Political Advocacy Without a Choice: Highlighting African American Political Social Workers

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Abstract: *From social work's early days, African American social workers were engaged in what today is termed as political social work, yet their work is often overlooked in both social work education and the broader retelling of our profession's history. This article examines the early history of African American political social work, using Lane and Pritzker's (2018) five domains of political social work. We outline ways in which African American social workers' lived experiences led them to engage in political social work to support community survival and to challenge injustice during the Black Migration period post-slavery, the Jim Crow Era, and the Civil Rights Movement. Even as broader structural dynamics sought to exclude African Americans from the political arena, dynamic and influential African American social workers laid the groundwork for modern political social work. They politically engaged their communities, lobbied for legislation, worked in the highest levels of government, supported campaigns, and ran and held elective office to ensure that civil rights were given and maintained. This manuscript calls for a shift from social work's white-dominant historical narrative and curricula (Bell, 2014; DeLoach McCutcheon, 2019) to assertive discussion of the historic roles African American political social work pioneers played in furthering political empowerment and challenging social injustice.*

Keywords: *Political social work; African American social work; social work pioneers; social work history*

Too often, social work education lacks attention to diversity in teaching students about the profession's historical context. Within social work education, Black and Brown communities historically have been constructed as oppressed people in need of rescue from those who often resemble the oppressor. This can ignore the survival tactics through which African American social workers have sought to dismantle injustice throughout the profession's history, including the Black Migration period post-slavery, the Jim Crow Era, and the Civil Rights Movement (McCoy, 2020; Peebles-Wilkins, 1994).

While African Americans could not access formal social work training until 1911, African American educators were already teaching social work values to survive adversity and advocate for basic human rights (Gary & Gary, 1994). From social work's early days, many African American social workers – whether with a professional degree or excluded from the profession due to structural barriers to accessing a formal social work education – were engaged in what today is termed as "political social work," yet their work is often overlooked in both social work education and the broader retelling of our profession's history. These dynamic and influential African American social workers laid the groundwork for modern political social work, as they politically engaged their

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communities, lobbied for legislation, worked in the highest levels of government, supported campaigns, and ran and held elective office to ensure that civil rights were given and maintained.

Using Lane and Pritzker's (2018) five domains of political social work, this manuscript examines the early history of political social work. We offer a historical corrective that brings attention to a deep history of African American political social workers and associated organizations fighting for social, economic, and political justice. While the history of African American engagement in political social work stretches across over a century of practice, we focus here on political social workers from the Progressive Era of the late 1800s, early 1900s, and the first half of the 20th century through the Civil Rights Movement. While some of the individuals discussed here did not receive formal social work training or credentials, each has since been described as part of the profession (e.g., through recognition by National Association of Social Workers [NASW] Foundation (n.d.) as a social work pioneer). We shift the current social work narrative by assertively outlining ways in which early African American social workers' lived experiences led them to engage in political social work for the survival of their communities. African American social workers created their own organizations and structures for communal care and political empowerment at a time when well-known frameworks for activism and advocacy commonly associated with social work, such as white-led settlement houses, were not accessible to African Americans (Hounmenou, 2012).

Political Social Work's Five-Domain Framework

The National Association of Social Work's (2017) *Code of Ethics* calls on social workers to engage in political action, expand choice and opportunity, promote policies that protect the rights of all people, and confirm equity and social justice for all. While social workers have engaged in political action throughout the profession's history, the specific term "political social work" originated in the 1990s and gained growing traction in the profession beginning in the late 2010s. Political social work refers to "social work practice that explicitly attends to power dynamics in policy-making and to political mechanisms for eliciting social change" (Lane & Pritzker, 2018, p. 4).

Although there has been extensive scholarship on social workers' contributions to social policy, the first framework that explicitly focuses on social workers' involvement in political action was developed by Lane and Pritzker (2018). This five-domain framework is outlined in Table 1. In the sections that follow, each domain will be utilized to highlight the historical foundations of African American engagement in political social work.

