

An Act of Love: Building a Collaborative for Reproductive Justice and Abolition Amidst Tumultuous Times

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Abstract: Within the impending threat of a second Trump presidency, two social work academics and activists—one Black, one white—deeply committed to reproductive justice and abolitionist frameworks, created a collaborative dedicated to these values prior to the 2024 election. This collaborative, born out of shared histories of marginalization, is grounded in the belief that reproductive justice and abolition are acts of love. Through this collaborative, the authors empower social workers—particularly students—to engage in grassroots advocacy, education, and policy work that challenges systemic harm and centers Black and marginalized communities. This paper explores the authors’ personal and professional journeys, the development of the collaborative, and their ongoing efforts to foster accountability and action among social workers during politically turbulent times. In doing so, it highlights the critical importance of embedding reproductive justice and abolition within social work practice, education, and advocacy as a necessary response to this political climate.

Keywords: social work, reproductive justice, reproductive rights, prison abolition

Introduction

Social work is not only a profession; it is a calling for those of us who are engaged in the work. Our Code of Ethics, while sharing similar common commitments with many helping professions, uniquely emphasizes the profession’s responsibility to challenge social injustice and promote social change (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). It is this explicit commitment to social justice that drew us to social work and continues to shape our teaching, scholarship, practice, and advocacy. For us, social work’s capacity to promote resistance, resilience, collective action, and systematic change remains one of its greatest strengths.

For us, reproductive justice, abolition, and collaborative organizing are acts of love. Reproductive justice affirms the dignity, autonomy, and humanity of all people, while abolition seeks to transform systems that produce harm and create conditions in which individuals, families, and communities can thrive. Collaborative organizing reflects these same commitments by bringing people together to build relationships, share knowledge, and collectively work toward justice, healing, and liberation.

While the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) delineates that social workers should challenge social injustice, the recent post-2024 election climate in social work has been profoundly quiet. Executive Orders (EO) from the Office of the President have threatened organizations that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), removing funding (Akin Insights, n.d.) and sparking fears that individuals working from this perspective may be at risk as well. As a result, some organizations have capitulated in advance, removing DEI information from their websites and shuttering programs that promote these values (Cutler et al., 2025). Social work

organizations—specifically NASW and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)—have issued some statements responding to the Executive Orders (NASW, 2025a; Vakalahi, 2025). While NASW provided some action plans and multiple responses, including a powerful statement condemning the attacks on diversity (Wilson, n.d.), CSWE was vaguer, perhaps to not call too much attention to the profession and its ongoing work to dismantle white supremacy, oppression, and systematic discrimination.

The goals of the profession are highlighted in the call for reproductive justice (or “RJ” to condense), a theoretical orientation and praxis founded by 12 Black women activists in 1994 called Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Recognizing that the mostly white middle-class led pro-choice movement was incapable of defending the rights of Black and other Women of Color from marginalized backgrounds, RJ focuses on the lived experiences of people living on the margins and elevating them to ensure that they have 1) the right to have a child; 2) the right to *not* have a child; 3) the right to parent in safe and sustainable communities; and 4) the right to bodily, sexual, and gender autonomy free from coercion and violence (Ross & Solinger, 2017). The foundation of RJ activism is resistance to white supremacy in all its forms, and it aligns beautifully with all tenets of the NASW Code of Ethics (Goldblatt Hyatt & Haggerty, 2025). Advocating for reproductive justice includes supporting communities to receive healthy, nutritious food; the dismantling of community violence; abolition of family policing and all carceral systems; access to free abortion provision; and advocacy to end disparities in Black maternal morbidity and mortality and across other People of Color. These values and actions must be embraced by social work as a whole, especially during the turbulent times of a Trump presidency. However, CSWE does not include RJ in its core competencies and has remained largely silent on these issues, especially in recent days.

