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# Fighting for a Healthy and Free Tennessee By Starting With Ourselves in the U.S. South

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by

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## **Our Challenge**

Healthy and Free Tennessee (HFTN) is a multiracial, statewide advocacy organization that promotes sexual and reproductive health and freedom<sup>1</sup>. In Tennessee and the United States (U.S.) South especially, but across the U.S. more broadly, the

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Briana Perry is the Co-Executive Director of Healthy and Free Tennessee, a statewide organization working to promote sexual and reproductive health and freedom. While an undergraduate student at Vanderbilt University, Briana developed a passion for Black feminism and community organizing, with a focus on Black women and reproductive justice. Before obtaining her master's degree, she taught English, science, and social studies for two years in Memphis, TN. While teaching, she was also involved in organizing efforts around reproductive health, sexual assault awareness, and racial justice. Today, she organizes around Black feminism, reproductive justice, abolition, and racial justice. In her free time, Briana enjoys writing, traveling, food, and going to concerts.

<sup>1</sup> Healthy and Free Tennessee is a statewide advocacy organization that promotes sexual and reproductive health and freedom in Tennessee. In the United States due to racial capitalism, the mainstream reproductive rights movement has not been attentive to issues affecting women and people of color, poor people, disabled people, and others who live at the margins of multiple oppressed identities. The term "reproductive justice" was coined in 1994 by Black women. Healthy and Free Tennessee uses the term "freedom" rather than "rights" or "justice" because we situate ourselves very carefully and intentionally as a multiracial and Black women-led organization that was not founded as a reproductive justice organization, but one that centers the reproductive justice framework and those most impacted by systems of oppression in our work. For more on the differences between these movements and terms see Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (2005) "A New Vision for advancing our movement for reproductive health, reproductive rights and reproductive justice", <https://forwardtogether.org/tools/a-new-vision>.

reproductive freedom movement is facing difficult challenges and extreme conditions, both internally and externally.

Externally, we as a movement are facing a maternal health crisis, with rising maternal mortality rates in the U.S. and a horrific racial disparity in outcomes. Black women are three to four times more likely to die of pregnancy-related causes than white women<sup>2</sup>. Sex workers are facing dangerous and hostile working conditions due to SESTA-FOSTA and other carceral approaches to ending sex trafficking<sup>3</sup>. Black families and children continue to be disproportionately involved with the family regulation system<sup>4</sup> and other forms of policing, surveillance, and incarceration<sup>5</sup>. Migrant arrests at the U.S. Southern border have reached a fifteen-year high with thousands of immigrant children being separated from their parents and kept in U.S. custody<sup>6</sup>. We have seen state anti-abortion legislation increase exponentially in the U.S. since the rise and success of the Tea Party in 2010 that heralded in a conservative sweep of state governments, Tennessee included. As the Guttmacher Institute reports, more than 25% of all state anti-abortion restrictions passed since abortion was legalized by the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision in 1973 were enacted between 2011 and 2015<sup>7</sup>.

Internally, our movement is challenged by racial divides driven by capitalism and white supremacy. The mainstream reproductive rights movement privileges issues affecting white, elite women - namely, access to birth control and the legal right to an abortion (the right not to have a child), excluding conversations around ensuring access to abortion care and other reproductive freedom issues. Funders and donors tend to support larger, well-known organizations dominated by white women's leadership with a narrow focus on abortion rights. As a result, attacks on other reproductive, sexual, and parental rights and community policing and control often do not receive the same level of attention or sense of urgency from the mainstream reproductive rights movement. While the right not to have a child is a critical component of actualizing reproductive justice, the framework also calls for abortion and birth control to be put into a larger context around sexual and repro-

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) "Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System" <https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternal-mortality/pregnancy-mortality-surveillance-system.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Chamberlain, Lura (2019) "FOSTA: A Hostile Law with a Human Cost" *Fordham L. Rev.* 87/5: 2171-2211. D Blunt and A Wolf (2020) "Erased: The impact of FOSTA/SESTA and the removal of Backpage on sex workers" *Anti-Trafficking Review* 14: 117-121. Bernstein, Elizabeth (2010) "Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The Politics of Sex, Rights, and Freedom in Contemporary Antitrafficking Campaigns" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36/1: 45-71.

<sup>4</sup> Alan J. Dettlaff, Kristen Weber, Maya Pendleton, Reiko Boyd, Bill Bettencourt & Leonard Burton (2020) "It is not a broken system, it is a system that needs to be broken: the upEND movement to abolish the child welfare system." *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 14/5: 500-517.