Table 1. *Domains of Political Social Work Practice*

Domain	Example Strategies
Domain 1: Engaging individuals and communities in political processes	• Increasing voting and voter registration via community outreach • Working with communities to build political power • Advocating for increased voting rights and more just and responsive electoral processes
Domain 2: Influencing policy agendas and decision making	• Influencing candidates' policy agendas • Influencing elected officials' policy agendas and policy decision-making • Influencing government agencies' policy agendas and policy decision-making
Domain 3: Holding professional and political staff positions	• Working on policy via civil service or other professional positions • Serving as a political appointee in a government office • Working in an elected official's office
Domain 4: Engaging with electoral campaigns	• Working as a volunteer or paid campaign staff member • Seeking ballot initiative or referenda passage or defeat • Educating voters about policy issues at stake in specific campaigns • Influencing which candidates run for elected office
Domain 5: Seeking and holding elected office	• Running for elected office • Serving in elected office

Sources: Lane and Pritzker (2018); Pritzker and Lane (2021)

African American Political Social Workers

From the profession's earliest days, African American social workers harnessed collective power to work towards social and political change. This political activity emerged in response to structural and individual violence targeted toward African Americans, as well as repeated systematic efforts to deny Black Americans core civil rights (Lowe & Hopps, 2007). While the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1870, made it unconstitutional to deny Black men the right to vote on the basis of race, social work's early years saw extensive denial of Black political rights. Jim Crow laws and practices explicitly erected barriers to Black political participation; for example, in Mississippi, just 9,000 of 147,000 Black citizens of voting age were registered to vote by 1890 (Erb, 2018). Even as early white social workers like Jane Addams actively engaged in the women's suffrage movement, many explicitly advocated for white women's voting rights at the expense of those of Black men and women.

The ongoing violence, oppression, and denial of political rights created a unique sociopolitical experience for Black Americans (Carlton-LaNey & Hodges, 2004; Lowe & Hopps, 2007). As a result, African American social workers, like those discussed in the following sections, worked to build political awareness, and organize fellow African Americans to ensure communal survival and self-empowerment (Carlton-LaNey, 1999). While we specifically locate the work of each pioneering political social worker within a single domain, the methods they utilized extend across multiple domains of political social

work, illustrating the substantial breadth of African American political social work engagement and influence.

Domain 1: Engaging Individuals and Communities in Political Processes

Early African-American political social workers paired political advocacy with individual and community outreach and education, often key to enabling impoverished African Americans to receive assistance during an extensive era of segregation (McCoy, 2020). Social work education and retellings of the profession's early history tend to focus on settlement houses like Hull House, founded by Jane Addams to create social welfare services for European immigrants and migrants in industrial cities while organizing residents around political reform efforts. Yet like many contemporaneous services created by white Americans, the settlement houses commonly described in social work education were not accessible to African Americans migrating to urban areas. Despite such exclusion, African American female political social work pioneers used the Hull House framework to create and provide safe havens for migrant African Americans, many of whom were experiencing similar circumstances as European immigrants including poverty, lack of housing, and limited basic resources (Hounmenou, 2012). These settlement houses provided housing, resources, and opportunities for residents to develop educational, recreational, and social skills to survive during uncertain times, while also teaching residents activism, advocacy, and the importance of civic engagement.

One such leader was Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who created a settlement house for Black men in Chicago. While Wells-Barnett did not receive a formal social work education, she is recognized as a social work pioneer (NASW Foundation, n.d.). Her research, activism, community organizing, and program implementation skills exemplified a dedication to advocating for social justice and uplift for African Americans. Wells-Barnett believed that the survival of African Americans was equally important as the survival of white Americans and argued that African American residents should be both informed and part of efforts to identify social problems and help create solutions to those issues (Stevens, 2003).

