

# A New World Cannot Be Built Alone: An Abolitionist Framework for Collective Action in Social Work

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**ABSTRACT** States across the U.S. are increasingly passing anti-CRT and anti-trans policies, most of which have begun to pervade institutions of higher education, igniting a concerning trend that is harming our communities, clients, students, and each other. While social work has been quick to name the harms of the systems with which we engage, it fails to address the mechanisms underlying those systems. To better aid schools of social work to move toward meaningful action, this conceptual article presents an abolitionist framework for collective action that highlights how social work schools and educators can resist performative responses to legislative terror. This framework calls for social work to take on the role of fugitive as we critically examine, disrupt, and disinvest from harmful power structures in social work. By adopting an abolitionist approach to collective action, schools of social work can better prepare faculty and students to engage in collective action for a more just society.

**KEYWORDS** abolition, collective action, transformative justice, social work education

*Without new visions we don't know what to build, only to knock down...Revolutionary dreams erupt out of political engagement; collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge.*

Robin D. G. Kelley

**SOCIAL WORK IS STUCK IN TRIAGE** with no clear vision of the healing and transformative future toward which we work, glued to the present by the trauma of repeated emergencies. As social work scholars who come from a variety of backgrounds and practice methods, we are in agony as this acute expression of chronic structural violence continues to harm our communities, harm our families and chosen families, our students, our clients, and our fellow social workers. Although social work as a profession is founded on the thesis that inequality permeates the world and demands a response, it often fails to acknowledge its complicity within the same mechanisms of harm. We write this piece to incite social work to action and to call for a vision of abolitionist social work practice. We come to this work, not with fear of the unknown, but rather with excitement about the possibilities of the blank page, the new canvas, the silence that brings forth a new tune, a picture of healing, a space in which we embrace each other, and, with a deep breath in, and long exhale out, we move forward toward our “revolutionary dreams” (Kelley, 2002, pg. 8).

In direct response to the racial reckonings in the summer of 2020, white politicians across the United States have enacted legislation (Kelly, 2023) that attempts to maintain the status quo of white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and cisnormativity. This is accomplished through “correcting” what they believe is wrong with our society by targeting transgender and gender diverse (TGD) children and their families (anti-trans legislation) and erasing Black histories and perspectives through anti-Critical Race Theory (anti-CRT) laws. Many of these implemented and proposed “corrective” policies directly impact social work education and educators. As social work academics, we [the authors] know that the academy has historically been hostile, harmful, and exclusionary toward Black women, LGBTQIA+ people, folks with disabilities, and others (Jackson et al., 2022; Mackey et al., 2022; Patton, 2016; Stovall, 2018). We acknowledge that while we have variably felt the impacts of this hostility, we must reckon with our own capacity to do harm. Though the University may deem us as in need of correcting through political control, we know that “incorrect as we are, there’s nothing wrong with us” (Harney & Moten, 2013, pg. 20), and we have been waiting for our profession to profess the same. As these new policies begin to mandate exclusion, discrimination, and hostility, we must move beyond performative and reactionary actions. Instead, we call for a collective refusal to act in alignment with the racist and transphobic logics that suggest that any expression of difference is a threat to the dominant group, as failing to do so would be violent to our students, faculty, and the communities that we serve. Any capitulation to these demands through reimagining our educational practices to fit within them renders us complicit in the move to “correct” that which was never incorrect.

This manuscript is written in direct opposition to the idea that our communities are in need of “correction” (Moten & Harney, 2004). To do this, we first describe how we came to this work and why it is particularly urgent. Next, we describe how we ground this framework for collective action in abolitionist thought as this praxis aids in the identification of the roots of anti-CRT and anti-trans efforts across the United States. To this end, we briefly outline the historical and current political contexts within which anti-CRT and anti-trans policies are enacted, briefly introduce these harmful policies, and highlight their impact. We then describe social work’s failure to act as a method for critiquing how the profession inadequately responds to these manifestations of white supremacy. We conclude with an abolitionist framework for collective action to demonstrate how social work academics and educators can resist performative responses to legislative terror and instead enact abolitionist principles in our work.

## **POSITIONALITY**

We have created this framework as social workers, organizers, students, and faculty who are directly impacted by the politics of white supremacy in which social work is embedded. As individuals situated within the University, we identify as both university insiders and university outsiders (Sitter, 2017). This framework for collective action and our feelings of urgency are grounded in our own positionalities. Melanie Sonsteng-Person is a white, cis-female, and maintains the identity of a university outsider (Sitter, 2017). Although she works in a university in a state that has passed anti-CRT and anti-trans laws and has had to determine how she will respond in her teaching and research, her identity is not directly impacted by the policies outlined below. Next, Andrea Joseph identifies as a Black cis-female faculty member at a state university in a southern state that has passed anti-CRT and anti-trans laws. She has likewise been targeted by surveillance entities that have labeled