In response to the lack of clarity and direction from the profession’s leading organizations, Dr. Hayes founded the National Collaborative for Reproductive Justice and Innovation in Social Work (NCRJI-SW) and invited Dr. E to become a co-director and lead collaborator. In other words, the Collaborative emerged from concerns that social work lacked an organized reproductive justice and abolitionist response to the political moment. Instead of waiting for our professional organizations to create formal pathways to resistance over the next four years, we, reflecting on our lived experiences and calling to dismantle social injustice, collaborated to support research, education, and advocacy related to reproductive justice and abolition across the field. Our narrative chronicles our efforts to teach, research, and advocate during a tumultuous time in our nation’s history as we stand on the precipice of revolution and the second Black Nadir (Connolly, 2018).

Joining Up: How It Started

Dr. E: Two years ago, I was writing a proposal for the profession’s first textbook aligning social work and reproductive justice and needed someone to write about the prison industrial complex. I had spent many languishing hours stewing in imposter syndrome, feeling ill-equipped to tackle the enormity of this project despite dedicating my career to RJ tenets. The book and contributors

were all set, save for a chapter on the carceral system, which I knew would be important to include. Mass incarceration is a threat to RJ in its separation of families (Hayes et al., 2020; James, 2020; Roberts, 2022). I reached out to the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) RJ Special Interest Group (SIG) listserv, asking for contributors to this chapter, and Dr. Hayes responded.

Dr. Hayes: When I saw the call for contributors, I knew I had to answer. I'm a Black feminist, a social worker, a reproductive justice scholar, and an abolitionist. But more than that, I've lived the realities of the carceral system my entire life. My father, a former Black Panther Party member, was a political prisoner and incarcerated for 45 years (AUTODIDACT 17, 2018). I grew up navigating foster care, the child of incarcerated parents, witnessing firsthand how the prison industrial complex is designed to break families apart. My work is deeply personal—whether it's supporting incarcerated pregnant people as a prison-based doula, fighting against state violence, or advocating for reproductive justice, I am always aware that my existence, my survival, is resistance. When I saw that the textbook needed a chapter on the carceral state, I didn't hesitate. Too often, conversations about reproductive justice are narrowly centered on abortion access, failing to interrogate the broader landscape of systemic oppression—particularly the ways the carceral system obstructs reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy (Hayes et al., 2020).

For Black women, femmes, gender nonbinary individuals, and incarcerated people—those trapped in cycles of state violence—reproductive justice extends far beyond the right to choose (Ritchie, 2017). It is fundamentally about the right to parent with dignity, the right to exist without oppression, and the right to live free from state control, violence, and coercion (Roberts, 2022; Ross & Solinger, 2017). This framework acknowledges that true reproductive freedom cannot exist without addressing systemic barriers like mass incarceration, racialized healthcare disparities, and economic injustice (Hayes et al., 2020; Roberts, 1997). It's about the right to raise our children without fear that the state will rip them from our arms (Roberts, 1997, 2022). It's about the right to bodily autonomy, not just in the context of abortion, but in every aspect of our lives—whether that means the right to give birth without chains, the right to access quality comprehensive compassionate culturally relevant healthcare without discrimination, or the right to say no without facing violence and retaliation. It's about dismantling the systems that have always deemed Black life disposable and building a future where we are not just surviving but thriving. I wanted to bring that lens to the book because too often, even in progressive spaces, these conversations are sidelined. Reproductive justice cannot be fully realized without abolition, without an interrogation of the carceral state, without a reckoning with how white supremacy shapes policy, practice, and culture. My contribution wasn't just about scholarship—it was about making sure these voices, our voices, were centered and could not be ignored.