Wells-Barnett worked with communities to build political power using journalistic strategies. She authored anti-lynching pamphlets designed to spread public awareness and call readers to action around the Blair Bill, which would have created a federal task force to investigate all rapes and lynchings in the previous decade (Bent-Goodley, 2001). Her fearless advocacy efforts led to a decrease in lynching of African American men (Brown & Stentiford, 2008). In addition to creating national and international awareness and promoting anti-lynching activism, Wells-Barnett held leadership positions in numerous African American organizations including the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), National Afro-American Council, and the National Equal Rights League, and co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Bent-Goodley, 2001). She utilized these platforms to build awareness and organize social justice, racial equity, and gender equality efforts (Stevens, 2003). She was a renowned leader in ensuring African Americans participated in democracy and had their voices heard because she understood that the survival of the race depended on it.

Born into slavery, Victoria Earle Matthews was Brooklyn, New York's first African American social worker (Thorpe, 2015). Like Wells-Barnett, Matthews utilized journalism to educate and organize supporters around political activism. Also, like Wells-Barnett, Matthews was often referred to as a "Black Club Woman," a phrase used to describe women who created social service programs that organized, educated, and expanded political power among African American women (Stevens, 2003). Matthews was actively involved in founding these clubs and the NACW, in response to the social and political conditions of African American women in the Jim Crow era (Waites, 2001). In 1897, Matthews founded the White Rose Mission in New York. This Black Settlement house began as a social haven for women and children but grew into temporary housing for African American women migrating from the South who needed assistance surviving their new urban environment (Hounmenou, 2012). Matthews provided education, self-help trainings, and services while organizing residents into political engagement and unions. She advocated for preservation of African American history and facilitated the social uplift of African American women through political awareness and engagement. Through the White Rose Mission and the Black women clubs that expanded throughout the U.S., Matthews' efforts helped to shape the social welfare movement (Hounmenou, 2012).

With the survival of the African American race in mind, Wells-Barnett, Matthews, as well as other Black female political social workers of the Progressive Era like Jane Edna Hunter and Lugenia Burns Hope, illustrated the power of this first domain (Carlton-LaNey & Hodges, 2004). They understood the importance of empowering African Americans through education and community organizing, raising awareness, and mobilizing African Americans around the social injustices they experienced daily.

Domain 2: Influencing Policy Agendas and Decision Making

Paired with the kinds of political organizing efforts described above, African American social work pioneers sought to directly influence the policy agendas of elected officials and government agencies to combat social injustices experienced by African American communities. One such pioneer, native Houstonian Thyra Edwards, became so influential in influencing policy both in the U.S. and worldwide that civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph referred to her as "one of the most brilliant young women of the Negro or any other race, in public life today" (Andrews, 2011, p. 1). A granddaughter of slaves, born in 1897, Edwards believed that policy advocacy that sought to impact people's everyday survival was critical to social work. Her advocacy and activism focused on labor issues, women's rights, international affairs, and race relations (Martin & Martin, 2001). Edwards highlighted struggles Black people experienced worldwide to show ways that racial injustice was not unique to the U.S., believing that social workers should influence policy in governments around the globe. She studied in multiple countries to strengthen her understanding of how to do so, subsequently taking strong stances in the Spanish Civil War to challenge fascism in that country.

Domestically, Edwards sought to influence policy working with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and International Labor Defense. In these roles, she worked to force change within the largest employer of African American women, Ben J.

Sopkins Apron Factory, and protested apartment evictions (Andrews, 2011; Martin & Martin, 2001). Edwards was a contemporary of social worker Jane Addams; upon Addams' death in 1935, Edwards wrote an article praising her work on labor reform, women's rights, and global peace, yet also explicitly critiquing what she perceived as Addams' too-gradual approach to policy and societal reform (Andrews, 2011). Despite public criticism of her stances and allegations that she was too allied with the Communist Party, Edwards believed that economic and employment circumstances played a huge role in Black communal survival and continued to strive to create change in these arenas worldwide (Martin & Martin, 2001).

Edwards' work as a political social worker demonstrates the interplay that can occur between distinct domains of social work, as she both advocated for policy change and played an intricate role in relief administration to counter deep Depression-era unemployment, holding professional positions guiding and supporting these efforts (Domain 3). This included work with the Chicago Relief Administration and the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission (Martin & Martin, 2001). By working within relief administration, Edwards believed that she could advocate for the poor and ensure relief policies provided justice and equity to all clients. Although Edwards viewed President Roosevelt's New Deal policies to be faulty and insufficient, she supported these policies, believing they were a start to progressive social legislation.