<sup>5</sup> Hinton, Elizabeth, LeShae Henderson, and Cindy Reed (2018) "An Unjust Burden: The Disparate Treatment of Black Americans in the Criminal Justice System" *Vera Institute of Justice*, NY, NY.

<sup>6</sup> Hackman, Michelle (2020) "Arrests of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children at Southern Border Surge" *Wall Street Journal* Feb. 26, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Guttmacher Institute (2016) "Last Five Years Account for More Than One-quarter of All Abortion Restrictions Enacted Since Roe", [www.guttmacher.org/article/2016/01/last-five-years-account-more-one-quarter-all-abortion-restrictions-enacted-roe](http://www.guttmacher.org/article/2016/01/last-five-years-account-more-one-quarter-all-abortion-restrictions-enacted-roe).

ductive health and freedom and other social justice issues. Erasing other social justice issues and their connection to reproductive and sexual freedom is part of a long legacy of white, upper class women activists sacrificing communities of color to negotiate shallow wins for an elite group of white women<sup>8</sup>. Meanwhile, organizations working to achieve reproductive justice in the U.S. South, which is where the majority of Black people in the country live, are chronically underfunded by philanthropic foundations<sup>9</sup>.

In Tennessee, where conservatives have a supermajority control over our state legislature, we are facing some of the most severe attacks on reproductive and sexual freedom in the country. Last year, Tennessee passed a law allowing adoption agencies to discriminate against LGBT parents<sup>10</sup>. This year Tennessee banned transgender athletes from participating in girls' sports and became the first state in the country to to require facilities to post a sign if they allow transgender people to use multiperson bathrooms. The legislature also banned the teaching of critical race theory in schools<sup>11</sup> and created a civil liability for anyone who by act or omission causes the death of a fetus at any stage of gestation, with serious impacts on pregnant people who use substances and potentially on abortion providers<sup>12</sup>. Tennessee is deemed one of the most hostile states for reproductive rights<sup>13</sup> and there is no end in sight to these extreme policies.

Politically we are on the back foot, barely able to respond to attacks while facing new ones every day. Large foundations are less eager to invest in cross-movement work that will be critical to shift the conditions necessary to win reproductive freedom. In this context, it is easy to get drawn into reacting to attacks and working in a state of ongoing rapid response that appeals to national funders. Yet, Healthy and Free Tennessee, the organization we co-lead, is committed to another way forward.

### Healthy and Free Tennessee's Approach

Because of the U.S.'s central role and leadership in the United Nations and the creation of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, the struggles for social justice in the United States have rarely been framed in the context of human rights. In fact, since its founding, Black Americans have been discouraged from taking their

<sup>8</sup> Davis, Angela (1981) *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Random House.

<sup>9</sup> McCambridge, Ruth (2017) "Where in the World is Big Philanthropy? Not in the Deep South" *Non-profit Quarterly* April 14, 2017 <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/philanthropy-deep-south>.

<sup>10</sup> Ebert, Joel (2020) "In first bill of the year, Tennessee Senate passes legislation allowing adoption agencies to deny gay couples" *Tennessean* Jan 20, 2020 <https://tinyurl.com/ryh3nvw8>.

<sup>11</sup> Kruesi, Kimberlee (2021) "Tennessee bans teaching critical race theory in schools" *AP News* May 25, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/8n27bkxc>.

<sup>12</sup> Kruesi, Kimberlee and Johnathan Mattise (2021) "Tennessee Governor Signs Two New Anti-Trans 'Bathroom Bills' Into Law" *TIME* May 18, 2021 <https://time.com/6049595/tennessee-anti-trans-bathroom-bill>.

<sup>13</sup> Center for Reproductive Rights (2020) "What If Roe Fell?" <https://tinyurl.com/yczprw5>

grievances to the UN out of fear of making the U.S. look badly on the global stage<sup>14</sup>. In spite of this censorship, in 1994 a group of Black women developed the reproductive justice framework and embedded it in the language of global human rights. Its three core tenets are 1) the human right to have a child 2) the human right to not to have a child and 3) the human right to parent children in a safe, healthy, and well resourced community. This is the framework that guides our work at Healthy and Free Tennessee.

We believe that in order to grow the reproductive rights and justice movements to be influential enough to shift power, we need to unite. For us, that means that white-dominated reproductive rights organizations must reorient to focus on the fight against racial capitalism, and to center marginalized communities in doing so. That's what Black feminist theory instructs us to do<sup>15</sup> and it is what we must do so that we can win. This means shifting our lens and work to align with the reproductive justice framework. However, we cannot be effective reproductive justice advocates on the large scale when we are still operating organizations dominated by white supremacist culture and practices, and individually if we have not done the work to excavate these from our internal expectations of professionalism in the workplace. We must practice on the small scale what we want to see on the large scale: we can only make this shift on a movement level when we put in the work to transform ourselves and our organizations.