Dr. E: Just a decade earlier, before the book, I had experienced an abortion after 20 weeks' gestation with my first child, who was diagnosed with a rare and deadly fetal anomaly. Our son, Darby, never developed an airway, and as a result, halfway through our pregnancy, fluid that should have been expelled from the trachea into the womb was building up inside his tiny body, ballooning his lungs, crushing his fragile heart, and flipping his diaphragm upside down. My

spouse and I were given three options: wait for him to die of heart failure in the womb, without certainty of when that would be; try to carry to term and give birth to a child who would be born brain-dead; end the pregnancy. After a second opinion at the nation's foremost center for fetal diagnostics, we made the heartbreaking choice to have an abortion. While I received excellent care and support, in the aftermath of our experience I came to appreciate how unique and stigmatizing later abortion is in the United States, which launched me, true to the values of social work, into advocacy mode. I told Darby's story everywhere I could, created clinical models for therapists supporting clients who terminated pregnancies due to medical reasons and delved into an RJ framework, recognizing that not everyone—especially those without my privilege—experienced the supportive abortion environment that I did. Later abortion has been targeted in political venues, and parents who make this decision, for whatever reason, have been stigmatized. Thus, I made RJ the focus of my career, and when I was approached by a leading publisher to write a book uniting it with social work values, I could not turn the opportunity down.

Dr. Hayes is, in many ways, larger than life. Originally from New York and the daughter of a Black Panther who was incarcerated for 45 years, she truly walks the walk of social justice. In addition to her faculty appointment at a small liberal arts institution, she has spent years working as a prison doula, supporting and advocating for women in the carceral system whose rights have been so severely violated. She supports abolition and has a distinguished research path that makes her values clear. In person, she is a force of nature. Her voice is strong, she makes her opinions clear, and, unlike myself, is not a people-pleaser. She wears oversized black plastic glasses and sports a bold red lip. She tells it to you straight, regardless of how you might feel about the truths she espouses. She aligns herself with Black feminists like Audre Lorde and bell hooks, centering the experiences of women of color and non-binary people, believing they have a unique and important story to tell. I was thrilled when she volunteered to write an auto-ethnographic chapter about her experiences with the carceral state within an RJ framework. Her chapter simply blew me away. We kept in touch after the book was submitted to the publishers, and I came to respect Dr. Hayes as someone I could truly learn from.

Dr. Hayes: After submitting my chapter, I figured that was it—another project, another contribution to the fight. But something about this collaboration felt different. Dr. E and I kept in touch, exchanging ideas and building a mutual respect. When 2024 rolled around and the stakes of the upcoming 2024 election became painfully clear, I knew we needed to do more. I sent out a call for collaborators, hoping to build something that could merge social work abolition and reproductive justice into direct action; I wanted to bridge the world between research and praxis. A lot of people showed up initially, but Dr. E was the only one who consistently kept coming back. It didn't surprise me, though. From the beginning, I could tell that Dr. E was thoughtful, intentional, and deeply committed to using their power for good. They are incredibly smart and generous, and I've always appreciated how they navigate the world—not as someone who takes up space just because they can, but as someone who carefully considers how to use their privilege in ways that disrupts white supremacy and create real change.

But we also knew that doing this work together required honesty. Dr. E is white and nonbinary. I am a Black cis straight woman. And we are navigating a field—academia—that is deeply entrenched in misogyny and white supremacy culture. We talked about that openly, about the dynamics at play, about the risks of collaboration in a space that often rewards surface-level diversity while punishing real, radical change. We weren't afraid to lean into those conversations, but we were also mindful that we had to be careful. White supremacy culture thrives on misrepresentation, on sowing division, on punishing Black women for speaking too boldly and white people for standing too close to us when we do. However, we chose to move forward, believing that the risk was worth it. We decided that freedom is worth fighting for. As we built this collaboration, I was reminded of a popular paraphrasing of Toni Cade Bambara: The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible (Bambara & Lewis, 2012). In many ways, our work is about doing just that—bringing research and advocacy together in a way that makes justice not only necessary but undeniable and irresistible.