The first African American president of the National Conference of Social Work, Lester Blackwell Granger has been described as the individual responsible for leading the social work profession to prioritize civil rights (NASW Foundation, n.d.), and a leader in explicitly centering social work attention on supporting democracy for marginalized communities (Toft, 2020). As was the case for many early African American social workers, Granger began as an educator. In 1922, he shifted to a social work career providing case management to African American youth in New Jersey's vocational school system (Ruffin, 2007). Granger's experiences as an artillery lieutenant in WWI subsequently informed his work as a Navy special consultant in WWII and his advocacy efforts to integrate the U.S. military. Granger's efforts persuaded President Roosevelt to issue an executive order banning racial discrimination in federal contracts, leading thousands of African Americans to be hired in manufacturing industries. These efforts also led to integration of the U.S. Navy and to President Truman's issuance of an executive order to create a committee to focus on equal treatment and opportunity in the Armed Forces (Ruffin, 2007).

Beginning in 1941, Granger served for twenty years as executive secretary of the National Urban League (NUL), the largest and oldest nonpartisan civil rights organization in the U.S., dedicated to empowering African Americans and working towards economic and social justice. In this role, he provided a national voice for continued civil rights advocacy, including efforts to integrate education (Thompson, 1952). Granger joined with Martin Luther King Jr. and other activists to push President Eisenhower to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and demand justice for African Americans' right to register and vote (Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, 2010).

Edwards and Granger, along with other Black social work advocates from the Progressive Era and the Civil Rights Era including Whitney Young, Jr. and Dorothy Height, exemplify ways in which African American political social workers have worked throughout the profession's history to influence policy and dismantle injustices within societal structures. Their advocacy impacted working conditions, access to democracy, civil rights, and the overall survival of African Americans and, in fact, of all of humanity.

Domain 3: Holding Professional and Political Staff Positions

Holding staff positions focused on policy and politics, whether as a political appointee or in a professional civil service position with policy influence, enables social workers to have a front-row seat in shaping policy to advance social justice (Lane & Pritzker, 2018). George Edmund Haynes, a southern African American social worker born in 1880, grew up in a time where education was often limited or non-existent for African Americans. Despite this, Haynes became the first African American student to receive a degree from New York School of Philanthropy (now known as the Columbia University School of Social Work) in 1910 and the first Black student to receive a Ph.D. from Columbia University two years later (Nixon, n.d.; Peebles-Wilkins, 2013b). Haynes co-founded and became the first executive director of the NUL. Through both NUL and his relationship with the New York School of Philanthropy, Haynes played a significant role in expanding access for African Americans to social work education and practice. He created the first-ever social work training center for African American graduate students at Fisk University in Nashville, TN and offered field placement opportunities through the NUL (Carlton-LaNey, 1983; Nixon, n.d.).

In 1918, Haynes was appointed to the position of U.S. Director of Negro Economics, serving as a special assistant to the U.S. Secretary of Labor. In this role as a high-ranking federal employee, he was the first African American to shape policy and government operations at the federal Cabinet level (Nixon, n.d.). Haynes analyzed the impacts of racism on employment, housing, and recreation, and promoted policies challenging the exclusion of African American workers from various trade unions, interracial conditions in the workplace, and growth in child labor in America (Nixon, n.d.). The impacts of his work in this position led to his subsequent appointment to the U.S. President's Unemployment Conference in 1921.

Unlike Haynes, Sarah Collins Fernandis was not appointed directly to government leadership positions; instead, she influenced policy decision-making as a staff member on both local and national government initiatives. Born in 1863, during the same year as the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Fernandis received an MSW from New York University in the early 1900s. She was part of establishing multiple settlement houses specifically for Black Americans, one in Washington D.C. and one in Rhode Island (Peebles-Wilkins, 2013a). She organized and became the first leader of the Women's Cooperative Civic League between 1913-1917, where she worked to improve health within Black communities in Baltimore, including placing pressure on the city government and its health department to improve sanitation (Crouse et al., n.d.).

