

ABOLITION.

FEMINISM.

NOW.

Angela Y. Davis

Gina Dent

Erica R. Meiners

Beth E. Richie

Praise for *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*

“In this powerful, wise, and well-crafted book, filled with insight and provocation, Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie make it patently and abundantly clear why abolitionist feminism is necessary. Offering vivid snapshots from a political movement, the book explains how organizing to end violence, without turning to violent institutions such as prisons and the police as remedies, is how we learn what we need to do to make change possible . . . [The authors] teach us, in taking up the slow, practical, and painstaking work of campaigning, to expand our political horizons and create imaginative tools for world-building . . . This book is as capacious and demanding as the abolitionist feminism it calls for. It gives us a name for what we want. Abolitionism. Now.”

—**Sara Ahmed**, author of *Living a Feminist Life*

“This extraordinary book makes the most compelling case I’ve ever seen for the indivisibility of feminism and abolition, for the inseparability of gendered and state violence, domestic policing and militarism, the street, the home, and the world. Combining decades of analytical brilliance and organizational experience, Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie offer a genealogy of the movements that brought us here, lessons learned, battles won and lost, and the ongoing collective struggle to build a thoroughly revolutionary vision and practice. A provocation, an incitement, an offering, an invitation to a difficult struggle to which we must all commit. Now.”

—**Robin D. G. Kelley**, author of *Freedom Dreams:
The Black Radical Imagination*

“In *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie brilliantly show how abolition feminism has always offered the radical tools we need for revolutionary change. [They] reveal the connections between state violence and intimate violence, between prisons and family policing, and between local and global organizing, [and] compel us to see the urgent necessity of abolition feminism now.”

—**Dorothy Roberts**, author of *Torn Apart: How the Child
Welfare System Destroys Black Families—and How
Abolition Can Build a Safer World*

“This little book is a massive offering on where we have been, where we are right now, and what we are imagining and organizing into being as abolition feminists . . . Invigorating and rooting, [it] is instantly required reading, showing us how everything we have done and are doing is accumulating towards a post-punitive, transformative future . . . This book is a lineage of words and visuals, showing us the beauty of our efforts, and gently reminding us that we are not failing—we are learning, and we are changing.”

—**adrienne maree brown**, author of *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*

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PREFACE

In 2001, a cluster of people attached to two emerging organizations connected to burgeoning movements gathered in a stuffy room over a weekend to hash out more than a statement. A key instigator for the small convening—primarily of women of color—was a pressing question: how to continue to knit together campaigns and analyses focused *both* on building a world without prisons and policing *and* building a world free of gender and sexual violence. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence was a growing network challenging the mainstream/whitestream anti-violence movement's reliance on policing and punishment, and Critical Resistance had recently coalesced into an organization of abolitionists campaigning for the end of policing and prisons.¹ While both were new and developing networks with many overlapping people and shared analyses, these two groups recognized the value of articulating a collective vision and the importance of writing and circulating a statement on the difficult intersection of their shared work. They understood that crafting a joint statement that balanced an attention to both interpersonal and state violence represented not only an engagement with the thorniest subjects for both organizations but also an opportunity for public engagement in the production of shared analytics, campaign demands, and radical visions.

Members of the two newly formed groups spent an intense weekend at Mills College in Oakland, California, hammering out the “INCITE!-Critical Resistance Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex,” which clearly named the vision and the challenge.² The statement reads in part:

It is critical that we develop responses to gender violence that do not depend on a sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic criminal justice system. It is also important that we develop strategies that challenge the criminal justice system and that also provide safety for survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

Outlining how “radical freedom, mutual accountability, and passionate reciprocity” can build toward “the survival and care of all peoples,” this eleven-point statement identified at its core precisely why abolition must be feminist and why feminism must be abolitionist. Like most collaborative political work, the INCITE!-Critical Resistance Statement arrived in 2001 long past its due date and initially landed quietly. Originally published both as a poster and a manifesto, the statement circulated in feminist and abolitionist movement spaces, propelled by the clarity and compelling nature of its demands and the growing cadre of organizers with whom the statement resonated. As a key reference point in the history of abolition feminism, the document is heralded as an exemplary and clarion call for a more complex approach to anti-police and anti-prison movements, as well as an insistence on antiracism and anticapitalism as central dimensions of contemporary feminism.