Pre-Election Work

There's no single answer that will solve all our future problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead, there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be.
—Octavia Butler, “A Few Rules for Predicting the Future: An Essay”

Dr. Hayes: I was in full organizing mode. I was scheduling weekly meetings with students and early career professionals; the first goal of the NCRJI-SW was to support Kamala Harris' candidacy for the presidency. Dr. E. was always fully onboard with this decision. It was clear that a Trump administration was antithetical to social work values and principles but beyond that, we could see that human rights were at stake as his unfounded narratives about immigrants eating cats and dogs (Thomas & Wendlig, 2024) and dictatorial threats to prosecute opposition (Dreisbach, 2024) circulated in the press, which gobbled it all up. We had already lived through a devastating pandemic under Trump's haphazard first presidency and were familiar with the multiple stories of ICE disappearing entire communities overnight amongst our colleagues. We had seen the dismantling of *Roe v. Wade* (Planned Parenthood Action Fund, n.d.), returning the decision of abortion to the states, with tragic results that included increased maternal mortality in anti-choice states (Pressner et al., 2025). Though there was much controversy surrounding the Biden administration's involvement in the Israel-Gaza crisis, I framed our support of Harris as *harm reduction* (D. R. Davis, 2013): supporting an administration that would, at least, be open to principles of reproductive justice and personal liberties versus shutting it entirely down. Though not an ideal candidate, Harris was the only pathway toward a more stable future during a time when the entire country was at war with itself.

Our work consisted of phone banking, leading meetings to encourage students to vote and to support clients in voting, and connecting with greater social work organizations that were also doing pro-Harris work. The work itself was exhausting in the face of the ever-growing voice of Trump and his supporters, which was the opposite of hopeful and uniting. We both felt the weight of this election in our bodies and bones: It was a whole-body fatigue, like swimming with clothes underwater or trying to climb a hill made of wet sand. We regularly talked about

pushing through to stay focused on the task at hand. Our social work students were enthusiastic about the birth of the reproductive justice and abolition collaborative and were increasingly engaged in the work.

Motivated for change, we penned a petition on behalf of the collaborative to CSWE, advocating for the inclusion of reproductive justice and abolition principles in the core competencies of MSW programs, and at the time of this writing have obtained over 600 signatures. I met with CSWE's director of accreditation to follow up on this request, and we are in ongoing communication.

By the end of the summer 2024, I had conceptualized a plan to design a webinar series, and we hosted an introductory webinar on reproductive justice that was attended by nearly 200 social work students, practitioners, allied professionals, and academics alike. During the webinar we reflected on our own unique positionality in doing this work and introduced the tenets of RJ and how they could guide us during tumultuous times. I spoke about my father's legacy, including a picture of him after being released from prison on medical parole, leaning on a cane, face turned toward the sun, in a garden. Dr. E discussed their upbringing as the child of a labor lawyer in Toronto, born into a life of social justice advocacy, and shared their abortion story. We could tell that our attendees were fully engaged with us as there were many meaningful questions asked about the intersection of social work and RJ. By embracing positionality and vulnerability during our webinar, I hoped to model what Black feminist scholars and activists before me have taught—that our truths, when spoken with intention and care, have the power to challenge power and cultivate radical change (Collins, 2022; Cooper, 2018; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984).

The high of the webinar and the enthusiasm it generated was so uplifting. But when Harris lost, the mood crashed. We, too, felt defeated and demoralized. We needed some time to pick ourselves up. We spoke on the phone about our despair and loss of hope in the face of the initial defeat. We were both experiencing trepidation over what was to come from the Trump administration, though we knew it would be antithetical to social work values (NASW, 2021). An anti-immigrant, anti-trans rhetoric that harkened back to 2016–2020 was growing stronger, and we sat in the limbo period before inauguration deflated and exhausted. Even as I reassured myself, I knew that Dr. E felt very pessimistic and overwhelmed. However, I leaned further into the tradition of Black feminist teachings and felt determined. I remember thinking how I had inherited a world where my political and civil rights were secured at birth—paid for by my ancestors. I had not fought for voting rights, civil rights, or Roe, but this was my chance to fight to protect them for all of us. I told Dr. E that we can't stop what we're doing. They agreed. Our commitment to reproductive justice and its tenets was stronger than fear, and while we acknowledged being down, we weren't *out*. The work of the Collaborative had only just begun.