In 1920, she became the first African American social worker hired by Baltimore's Health Department, becoming a staff member in the city's Venereal Disease Clinic. In

1922, she was invited by the U.S. surgeon general to serve on a Women's Advisory Council to the U.S. Public Health Service in Washington, D.C. (Smith, 1996), and soon after, helped organize the opening of a Maryland state hospital to serve African American patients with tuberculosis. Subsequently, she played a key role in opening a Baltimore office for the National Youth Administration, a New Deal-era federal agency, designed to provide work, education, and support for teenagers and young adults (Crouse et al., n.d.).

Early African American political social work pioneers like Haynes and Fernandis sought governmental staff positions through which they could advocate for policies that directly benefited Black communities and promoted the survival and well-being of African Americans. Despite limited attention to their contributions within social work education (Carlton-LaNey, 1983), each helped set the precedent for African American political social workers holding staff positions with substantial policy influence in local and federal governments.

Domain 4: Engaging With Electoral Campaigns

Political social workers use electoral methods to influence policy through campaign work, providing voters with knowledge about candidate or issue campaigns, and influencing ballot initiatives and which candidates run for office (Lane & Pritzker, 2018). Electoral methods were used alongside other methods of political social work by African American social workers including Ida Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Victoria Earle Matthews, and Lugenia Burns Hope, who together with other Black women social reformers, came together to form the NACW in 1896 (Roberts, 2005). During a time where African American communities faced frequent racial terror and the impact of Jim Crow laws (Stevenson, 2015), the NACW was created to bring public attention both to the needs of African American children and families, and to civil rights. The NACW created a Black women-led system of social reform and a policy agenda that sought to challenge systemic racism and its negative impacts on African Americans (Roberts, 2005). NACW's policy agenda included job training, wage equity, childcare, challenging segregated transportation systems, and anti-lynching efforts. This policy agenda was paired with electoral-focused efforts to pursue women's suffrage via Constitutional amendment. NACW became the leading African American women's voice in the suffrage movement, seeking both access to the vote for women via the 19th Amendment and increased access for Black men who were denied their constitutionally-granted right to vote due to Jim Crow laws.

The NUL, co-founded by social worker George Edmund Haynes in 1911, began as the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negros. While NUL helped introduce social work to young African Americans by providing trainings in African American history, economics, sociology, and political advocacy, and built coalitions to advance civil rights legislation in Congress, it also extensively organized, demonstrated political power, and utilized electoral methods to impact policy (Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute [MLK REI], 2010). Under the leadership of social worker Lester Granger, it supported the 1941 March on Washington to call for integration of labor unions and challenge anti-Black discrimination during WWII (MLK REI, 2010). In 1951, Granger and other NUL leaders specifically called on President Eisenhower to protect

voting rights (MLK REI, 2010). In the 1960s, under the leadership of political social worker Whitney Young, the NUL became increasingly active in the civil rights movement, joining in organizing the 1963 March on Washington and engaging in electoral methods such as registering voters. Today, the NUL continues to use nonpartisan electoral methods such as educating underrepresented communities about redistricting (Brennan Center for Justice, 2011).

NUL and NACW chapters and their members worked to racially uplift African Americans during a period of extensive oppression, segregation, and discrimination in the Progressive era and the early 1900s. African American survival and self-empowerment was critical to these organizations' programming and to the ways they sought to expand electoral participation and representation on the part of African American citizens (Carlton-LaNey, 1999). In these early years of social work, electoral methods also were adopted by individual African American political social workers; for example, Lizzie Koontz Weeks, the first Black social worker in Portland, Oregon, mobilized African American female voters in support of the Republican Party in the 1910s (Corppetts, 2019). In 1914, just as women were preparing to be able to cast their first Congressional ballot in Oregon, Weeks became the first president of Portland's Colored Women's Republican Club; building on her successful voter registration and mobilization efforts, she ran as a candidate for the Republican precinct committee in 1918.