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In 2021, we return to this statement and its interventions at a critical moment for the future of social justice, as contemporary organizing makes abolition increasingly irresistible both as a mode of analysis and a political practice. Inching from the margins toward the mainstream, from the end of course syllabi to the beginning, calls for abolition proliferate. *Guardian* headlines announce “unprecedented” support for defunding the police. *Teen Vogue* publishes multiple articles, all identifiable with the tag *abolition*, on topics ranging from how police do not make us safer to why hate crime laws will not end anti-Asian violence.³ Crowds in the street chant *Abolition*. The proliferation of abolitionist lawyering has been spurred in part by the National Lawyers Guild’s resolution endorsing abolition in 2015, by formerly incarcerated people opening law offices like Pittsburgh’s Abolitionist Law Center, and in webinars and organizing sponsored by groups such as Law for Black Lives. School boards from Oakland to Minneapolis are voting to cancel contracts with police departments. Colleges and universities are questioning the role of campus police and reconsidering contractual relationships with local law enforcement.

Yet as abolition becomes more influential as a goal, its collective feminist lineages are increasingly less visible, even during moments made possible precisely *because* of feminist organizing, especially that of young queer people of color whose pivotal labor and analysis is so often erased. As some recognized twenty years ago, abolition is most effectively advanced by naming and elevating an analysis and practice that is collective *and* feminist. We return to the profound intervention of the INCITE!-Critical

Resistance Statement: abolition is unimaginable without our radical, anticapitalist, antiracist, decolonial, queer feminism. This small book argues that abolitionist traditions have relied on feminist analysis and organizing from their inception and that the version of feminism we embrace is also not possible without an abolitionist imagination. Bridging the overlapping but sometimes discontinuous worlds of scholars and organizers, we explore recent movements and organizational formations—including those anchored by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and Critical Resistance—revealing an ecosystem of abolition feminism that is often relegated to the background. As freedom is a constant struggle, abolition feminism has always been a politics—the refusal to consign humans and other beings to disposability—inseparable from practice.⁴

We look to the interventions offered by earlier feminist organizers. The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), for example, was one of several key political treatises that established a political path for radical feminist organizing and that functioned, like all manifestos and open statements, as both a declaration and a process.⁵ While for many the Combahee River Collective Statement is a historical document establishing contemporary Black, lesbian/queer, anticapitalist feminism, the organizing that shaped its creation was as central as the content of the statement. Centering the lives of Black women and other women of color, their collective organizing generated a sense of urgency for the kind of truth telling in which on-the-ground feminist campaigns for liberation engaged deeply with larger, overarching political principles and debates. This broad, optimistic, action-oriented, complex sense

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of abolition feminism and its theory of change reverberates in the efforts of organizations that actively work to free people—like the Brisbane, Australia–based Sisters Inside and the UK’s Sisters Uncut—and across contemporary statements, open letters, posters, and manifestos from networks like the Crunk Feminist Collective, the Movement for Black Lives, the Statement of Solidarity with Palestine from the Abolition and Disability Justice Coalition, and, of course, the INCITE!-Critical Resistance Statement.

We frame this book as a critical genealogy rather than a manifesto, one that emphasizes how important it is to trace political lineages. We offer a set of ideas and thick descriptions of unfinished practices rather than promoting rigid definitions. We attempt to reveal the common constitutive threads of the work and the promise of abolition feminism rather than constrain it to a sectarian political position. From storefronts in Chicago and prisons in Manchester to São Paulo streets and Johannesburg classrooms, our work proceeds genealogically to address subjugated histories of organizing that must inform and strengthen our present mobilizations. We use the term *ecosystem* to avoid a prescriptive or reifying framework and to amplify a dynamic ecology of political work, highlighting legacies, analytics, and questions often erased or obscured. We also use the term *ecosystem* to mark the complexity of a landscape populated with intertwined networks, campaigns, mobilizations, and organizations. Narrating a history of the present ecosystem—attending to subjugated knowledges and erasures—not only gestures to the underlying strata of necessary collective labor but also provides key imaginative and conceptual tools to engage with in our contemporary moment.

