways that you practice collective care within your community? What would “a culture of care that nurtures human growth and potential” require?
12. What is your personal definition of justice? Do you believe it is possible for the U.S. criminal punishment system to deliver justice? Why or why not? How did the criminal punishment system fail Marissa Alexander? What must be created in order to accomplish your own vision of true justice?
13. Read the poem **“Sister Outsider”** by **Opal Palmer Adisa**. Why do you think Kaba chose to include part of this poem in her essay “Free Marissa and All Black People”? Why was Kaba committed to freedom for Marissa Alexander? How did she advocate for Marissa and other survivors? What does she mean when she writes, “Marissa’s unfreedom cages me”?
14. What is the difference between survival sex work and sex slavery? What are some of the realities that lead to young people—particularly young people of color and queer and trans young people—to turn to survival sex to provide for themselves? How does the criminal punishment system attempt to eliminate the agency and self-determination of young people engaged in the sex trade? How does the prosecution and incarceration of survivors of violence perpetuate harm? How do social service systems like foster care and behavioral treatment fail to address the root of harm?
15. Why was Cyntoia Brown charged with first-degree murder while defending herself at the age of sixteen? Why was she incorrectly depicted in the media as a child sex slave? Why did contemporary images advocating for her defense represent her as a child? Why is there no such thing as a perfect victim? Who is excluded from mainstream narratives about sexual and gender-based violence?

16. How are survivors of violence systematically punished for taking action to protect themselves and their children? Why does Kaba use the term “no selves to defend” for Black women caught in the criminal punishment system? How are self-defense laws applied differently to white men than they are to women and gender nonconforming people? What does Kaba mean when she asserts that “prison is not feminist”?
17. Why do officer indictments do nothing to end oppressive policing? Why doesn't Kaba focus her energy on indictments of officers who murdered Black people? What alternatives does she focus on? How can you interrupt statements that identify “bad apple” cops as the core problem with policing?
18. How does transformative justice address harm? How could transformative justice be applied in high-profile cases like those involving Larry Nassar and R. Kelly? When addressing harm, why is it important to center the concerns and experiences of people who experienced harm? How do powerful people and institutions often shield individuals who commit harm?
19. Why do Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie assert that “the system that killed [Breonna Taylor] is not set up to provide justice for her family and loved ones”? Why are police officers rarely convicted for shooting and killing people? Do convictions address the harms inflicted upon families and communities? Why or why not?
20. Have you ever desired or called for punishment for someone who committed harm? How do we challenge and reconsider our own punitive impulses? How can we encourage others to do the same? How could the reparations framework—which includes repair, restoration, acknowledgment, cessation, and nonrepetition—benefit Breonna Taylor's family?
21. How do police reforms strengthen and protect the police? How can you take action to oppose reforms that expand the scope of policing in your community? What is a “non-reformist reform”? How might you support interim reforms that do not inhibit a broader vision of abolition? How does language like “community policing” and “school resource officers” obscure the reality of policing? Why is it important to limit and shrink resources—including technology—allocated to the police?
22. Prior to reading this text, what did you know about the origins of prisons in the United States? What did you learn about the history of the criminal punishment system from Mariame Kaba? Why is it important to connect the history of the criminal punishment system to its current form today?
23. Read the **ACLU BuzzFeed listicle “Eleven Students Whose Punishments We Wish Were Made Up”** referenced in “Arresting the Carceral State.” How are these incidents demonstrative of the School to Prison Pipeline? How is policing used in the schools within your community? How can education, and an increase in resources for education, disrupt policing and prisons? Consider your relationship to schools in your community—as a parent, student, staff member, or community member. How can you support and engage in efforts to transform how harm is addressed in schools?
24. How can you interrupt conversations that center excessive militarization of the police? Why is it important to instead steer conversations towards empathy and care for Black people? Why does public attention often focus on the militarization of police rather than on the suffering of Black people?
25. What examples of surveillance does Kaba identify in her essay, “I Live in a Place Where Everybody Watches You Everywhere You Go”? Does surveillance feel like a significant part of your everyday experience? What are some of the types of surveillance that are normalized in your community? How can you resist the surveillance of Black people and young people of color in your community?