Domain 5: Seeking and Holding Elected Office

While much of the pioneering political social work on the part of African American social workers described thus far has focused on advocacy efforts or political appointments that grant policy decision-making authority, African American political social work pioneers also ran for and held office at various levels of government. One such early African American social worker was Mary Church Terrell, who has been recognized as a social work pioneer (NASW Foundation, n.d.). Although Terrell's parents had both been slaves, they were financially successful. She dedicated her career to self-help, racial uplift, and empowerment of African Americans during the era of terror that emerged after Reconstruction. In 1891, Terrell was forced to resign from her job as an educator in the Washington D.C. public school system because women could not work as educators once they became married (Steptoe, 2007). A year later, her political activism was ignited when a close friend's life was taken by lynching. Terrell became deeply active in political engagement surrounding child welfare, women's suffrage, and re-establishing African Americans' rights. A co-founder of the NACW, she spent years working alongside the infamous Fredrick Douglass, unsuccessfully advocating to multiple U.S. presidents to enact anti-lynching laws (Steptoe, 2007).

Despite not having access to the right to vote herself, Terrell became a member of the Republican Party and president of the Women's Republican league. She served on the Washington D.C. Board of Education from 1895-1901 and from 1906-1911. While at the time that position was appointed, not elected, she was the first African American woman in the country to serve in such a role (Martin, 2018). She advocated for school integration and education equity for all children (Steptoe, 2007) and was the only board member with experience teaching in public schools (Martin, 2018).

While his time in elected office reflects a somewhat later era than the other political social workers discussed in this manuscript, Edolphus (Ed) Towns grew up in the South during the Jim Crow era. After serving for two years in the U.S Army, Towns earned a master's degree in social work and began his social work career as a hospital director (U.S. House of Representatives, n.d.). He became increasingly active in the Brooklyn Democratic Party, and was elected as Democratic Party state committeeman in 1972 and as Brooklyn's deputy borough president in 1976. Towns ran and won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1982, where he served for 14 terms before resigning in 2013 (U.S. House of Representatives, n.d.).

Although Towns maintained a "low-key legislative style" during his time in Congress (U.S. House of Representatives, n.d., para 1), he sponsored legislation to mitigate health disparities impacting African Americans and other underserved populations, as well as other forward-thinking polices that would directly benefit his constituents. Towns also was influential in terms of establishing a social work presence in Congress. With the support of staffer and fellow political social worker Charles Lewis Jr., he founded the Congressional Social Work Caucus to create a space within Congress for members of Congress who are social workers or who explicitly support the social work profession to engage and connect (Lewis, 2013). Honoring the contributions of two African American political social work pioneers, Towns sponsored the Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act (H.R. 795). If passed, this bill would have mitigated social and economic challenges experienced by social workers, such as school loan debt and underpaid wages.

While Terrell and Towns are comparatively well known within the social work profession, they are just two of the many African American political social workers that have run for or held elective office over the profession's history, with candidacies that often marked important societal firsts. For example, social worker Irene McCoy Gaines was the first African American woman to run for the Illinois State Legislature; though she lost that 1940 election, she subsequently helped organize the 1941 March on Washington, became one of the first people worldwide to testify before the U.N. about discrimination toward women of color in the U.S., and later ran again for further elective office (O'Donnell, 2001). In 1934, social worker Eunice Hunton Carter was the first African American nominated by the Republican Party to represent her district in the New York State Assembly (Smith, 2013), while social worker Cora Mae Brown was the first African American woman elected to Michigan's State Senate in 1952 (Wolcott, 2007). The first African American social worker in Congress, Ron Dellums, began his career in psychiatric social work before running for and being elected to the Berkeley, California City Council in 1967 (Dellums & Halterman, 2000). Dellums was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1970, where he co-founded the Congressional Black Caucus. When he retired from Congress in 1998, he was succeeded by another African American social worker, Rep. Barbara Lee.