As our thinking and practice continues to be stretched and challenged by learning, teaching, and analyzing collective struggle, we do not offer this collaborative project as a thoroughgoing linear historical account of every organizational or conceptual treatment of abolition feminism. Instead, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* puts abolition feminism as a concept into conversation with both the historical and contemporary ideological and political praxis that demands explicit and expansive ideas about how to go about freedom-making. As a critical genealogy, we start with a recognition that these overlapping histories of abolitionist and feminist movements are deeply intertwined, but they do not unfold alongside each other in neat chronological order. The historian Elsa Barkley Brown describes history as “everybody talking at once, multiple rhythms being played simultaneously” and reminds us that “a linear history will lead us to a linear politics and neither will serve us well in an asymmetrical world.”⁶ We welcome other renditions of abolition feminism, and we contend that genealogies should always be questioned, because there is always an unacknowledged reason for beginning at a certain moment in history as opposed to another, and it always matters which narratives of the present are marginalized or expunged. Rather than read this short book and the snapshots of campaigns, organizational formulations, and analyses we offer as a road map—as prescriptive tools for the present and future—or as the authoritative voice on organizations or movements, we suggest an engagement with the goal of our collective writing: to expand dialogue, practice, reflection, and more.

INTRODUCTION

Abolition. Feminism. Now.

Why Abolition Feminism

As abolition haltingly moves into public discourse and as some of its proponents underscore the feminist dimension of abolition as well as the abolitionist dimension of feminism, a clear articulation of the term *abolition feminism* becomes a critical challenge. Concepts, derived both from organizing and scholarship, can become brittle, empty terms—tools to wield against others—rather than living, generative, and rigorous frameworks that deepen and strengthen our theoretical understanding and our movements for social and political transformation.

When we began to collaborate on this book, we assumed that identifying what was and is feminist or abolitionist would be relatively simple. Yet this emerged as a more complex question, partially due to the medium: it can be challenging to write about organizing and ideas that are by nature in motion and therefore always nuanced in their relationality. Neither abolition nor feminism

are static identifiers but rather political methods and practices. Is a project or a campaign feminist or abolitionist if participants do not use these words to describe their labor or campaign? Could we discretely mark what was “feminist” about “abolition” or “abolitionist” about “feminism”? How does abolition feminism take up the political questions that are germane but often obscured in the rendering of both concepts, considering racial capitalism, heteropatriarchy, internationalism, and transphobia as examples? Because these and other questions continue to play generative roles without demanding reductionist responses, we punctuate each word in the title with a full stop to signify that each of these concepts, with their own singular histories, frames this project. As abolition and feminism continue to be theorized discretely by a range of scholars and organizers, our project is not to erase, correct, or supplant these preexisting (and ongoing) efforts. Rather, the very meaning of the term *abolition feminism* incorporates a dialectic, a relationality, and a form of interruption: an insistence that abolitionist theories and practices are most compelling when they are also feminist, and conversely, a feminism that is also abolitionist is the most inclusive and persuasive version of feminism for these times.

While these approaches are always analytically and experientially overlapping—the movement to end gender and sexual violence, for example, can never be isolated from the work to end state violence, including the violence of policing—this more holistic understanding cannot always be assumed. As Critical Race Theorist Mari Matsuda wrote in 1991, a feminism that is able to meaningfully challenge emergent and existing forms of domination must always be flexible enough to “ask the other question”:

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The way I try to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination is through a method I call “ask the other question.” When I see something that looks racist, I ask, “Where is the patriarchy in this?” When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, “Where is the heterosexism in this?” When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, “Where are the class interests in this?” Working in coalition forces us to look for both the obvious and the nonobvious relationships of domination, and, as we have done this, we have come to see that no form of subordination ever stands alone.¹

Matsuda’s invocation requires an acknowledgement of the intersectionality of struggles and also represents our willingness to anticipate change and to build into our organizing a critical, generative reflexivity and opportunity to learn and grow.