26. What have you learned about the reparations campaign for survivors of torture committed by and under John Burge in Chicago? Why is it important to name and make torture visible?
27. What are abolitionist defense campaigns? What are some tactics that demonstrate care for criminalized individuals? Are any of these tactics currently being used in your own community?
28. Who was Joan Little? How did the 1974 effort to free her from prison inspire freedom campaigns for Marissa Alexander and Bresha Meadows? Why did organizers within the Free Joan Little Movement focus their campaign on state violence rather than on state protection from violence? What campaigns today are taking the same approach?
29. How was the call to #FireDanteServin situated within an abolitionist framework? Why is visibility a precursor to accountability? How is visibility a part of Reika Boyd's legacy? How do public campaigns like #SayHerName create more visibility for women and gender nonconforming victims and survivors of state violence?
30. What success does Kaba celebrate in "A Love Letter to the #NoCopAcademy Organizers from Those of Us on the Freedom Side"? Why is it important to recognize smaller victories within larger defeats? **Read "The New York Poem" by Sam Hamill.** Why do you think Kaba chose to include an excerpt from this poem?
31. Why is it important for abolitionists to refuse to advocate for or celebrate someone's imprisonment? Why is it important for systems and practices that address harm to be separated from emotions? How would you respond to someone who argues that abolitionists do not believe in accountability for harm?
32. Why does Kaba focus on transforming harm rather than focus on individuals who caused harm? What is the difference between accountability and punishment? Why is it impossible to make someone take accountability for their actions? What is the difference between punishment and consequences?
33. What are some of the differences between restorative and transformative justice? How does transformative justice address interpersonal relationships? Why is it important to develop and engage in processes that do not rely on the binary of success and failure?
34. What support do you believe should exist for survivors and victims of violence? What support currently exists within the criminal punishment system? How can you create and advocate for different forms of support outside of this system?
35. How does Kaba's imagined world in "Justice: A Short Story" center relationships and community care? How is harm addressed in this story? If you were to write a short story about a future world where punishment and policing do not exist, what alternatives would you like to imagine and include?
36. Why does Kaba emphasize the importance of continuously building many small experiments? How can this help us move beyond the binary of success and failure? How can you embrace an attitude of experimentation and imagination? How can you help others do the same?
37. What are some of the lessons that Mariame Kaba learned from her parents? How did these lessons contribute to the development of her own core values? Who are some of the people who have shaped your values? What are your political commitments?
38. What is the difference between being an activist and being an organizer? Do you identify as an activist or an organizer? Why or why not? What are the issues that are most important to you? How can you actively work to build and be a part of an accountable community with others? How can being a part of community help you take responsibility for your actions, while encouraging others to do the same?

39. Mariame Kaba names several people who are touchstones in her life—including James Baldwin, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Angela Davis. Who are some of your touchstones? How do you connect to them? How do they inspire or uplift or motivate you?
40. How is the phrase “police violence” used to keep us from considering policing as inherently violent? After reading this text, how would you define policing?
41. Why does Kaba share the story of her relationship with Michael in “I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies”: The Living Legacy of June Jordan”? What do you think Michael meant when he shared, “I want them uncomfortable and they need to know that I was here”? What does it mean to be a menace to society? What acts of resistance are you committed to? Why does Kaba believe that “love is a requirement of principled struggle”?

## For Further Discussion & Action

1. Read Interrupting Criminalization’s **#DefundPolice Toolkit: Concrete Steps Toward Divestment from Policing & Investment in Community Safety** by Mariame Kaba, Woods Ervin, and Andrea J. Ritchie.
2. Watch Project NIA’s **Defund Police: An Animated Video** and use the accompanying **discussion guide**.
3. Read **#SurvivedAndPunished: Survivor Defense as Abolitionist Praxis Toolkit** and donate to the **survivors’ commissary fund**.
4. Write a letter or host a letter writing event to support criminalized survivors. Explore the Survived and Punished **Letter Writing Action Center** which includes toolkits, addresses, and tips on how to write letters of support.
5. Read the Movement for Black Lives’ **demand for reparations** and review the accompanying toolkit and policy briefs.
6. Read the Community Organizing and Family Issues’ **Parent-to-Parent Guide to Restorative Justice in Chicago Public Schools**.
7. Explore the **Creative Interventions Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence** by Rachel Herzing and Mimi Kim.
8. Take these **9 solidarity actions** for and with incarcerated people.

## About This Guide’s Author

Rachael Zafer is the author of over a dozen discussion guides for texts like *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, and *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson. You can view all of her guides at [rachaelzafer.com/curriculum](http://rachaelzafer.com/curriculum).