Within Healthy and Free Tennessee, that has looked like shifting our leadership, our programming, and our internal processes to reflect a commitment to dismantling white supremacy culture. Over the past several years, we have taken a number of steps to change the way our organization operates to situate ourselves more firmly in solidarity with Black and Brown liberation movements. We hope that by sharing our story of wrestling with white supremacy within ourselves and our organization, we will inspire others to join us in working towards transformational change.

### **Confronting Our History**

In September 2012, nine state-based organizations came together to form Healthy and Free Tennessee as a coalition to fight the wave of anti-abortion legislation following the rise of the Tea Party and the 2010 conservative sweep of state governments. For the first two years of our history, our work was focused on defeating an anti-abortion measure, which ultimately was approved by Tennessee voters in November 2014<sup>16</sup>. Eight out of nine of our founding organizations were led by white people, and the leadership on our steering committee<sup>17</sup> at the time was most-

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<sup>14</sup> Kakwar, Jamil (2017) "W.E.B. Du Bois's Historic U.N. Petition Continues to Inspire Human Rights Advocacy" American Civil Liberties Union October 25, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/m6tdv65p>

<sup>15</sup> "The Combahee River Collective Statement. United States" (1977) Web Archive. Retrieved from the Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0028151>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/9z3kws5t>

<sup>17</sup> Our governing body. We do not have a board because we are fiscally sponsored.

ly white women. Because there was not an intentional effort to decenter whiteness and white supremacy culture during our founding, elements of white supremacy culture were baked into the organization's processes and expectations. Okun (2001) describes white supremacy culture as<sup>18</sup> “norms and standards... [that] promote ‘white supremacy thinking’ such as perfectionism, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, and fear of open conflict.” These characteristics were of course implicit – the founders did not decide the organization would have this culture. However, they didn't intentionally set up a culture that would resist these dominant and insidious practices, and so they prevailed by default. As a result, white supremacy began to show up in our structures and decision-making.

For example, in 2014, we received a grant to hire full time staff and promoted a staff member to State Director who was white, and later hired a Black woman as part-time Field Organizer. Because we were such a small organization at the time, these women in practice had very similar workloads despite a difference in title and pay. In 2015, one of the few Black women on our steering committee resigned after a racially charged incident.

This was our organization's first moment of reckoning. In response, our steering committee developed a subcommittee known as Team Liberation, whose role would be to lead us toward centering anti-oppression in our organizational practices and culture. For years, Team Liberation has led the steering committee and staff in candid conversations about white supremacy culture within the organization and within ourselves. This helped to normalize and institutionalize self-reflection and it also increased the level of comfort in speaking about racism and white supremacy for the white people who were part of the organization at the time.

In response to the inequity in staffing, in 2016 Healthy and Free Tennessee shifted to a Co-Executive Director model with a Black woman and white woman sharing leadership starting in 2017 (that's us, the co-authors). Even though there was an intentional decision to shift to this model in order to be more rooted in anti-oppression, white supremacy culture still undergirded the organization. Healthy and Free Tennessee made the error that other social justice organizations often do when it becomes evident that there needs to be an organizational shift – bring in a “diverse” person in hopes that they can and will shift the organization instead of uprooting the white supremacist structures. Hiring a person of color without drastically transforming the conditions of the organization can actually cause additional harm. There was no plan in place to nurture Briana's leadership over what was still a white-dominated organization, and as a result she was largely unsupported. As we continue to ground our work in anti-oppression, we now understand that organizations should begin putting an anti-oppression structure in place that is supportive of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color before recruiting them into positions.

At the legislature in 2014, Tennessee was the first state in the country to pass legislation to criminalize drug use and pregnancy. Programmatically, we shifted our organization's focus to work at the intersections of incarceration, pregnancy

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<sup>18</sup> [https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun\\_-\\_white\\_sup\\_culture.pdf](https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf)

and parenting surveillance. From 2014 to 2016, we worked with a coalition of reproductive justice leaders, drug policy reform advocates, substance use disorder treatment centers, public health officials and workers, and directly affected people to defeat the law, which sunset in 2016. This marked a pivot in our work to a more cross-movement orientation.

Admittedly, this shift was more reactive than proactive at first, precipitated by political attacks rather than a change in strategy. However, because of our ongoing efforts to uproot white supremacy culture, our leadership began to examine the need to more intentionally and permanently center our work at the intersections of criminalization and reproductive oppression since marginalized people, including Black mothers, are often swept up in the criminal legal system.