Discussion and Implications

While "political social work" is a relatively new conceptualization within the social work profession (Lane & Pritzker, 2018), African American social workers have practiced

political social work since the early days of the profession. This manuscript focuses attention on several African American political social work pioneers. Across five domains of political social work practice, these pioneers laid the groundwork for modern political social work, spearheading advocacy and policymaking around the critical policy issues of their time. The practice of these early African American political social workers focused directly on challenging systemic oppression towards African Americans, such as lynching, racial discrimination in federal contracts, exclusion from labor unions, segregation in the military, and voter disenfranchisement.

The lives and work of these political social workers illustrate a critical implication for understanding a critical implication for a comprehensive understanding of social work's history – that the lived experiences of early African American social workers required them to engage in political work for the survival of their communities. O'Donnell (2001) juxtaposed the activism of early African American female social workers and early white social workers, suggesting that African American social workers engaged in activism to uplift their own communities, often building non-governmental organizations like the NACW and other Black women clubs to provide this self-help, while early white social workers tended to engage in activism as a charitable endeavor, seeking reforms via government public welfare. The pioneers described here demonstrate ways in which early political social work was grounded in African American social workers' lived experiences. These experiences informed their work toward policy change, building on community strengths, self-determination, and communal empowerment in order to improve community well-being.

As noted previously, not all of the individuals discussed in this manuscript possessed formal social work training or degrees. By 1930, there were just over 1,000 Black social workers identified in the U.S. based on that year's U.S. Census (Gary & Gary, 1994). African Americans faced limited access to both higher education and the financial resources necessary to attend higher education throughout the Progressive Era and the first half of the 20th century. Apprenticeship, an early model of social work training, often excluded aspiring Black social workers (Gary & Gary, 1994). While Black students could attend social work training programs at educational institutions in northern states; in the South during this era, Black students were not permitted to attend colleges serving white predominantly students. The first undergraduate social work program to educate Black students in the South was established by George Haynes at Fisk University in 1911 (Gary & Gary, 1994). In the 1920s, two professional social work training programs were established for Black students in the South. While some of the social workers discussed here have subsequently been identified by the NASW as "social work pioneers," the lack of formal social work training for others may have contributed to a lack of attention to their professional contributions.

Although this manuscript focuses on social workers during the Progressive Era and the first half of the 20th century, the ways in which African American social workers of these eras responded to racial exclusion by organizing for policy change to uplift their communities set the stage for subsequent political social work practice on the part of African American social workers. For example, while Black Panther Party (BPP) leaders did not necessarily hold social work training or degrees – and the BPP's work has rarely

been acknowledged within social work history – individuals identifying as social workers, like Ruth Beckford, were involved in developing BPP programs that served as alternatives to inadequate governmental policies and that informed the BPP's political agenda (Jackson, 2020; Lateef & Androff, 2017). For example, Beckford helped found BPP's Free Breakfast for Children program, one of the most influential programs in social welfare history, linked to the development of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's federal free breakfast program (Lateef & Androff, 2017; Milkman, 2016).

Shifting the Social Work Narrative

The African American political social work pioneers discussed here, working across all five domains of political social work, serve as a direct counterpoint to the white-dominant narrative too common within social work (e.g., Bell, 2014; DeLoach McCutcheon, 2019; Gregory, 2021; Johnson, 1991; Wilson, 2020). In this narrative, the history of social work often has involved white women stepping in to help communities of color and low-income communities, while framing African Americans as in need of both government and charitable service (Dominelli, 1989). This narrative risks perpetuating white supremacy, as it implies that white social workers are critical to moving those who have been victimized forward.

The influence of these pioneers, from the earliest days of the social work profession, shows this narrative to be false. Early African American social workers were political leaders, even as broader structural dynamics sought to exclude Black Americans from the political arena. These social workers challenged systemic racism via community self-help and mutual aid and took on leadership roles that created long-term meaningful change for their communities. They used strategic organizing and communication methods to build awareness of discriminatory policies and to mobilize Black Americans to action. They stood up against these discriminatory policies and pressured policymakers to eliminate them. They built relationships with the political leaders of their time, gaining access to positions with direct influence over policies affecting African American well-being. They organized together to demand the right to vote for Black women and men and to ensure Black women were able to participate in elections. And in quite a few cases, Black social workers led the way in ensuring Black political representation on government decision-making bodies.

