

## **Book Review: Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests, and the Pursuit of Freedom, Derecka Purnell, 2021**

*Ria Thompson-Washington (they/she/elle) is an anti-racist activist, Afro-Latine, nonbinary Queer feminist living on unceded Nacotchtank known as Washington, DC. They have spent the last twenty years, organizing and training Black and Latine people working on various campaigns in the Labor movement to Occupy Wall Street, and more recently, providing legal support to the Movement for Black Lives.*

This year as part of my observance of [Black August](#), I read "Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests, and the Pursuit of Freedom" by Derecka Purnell (2021). I read this book because as an abolitionist and an organizer, I am always looking for ways to make the conversation about abolition accessible to people who haven't been to law school or aren't in movement circles. Derecka did not disappoint: she reminded me that the conversation about abolition is about redistributing resources, mutual aid, and dreams— this book should be required reading for first-year law students. I resonated with her story of how she arrived at abolition through a series of circumstances where perceivably, justice was just out of reach.

I, too, went to law school thinking that it would teach me how to share access to the justice I had never had the opportunity to experience in my own life. In 2005, my apartment in San Antonio, Texas was raided by police who suspected me of dealing drugs. I was a full-time organizer and touring poet who smoked a lot of weed—I never sold drugs. Nonetheless when my house was raided, and I was charged with possession, I thought that the truth would protect me—it did not. In chasing justice, I ended up in law school, because I felt that the law would be a valuable tool to add to my organizer's toolbox. And I guess, in a manner of speaking it was; but not because I found justice in the courtroom.

In 2015, I joined the National Lawyers Guild as a law student member, it was the year that the [Guild adopted a resolution to abolish police and prisons](#), and it was the first time I had heard of abolition outside of a conversation including Frederick Douglass. It had never occurred to me before then that "we, the people" could materially change the conditions of our society by abolishing police, prisons, and the prison industrial complex. The Guild had provided, for me, a place to dream about what a world we could build if we abolished the police. It's where I found a place to build the future through mass defense training and Movement legal support. As a young activist, no one shared with me the tools that I now have access to, so I feel compelled to share them with the next generation of activists who will need them.



*Photo credit: Peter Aehl. Photo of Ria at the Yes4MN Campaign Launch in 2021 (Black-led coalition campaign to replace Minneapolis Police Department with a Department of Public Safety)*

Over the last eight years, I have served the Guild in many capacities: I am a member of the DC NLG chapter, where I am a legal observer, coordinator, trainer, and on the Executive Board. I have served on the Executive Council (EC) of the NLG as executive vice president (2016-2019) and as senior co-chair of The United People of Color Caucus (2021-2023) where I led the campaign to change the NLG constitution to add a permanent TUPOCC seat to the EC. I am an active member of the Mass Defense Steering Committee, as well as the Queer Caucus and the Legal Worker Caucus. In 2021, I was awarded Legal Worker of the Year by the National Executive Committee (NEC) for my work training hundreds of legal observers across the country during the Uprisings of 2020 that erupted after the murder of George Floyd and [Hulu made a short documentary about my work](#) as a legal support organizer and trainer.

It is with great joy that I declare the intention for my next act of service to the National Lawyers Guild will be to serve as its President (2025-2028), and it is with this pledge that I announce my candidacy.