In 2017, we began a partnership to do regional work in the Southeastern U.S. with SisterSong and SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW in Georgia, and Women’s Rights and Empowerment (WREN) in South Carolina to align the reproductive rights and justice movements by dismantling white supremacy. It was exciting to see that national funders were starting to see the need to invest in this kind of work. In the first year of the project, Healthy and Free Tennessee was tasked with mapping the southeastern region. As a group we decided that we would engage white-dominated reproductive rights organizations first because these would need more support in dismantling white supremacy.

We tried to identify which white-dominated reproductive rights and health organizations were already centering communities of color in their work and leadership. We used websites and social media to gauge this and through this process, we realized that our own organization’s external presence didn’t adequately reflect or communicate our internal and external commitment to dismantling white supremacy. In response, we created more explicit anti-racist organizational values and added them to our website in early 2019. Though seemingly a small change, an explicit commitment that is public-facing is important because it allows supporters and communities to hold us accountable.

In 2019, Healthy and Free Tennessee worked with progressive state lawmakers to introduce proactive legislation for the first time in our organization’s history - an anti-shackling bill that included prenatal care and access to breast pumps for incarcerated pregnant people. Rather than merely reacting each year to the vile bills introduced by our Tennessee legislature, we wanted to be intentional and proactive in our work to center the intersections of incarceration and reproductive oppression. We began to take on the abolition framework as an organization and did some public education about the connections between abolition and reproductive freedom<sup>19</sup>.

Also in 2019, Healthy and Free Tennessee voted to raise our Co-Executive Director salaries to be more in line with the cost of living for our area. This raise was not in response to bringing in significantly more funding, but rather was a move to put us more in line with our values to offer all of our staff a living wage, even if that meant cutting back on other areas of spending.

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<sup>19</sup> “What is the Prison Industrial Complex? What is Abolition” 2021 *Critical Resistance* <http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/>

Although we had been reflecting about white supremacy and shifting our culture, programming, and leadership, we had not done much yet to institutionalize these changes apart from the creation of Team Liberation and some language about prioritizing diverse communities in the recruitment of our steering committee. Wanting to adopt more equity-enhancing internal policies, our steering committee voted to approve a \$100 a month student loan repayment benefit for staff, knowing that Black graduates have twice as much student debt as white graduates<sup>20</sup>.

We also adopted a paid family leave policy, which surprisingly a number of organizations are unable to offer because of funding. In 2020, our steering committee for the first time became majority Black and other people color led. In March of that year, we launched 30 days of collective journaling about anti-capitalism and paid leave (since it was one of the key demands that emerged in the first wave of the COVID-19 lockdowns)<sup>21</sup>. We also lost a big chunk of our funding from a funder who was no longer aligned with the cross-movement work in which we had become grounded. We are still in the process of seeking out funders who are willing to invest in our vision.

Because of our commitment to abolition, and the importance of building our capacity to address harms outside of the criminal legal system, in 2020 we decided to host a virtual (due to COVID-19) transformative justice training with Mia Mingus for Tennessee-based social justice organizations. In partnership with the Official Black Lives Matter Memphis chapter, we plan to anchor the formation of a statewide transformative justice collective, with hubs in Nashville and Memphis in 2022. This collective and hubs are vital in working to divest from the carceral system and supporting communities in shifting approaches to addressing sexual and reproductive harm with adequate resources and tools.

However, the cumulative impact of our marginal organizational advances have not gone far enough; this year in 2021 we will be undertaking a five-year anti-racist strategic planning process that will provide an overhaul and new roadmap towards more institutionalized changes and greater focus.

## Onward

This practice of dismantling white supremacy is an ongoing process. The events of the past five years and the growth and popularity of the Black Lives Matter movement and protests at Standing Rock have uplifted the racism and settler colonialism inherent within U.S. society. At Healthy and Free Tennessee, we are pushing ourselves even further to think through what role we can play in building alternatives to white supremacist, capitalist structures that dominate our state, our nation, and the global system. We will continue to dig deeper and work harder to unroot

<sup>20</sup> Scott-Clayton, Judith and Jing Li (2016) “Black-white disparity in student loan debt more than triples after graduation” *Brookings* October 20, 2016 <https://www.brookings.edu/research/black-white-disparity-in-student-loan-debt-more-than-triples-after-graduation/>.

<sup>21</sup> “30 Days of Collective Journaling” (2020) Healthy and Free Tennessee April 30, 2020 [www.healthyandfreetn.org/collective\\_journaling](http://www.healthyandfreetn.org/collective_journaling).

white supremacy within us and our organizations, and we hope other reproductive freedom organizations both in the U.S. and globally will join us.