Post-Inauguration

Dr. E: A litany of executive orders (EOs) swept through the nation within hours of Trump's inauguration. They included a push to end DEI programs; withdrawing from the World Health Organization (WHO); and the recognition of sex, instead of gender, in federal policies and

documents, to name a few (Akin Insights, n.d.). For those of us who were already deflated by Trump's victory, these EOs provided another difficult blow. As a non-binary person, I felt personally hurt and excluded, but not surprised, by the attack on transgender and gender diverse (TGD) people. I had only been "out" as non-binary for a few years, affirming the reality of who I truly am after a lifetime of crippling dysphoria and not fitting in. Post-top surgery and publicly declaring my non-binaryness, I was finally *myself*. But now, my identity was somehow considered a non-reality at worst, at best a threat to American values as delineated by the President. I grieved especially for TGD youth who had bravely stepped forward into their own realities, only to experience such very public and excising disaffirmation. I am also an immigrant from Canada and began to consider how my positionality as a non-binary immigrant working to advocate for social justice might mark me as a threat to the Trump administration. I became acutely aware of who in my neighborhood voted for Trump and I harbored anxiety about a future where I might be "turned in" to some unknown watch agency for my values and beliefs. This was my reaction on a micro level.

At a macro level, there was also chaos ensuing across the country, as a federal funding freeze and stop work orders were initiated from the Office of Management and Budget (Vallorano et al., 2025). As the Co-Directors of the collaborative, Dr. Hayes and I doubled down on our work, realizing that now, more than ever, it was important to provide education and advocacy in the face of a restrictive, increasingly authoritarian government. As the days passed, we were genuinely surprised by the silence coming from social work executive organizations, whom we expected to release clear and pointed arguments against attempts to create a climate of hostility toward diversity: the very heart of the social work profession. Instead, we were disappointed that CSWE did not even use the word "diversity" in its one-paragraph response (Vakalahi, 2025), while NASW (2025b), slightly more emboldened, chose to focus on the beloved community of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1956) advocacy, calling the current administration "complex or difficult" (0:37) and advocating for collective action. They also released a video on Facebook clarifying that not supporting gender-affirming care is a violation of our code of ethics (NASW, 2025c). Dr. Hayes and I felt that more could still be done in order to enact a full mobilizing call for resistance and decided to use the collaborative to further educate, mobilize, and strategize.

Dr. Hayes: In response, we created the Spring 2025 Webinar Series with guest speakers on topics ranging from dismantling white supremacy and environmental justice to abolition and reproductive justice during captivity. We met with our collaborators and sometimes heated discussions ensued about our perspectives on the content we were providing. For example, during the planning of the abolitionist webinar, it was clear that positionality played a key role in our speakers' experiences and perspectives on the topic. In other words, we wanted to challenge our collaborators—and ourselves—to avoid discussing abolition from a purist perspective. We emphasized the importance of being open to multiple entry points, especially when considering the unique experiences of Black women within the abolitionist movement. For Black women, the relationship with abolition is complex, as we are disproportionately vulnerable to violence in a society that often fails to protect us. While abolition aims to create a safer world, we must acknowledge that, in the present, it does not yet offer the security we

deserve. This acknowledgment is crucial, as it recognizes the tensions inherent in striving for a safer future while living in an unsafe present (Collins, 2022; A. Davis, 2003).

In acknowledging these tensions, we can engage in a more nuanced conversation about abolition that includes the realities of Black women's experiences. By recognizing the vulnerabilities that Black women face in the present while working toward a more just and liberated future, we ensure that our approach to abolition is grounded in both the urgency of the moment and the long-term vision for safety and justice for all. This critical perspective helps guide our collaborative work, shaping a framework that is both inclusive and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities.

We are a fully engaged collaborative. We have launched a research project exploring institutional resilience in the face of the executive orders. We run weekly "Reproductive Justice Resistance Briefings," formerly known as "RJ Power Hour," Zoom calls with our community where we engage in more phone banking, debriefs, calls to advocacy, and supportive check-ins. The Briefings host members from all around the country, with the shared goal of advancing RJ during these challenging times.