For us, abolition feminism is political work that embraces this both/and perspective, moving beyond binary either/or logic and the shallowness of reforms. We recognize the relationality of state and individual violence and thus frame our resistance accordingly: supporting survivors and holding perpetrators accountable, working locally and internationally, building communities while responding to immediate needs. We work alongside people who are incarcerated while we demand their release. We mobilize in outrage against the rape of another woman and reject increased policing as the response. We support and build sustainable and long-term cultural and political shifts to end ableism and transphobia, while proliferating different “in the moment” responses when harm does happen. Sometimes messy and risky, these collective practices of creativity and reflection shape new visions of safety,

animating complex landscapes that shape abolition feminism.

An ability to look both inward and outward, to meet both immediate demands and confront broad systems of injustice, and to think in complicated and layered ways about abolition represents a feminist approach to change. Our approach builds on notions of double and triple jeopardy put forth by Fran Beal and the Third World Women's Alliance, along with Deborah King's theory of multiple jeopardy or the idea that forms of domination and oppression both interrelate and compound—what Kimberlé Crenshaw would later define as intersectionality in the legal context.² These ideas have important lineages, often stretching back to the nineteenth century. Abolition feminism is a praxis—a politically informed practice—that demands intentional movement and insightful responses to the violence of systemic oppression. Building on these foundational approaches, this theory of change proclaims that we can and must do multiple things at the same time. We work locally and internationally. We hold people accountable and believe that people can change. We believe in being radical and active. We reflect, learn, and adjust our practices. We react to injustice. We build different ways of living. We are clear that organizing to end gender violence must include work against the prison industrial complex—against border patrols, against the incarceration of disability, against the criminalization of radical democratic protest—and as centrally, for mutual aid, cop-free schools, reproductive justice, and dignity for trans lives.³ All this is possible because the “we” is not a set of individuals but rather a collective that grounds and defines its members and the projects, goals, and campaigns that are connected to the everyday, thus encompassing joy and struggle. Inextricably.

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Abolition feminism does not shy away from contradictions, which are often the spark for change. Holding onto this both/and, we can and do support our collective immediate and everyday needs for safety, support, and resources while simultaneously working to dismantle carceral systems. Unhoused people should be afforded a safe place to sleep while we organize campaigns to build housing for all. Campaigns to close jails and prisons can move forward as we continue to teach classes inside prisons and as we support restorative justice processes and organize around parole hearings. Protests continue against sexual assault and murders committed by police officers while we build international solidarity movements against the exportation of militarized police tactics. Discovering and in fact embracing this ambiguous terrain located in the space between necessary responses to immediate needs and collective and radical demands for structural and ultimately revolutionary change is a hallmark of abolition feminism. Rather than being limitations, prescriptive horizons, or opportunities for empty quick fixes that resolve little, these contradictions are generative and necessary sites for collective analysis and labor.

The negotiation of this terrain also continues to create experimental and collective practices of safety, accountability, and healing untethered from the existing criminal legal system. Often named formally as community accountability or transformative justice, these tools and practices (with accompanying analysis) provide and proliferate responses without engaging the carceral or punitive state. Engagement is both reactive—what to do at the moment when harm and violence happen—and also provides examples and ideas for wider, longer-term preventative

frameworks, or how to stop harm from happening. The practices of community accountability and transformative justice emanate from our political frameworks and offer multiple concrete ways for more people to become involved.