In bringing limited attention to the leadership of pioneers like these, the social work profession perpetuates a narrative of white paternalism and charitable aid. It portrays African Americans as oppressed victims in American society, rather than recognizing the strength of African Americans' survival strategies (Pebbles-Wilkins, 1994). This narrative neglects attention to the ways in which community self-empowerment, self-help, and mutual aid have been critical to communal survival among African Americans (O'Donnell, 2001). This criticism is not new to social work; in fact, it was part of the impetus for the creation of the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) in 1968. Black social workers walked out of the 1968 annual meeting of the National Conference on Social Welfare, critiquing the lack of commitment to racial equity within social work, the lack of representation of Black social workers in leadership positions, and insufficient attention to

white racism. Subsequently, NABSW chapters were developed across the U.S., focusing attention on the survival, well-being, and liberation of Black communities both outside and inside of social work (Bell, 2014).

By highlighting these early political social work leaders, we hope to contribute to re-thinking the narrative of the social work profession to one that assertively recognizes the historic roles African American political social workers have played in furthering political empowerment and challenging social injustice. The leaders discussed here underscore the power of Black-led advancement of the African American community and its centrality to social work. These leaders also underscore the critical role that African American social workers played in the activist orientation of social work in its early years, even as clinical forms of social work began to take on more attention from white social workers (O'Donnell, 2001).

Social Work Education

CSWE first implemented an accreditation policy requiring social work programs to incorporate diverse groups within social work curricula in 1968 (Bent-Goodley, 2006). Yet over 50 years later, ensuring that the profession's diverse social work history is accurately reflected continues to be a challenge. More recent calls to decolonize social work education (Tamburro, 2013) and to better integrate social work practices contributed by African Americans create an opportunity to revisit how social work history is addressed within social work education.

The contributions the African American political social work pioneers described here made both to the social work profession and to their communities display a diverse lens currently missing in social work education. The pioneers and organizations discussed throughout this manuscript engaged in social work practice specifically to help their communities survive adversity and injustice. They found it necessary to adopt political tactics to maneuver racist systems and institutions in order to achieve social, political, economic, and racial justice. Through attention to the historic roles African American social work pioneers played in furthering political empowerment and challenging social injustices (Bent-Goodley, 2006), this manuscript calls on social work educators to recognize – and assertively incorporate into social work education – these survival strategies (Pebbles-Wilkins, 1994).

As political social work continues to be institutionalized within social work as a critical method for pursuing justice (Lewis, 2018), it is imperative that social work's historical lack of an African American centric lens not be replicated within scholarship and education focused on political social work. Political social work education and scholarship can contribute to actively dismantling the white-dominated narrative of social work history by elevating the influential contributions of African American pioneers. Further, teaching about these political social work pioneers can expand students' understanding of the profession's history and tactics, while specifically affirming Black students' identities within the profession (Green, 2015).

Conclusion

As the profession continues to progress, the social work profession must be careful not to continue to suppress the historic roles African American social workers have played in seeking policy change and facilitating political empowerment in African American communities. African American political social workers and the organizations they developed have been vital to the survival and empowerment of African American communities and are critical parts of the history of the social work profession.

Disrupting white supremacy within social work requires shifts both in the profession's historical narrative and in the ways in which the diverse history of our profession is reflected in social work curricula. Moving forward, increasing attention is needed within the social work profession to highlighting self-help survival tactics used by African American social workers through our history. By shining a spotlight on the communal self-help tactics and political strategies early African American political social workers implemented as they sought to challenge societal violence, oppression, and marginalization, social work can move away from mitigating challenges caused by failing systems and toward creating new racially just structures that promote community well-being.

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