Future Directions and Implications for Our Collaboration

As we continue to build the National Collaborative for Reproductive Justice and Innovation in Social Work, our future direction is rooted in the ongoing work of fostering a transformative, intersectional approach to social work that incorporates reproductive justice and abolitionist frameworks. Our mission to advance these principles is more than a statement; it is a call to action for all of us—educators, clinicians, policy advocates, students, and allied professionals—to work together toward the goal of dismantling systemic harm and building community-centered models of care (Collins, 2022; Davis, 1981).

The urgency of this work has only intensified with the prospect of a second Trump presidency, which represents a dangerous trajectory for social justice, reproductive rights, and racial equity (Amnesty International, 2025; Brennan Center for Justice, 2017; Dakwar, 2025; Monteil, n.d.). The threat of deepening anti-immigrant, anti-Black, anti-woman, and anti-trans policies looms large. Under such leadership, the rights we have fought for, especially reproductive rights, are at risk of being completely stripped away. In this context, our work is not just necessary—it is an act of love. Reproductive justice and abolition are fundamentally rooted in care for our communities, particularly Black and marginalized poor working class communities. It is through love for our people, social work, our values, and our collective liberation that we do this work, knowing that love is both a revolutionary force and a life-sustaining practice (Roberts, 1997).

Looking ahead, we are committed to expanding our efforts in several key areas:

1. **Dismantling White Supremacy Culture:** We will continue to center Black women's leadership, scholarship, and voices in every aspect of our work. As we elevate their

contributions, we aim to ensure that Black feminist and abolitionist frameworks not only guide our training and advocacy but also transform the social work field (Collins, 2022).

2. **Bridging Research with Praxis:** We are dedicated to translating our research into concrete actions that shape policy, education, and practice. This involves developing community-informed, evidence-based tools that address the realities of systemic injustice, giving social work professionals and allied communities the practical strategies to confront and challenge these systems (Chavez, 2020).
3. **Integrating Reproductive Justice and Abolition into Social Work Core Competencies:** We will work to embed reproductive justice and abolitionist principles into the very fabric of social work education and practice. Through developing and disseminating educational resources, we aim to equip all social workers with the skills to address not only immediate client needs but also the larger systemic factors that perpetuate harm (Goldblatt Hyatt, 2024; Goldblatt Hyatt et al., 2024; NASW, n.d.; Poehling et al., 2023; Younes et al., 2021).
4. **Building a Transformative Network for Collective Action:** Collaboration will remain at the heart of our work as we cultivate a network of professionals committed to reproductive justice and abolition. This network will serve as a platform for sharing knowledge, building solidarity, and supporting initiatives that reimagine care work as a tool for justice, healing, and liberation for all marginalized communities (Davis, 1981).

Our vision for the future is one where reproductive justice and abolition are integral to the core values of social work and other helping professions. We will continue to push boundaries, challenge established norms, and ensure that these frameworks are not only taught but practiced. Through collective action, we will move closer to a future where liberation, equity, and healing are foundational, and where Black and marginalized communities are at the center of transformative justice. The work we do is an act of love—not just for our communities, but for a better, freer world where justice reigns, and all people are truly free (Collins, 2022; Davis, 1981).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the work we've done and continue to build through the National Collaborative for Reproductive Justice and Innovation in Social Work is not just an academic or professional endeavor—it is a deeply personal and political act of love. Our commitment to reproductive justice and abolitionist frameworks is rooted in the belief that transforming systems of oppression is essential for the liberation, healing, and equity of Black and marginalized communities. As we face the impending threats posed by political forces that seek to dismantle our rights and undermine our safety, we are reminded of the urgency of this work. This collaboration is a powerful testament to what can be achieved when we center Black women's leadership, engage in community-informed research, and remain steadfast in our vision for a future where justice and care are not just ideals, but practices embedded in the core of social

work and beyond. Our journey is far from over, and through collective action, we will continue to push toward a world that honors and protects us all.

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