This growing and internationalist abolition feminist ecosystem—sustained overwhelmingly by unpaid labor—continues to produce radical tools and other resources. Before dissolving in January 2020, Berlin’s Transformative Justice Kollektiv spent years documenting the multiple ways ordinary people try to respond to interpersonal harm, particularly gender and sexual violence, without resorting to police and prisons and offered workshops and resources to share tactics and strategies. With reading and learning circles, discussion groups, and other workshops, Alternative Justice in India works to offer “community-based, anti-carceral and feminist interventions to sexual harm and abuse in India.” Through direct action, statements, and political education events, the United Kingdom’s Sisters Uncut network concretely identifies and demands how budgetary resources can be removed from carceral forms and reinvested in communities, in health care, education, and the arts. Survived & Punished and Love & Protect support survivors who are criminalized for self-defense by developing campaigns that advocate for individuals, and they simultaneously make visible structural and systemic forms of state violence. Queer and trans networks—from the UK’s Bent Bars group to the Bay Area’s Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project—build and disseminate ways to guarantee safety, when calling the police is not an option, and when some are locked up in institutions predicated on violence.

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Among this rich ecology of resources, “how-to” texts about practicing transformative justice and community accountability circulate and ignite discussion and practice, and spur further invention. People Against Prisons Aotearoa in Aotearoa/New Zealand offers pamphlets to accompany their workshops, including “Transformative Justice Workshop: Practical Ways of Solving Interpersonal Harm and Conflict in our Communities,” which provide tools to address everyday forms of conflict without engaging law enforcement.⁴ *Fumbling Towards Repair* by Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan is a “Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators.”⁵ Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* and the edited collection by Ching-In Chen and comrades entitled *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence within Activist Communities* are full of stories reflecting on and analyzing how people are experimenting, sometimes unsuccessfully, with addressing conflict and harm within organizing communities.⁶ The 576-page toolkit by Creative Interventions and the Story-Telling and Organizing Project in Oakland offer tools, language, and a wealth of material to begin to study, and to practice. Not a checklist or a one-stop fix, this expanding constellation of resources and organizations—one piece of our internationalist abolition feminist ecosystem—offers multiple, tangible tools for people to practice, together, now.⁷ These resources—and too many others—are shared, critiqued, translated, and modified at grassroots convenings and gatherings across the globe, almost all organized by uncompensated labor.

Alongside these textual resources, artists continue to produce a range of visual interventions in our carceral state—including works that meticulously document the realities of day-to-day survival in prison. Artists have always been key agents seeding resistance and providing the tools for us to imagine otherwise—as exemplified by the visuals incorporated throughout this book. Our posters, memes, banners, statements, slogans, Signal and Snapchat groups, and more also create—to tweak a phrase from the visual arts scholar Nicole Fleetwood, an anti-“carceral aesthetics,”⁸ or, as we would frame it, an abolition feminist aesthetics—to grow our collective capacities to visualize the regime of hetero-gendered and racialized punishment that is the US prison/police state and also the myriad ways that people—poor, queer, First Nations, brown, Black, and/or non-citizens—attempt to flourish and resist in spite of all of these obstacles. Over the past decade the audience has also exploded for the work of writers who center speculative Black female (and queer) futures such as Octavia Butler, N. K. Jemison, and Nnedi Okorafor. The growth of interest in these authors and artists who center the struggle for Black futurity—and the increasingly wide body of work that has emerged in dialogue with these speculative texts—cannot be separated from the material demands that emerged during this time period: Fund Black Futures.⁹ Abolition. Feminism. Now. While local organizing continues to transform the discursive environment, furthering and legitimizing abolitionist-oriented discourse on prisons and policing, cultural and artistic projects also help to denaturalize the carceral state and to frame this institutionalized violence as an essential topic for mainstream discussions. Consider, for example,

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Illustration of sci-fi's kindling of radical imagination by Ira M. Leigh, 2015.

Papel Machete's multimedia puppetry performance that creates a speculative narrative about the last prison in the US.¹⁰ Visual culture, music, art, and fiction shape the popular imagination in profound ways, outpacing changes in policy and law.

Yet, as all these resources acknowledge, even as we create multiple interventions and responses to supplant carceral approaches—some formally named transformative justice and some not—harm will occur. Women will be sexually assaulted, trans people will be beaten, disabled people will be held hostage in their households, and Black and other people of color will hurt each other. Our work is not to pretend these forms of violence will not happen. Our own contexts, projects, work-

sites, and organizing are not immune. As we write, allegations of sexual harm, transphobia, and racism unfold in organizations and movements around us. We struggle. And we recognize that the highest costs are often experienced by those most vulnerable: people living and organizing, without pay, from within prisons and other carceral sites and those working, without pay, in movements and grassroots organizations. With humility we acknowledge these risks, and yet we dive in, together. This is not impossible work because we do this together. *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* outlines how and why abolition is unimaginable without feminism, how feminism is unimaginable without abolition, and why this dialogue is imperative, now. We hope that readers will reflect on the ideas in this book and let themselves be moved to action—action not prescribed by us but inspired by the work, the ideas, and the challenges archived in this book.

Why Us

Collective abolition feminist organizing, teaching, and learning bring us together. As scholars, educators, and organizers, we are involved in projects that revolve around prison and police abolition, as we attempt to grow anti-carceral approaches within feminist anti-violence movements. Collaboratively, we have built and supported a number of organizations, worked on campaigns, participated in delegations, convened gatherings, learned (and taught), all as part of the work of movements and organizing. In particular we have ongoing and deep histories with INCITE! Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans People of Color Against Violence

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and Critical Resistance. Angela is one of the founding members of Critical Resistance, Beth is a founding member of INCITE!, Gina has been involved in Critical Resistance since its inception and first conference in 1998, and Erica joined Critical Resistance in 2006. For Beth, Gina, and Angela, these exchanges began in the late 1990s, with Erica, the youngest in our collaborative effort, joining ten years later. In car rides and on panels, in organizing meetings and campaigns, in classrooms and strategy sessions, over meals in kitchens, these fragments of conversations moved across Chicago, New York, Oakland, Bahia, Brisbane, London, Palestine, and other parts of the globe. What does it mean that abolition now appears at the start of many syllabi as a foundation rather than an afterthought covered in a few weeks at the end of a course? What is the impact of few people formally recognizing how feminism has shaped abolition? Why must we keep agitating to ensure that feminism is informed by abolition?

Our decision to collaborate on a small book entitled *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* was made long before the spring 2020 antiracist protests and uprisings in the United States and around the world and the emergence and strengthening of demands such as “Defund the Police” and “Police Out of Schools.” We met by Zoom weekly before Zoom classes, conferences, and other online gatherings became the norm. We continued through the early days of the pandemic, during uprisings that unfolded on our blocks, and while negotiating changing working, living, and organizing conditions. We persisted through domestic unpredictability, insufficient bandwidth, tornados, new puppies, forest fires, caregiving demands, mandated shelter in place orders, and

even a white supremacist insurrection. Our calls were punctuated by the urgency of the now—check-ins about the health of loved ones, real-time updates on pressing local actions, questions about teaching and learning, worries about the 2020 election, and strategy sessions about movement weaknesses and futures. This project has always felt imperative: our involvement in multiple communities that simultaneously resist both imprisonment and gender violence illustrates the imperative of an indivisibility—feminism is central to abolition and abolition is indivisible from our feminism—motivating us to collaborate to document, theorize, and amplify abolition feminism. The mobilizations of 2020, the white supremacist insurrection of early 2021, and the COVID-19 pandemic have only heightened this urgency and yet also imposed multiple competing demands.

As the landscape surrounding this project continued to rapidly shift and as the work started and stopped according to everyday demands, we paid careful attention to a collaborative process. We come from very different locations, were trained across divergent academic and organizing traditions, and work and teach in intersecting but also varying domains. Perhaps unintentionally, our writing practice for this project reflected the organizing we aimed to engage and in part to chronicle. We sought a collective voice that reflected our shared thinking and practice, nurtured an ongoing critical reflexivity, and we worried about what and who was missed or left out, always mindful of the imperative to acknowledge narratives, people, and analytics easily forgotten or buried. We struggled through dissatisfaction with the technologies and tools available to support collective writing and analysis, embraced