her as discriminatory to conservative students given her use of CRT in the classroom. A.P. Spoth is a white, transgender non-binary graduate student and clinical practitioner. While they do not currently reside or practice in states where this legislation is being passed, they feel the precarity of their position as these policies begin to form the blueprint for legislation that will likely proliferate across large parts of the country. C. Riley Hostetter is a white, queer, nonbinary doctoral student and adjunct faculty member. They hail from a state with increasing anti-trans legislation, supremacist rhetoric, and dehumanizing politics. Isaac Akapnitis is a white, non-binary doctoral student in the Southwest. They have lived in Florida, Texas, and Arizona, states that continue to engage in efforts to systematically eradicate trans youth from our communities through legislative and other political (and often unconstitutional) means. Rosemary A. Barbera identifies as a white, ciswoman, bisexual activist-scholar. She currently lives in Philadelphia, PA but her work has taken her to various places across the Americas. While Philadelphia has not yet been affected by hateful legislation, areas right outside of Philadelphia have been with LGBTQIA+ student groups dismantled, libraries removed from classrooms, and similar actions. Cynthia Mackey identifies as a Black mixed-race, ciswoman doctoral student, instructor, and community advocate. She currently lives in Arizona, a state just starting to introduce anti-CRT and anti-trans bills and developing hotlines to increase surveillance on schools and instructors. Javier Garcia-Perez identifies as a queer Latinx cis-male. While he does not currently reside in states where harmful legislation is being enacted, the legislative attacks directly impact his research and community.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As we explore the tensions within our relationship with the University, we engage abolitionist thought alongside Afropessimism (e.g., Snorton, 2017; Stevenson & Blakey, 2021) and trans pessimism (Gill-Peterson, 2021). We understand the work of abolition to be as much about creating alternatives to harmful institutions as it is dismantling these structures (Meiners, 2018). We follow Fred Moten (2013) in situating ourselves relative to Afropessimism as we find freedom in the abject position Black and/or trans people are relegated to in a white supremacist cisnormative world. We see this as an opportunity to create new worlds – new worlds that may have “the potential to end the world” (p. 739). With this, the creative project of abolition leads to the end of institutions and political structures that cultivate and maintain violence, including institutions of higher education (Moten & Harney, 2004; paperson, 2017). We present this piece to rethink our role within the academy as we maintain an ongoing commitment to abolish this oppressive structure as we simultaneously build new ways of relating within the academy (Meiners, 2018).

Abolitionist perspectives for education ground our understanding of what can and must be done to reimagine social work education as a space of resistance to current political confines. As institutions of higher education act as a tool for transmitting and upholding white supremacist values through their curriculum, climate, policies, and practices (Patton, 2016), it is necessary to not only abolish harmful practices, but also transform the way that we commune within and beyond the academy. As Bettina Love (2019) describes, “abolitionist teaching is as much about tearing down old structures and ways of thinking as it is about forming new ideas” (p. 88). Key to Love’s abolitionist teaching framework is the requirement that educators work with those most impacted by oppression while also acknowledging our capacity to reproduce oppression through the (mis)use of that power. Therefore, as educators within the academic project, we must provide a space for

“transformative knowledge production” (Patton, 2016, pg. 335) that challenges white supremacy and operates within and beyond the confines of the University. To do this, we contend, is an act of collective refusal to fit ourselves and our work within anti-CRT and anti-trans legislation. Instead, we engage in an abolitionist practice of worldbuilding that subverts the tools and resources often used in service of oppression towards more liberatory ends (Alexander et al., 2022; Moten & Harney, 2013).

As this political moment makes clear, social work practitioners and educators must understand that the only ethical way to teach and to practice may be to break the law. It is here that we pull from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s abolitionist relationship to Afropessimism, as we acknowledge that those of us deemed “incorrect” already exist outside of the dominant way of being within the academy (Harney & Moten, 2013). Yet now, as the state criminalizes the content required to ensure our students are competent practitioners, we all become criminals in the eyes of the state. We must, therefore, draw from the resources we are afforded by our position to create spaces within and beyond the University that do not replicate its practices (Moten & Harney, 2004), but instead create spaces that allow for the dismantling of oppressive structures and mindsets. This recalls Moten & Harney’s (2004) assertion that “the only relationship to the university is a criminal one” (p. 101).

As long as social work academia continues its reluctance to take action against these political threats to its social justice mission, it will continue to (re)produce racism, transphobia, and homophobia. Social work must meet this particular political moment with an abolitionist perspective aimed towards creating the conditions for a more just, creative, and liberatory world. So, we imagine what a refusal to comply with these restrictions might look like in schools of social work as an exercise in hope (Hayes & Kaba, 2023) and we urge all social work practitioners and academics to do the same.

## **POLITICAL CONTEXT**

As higher education and research are not free from the political context in which they operate (Bonilla-Silva, 2017), the current political context around anti-CRT and anti-trans laws are inevitably present in schools of social work. In recent years there has been a growing movement to oppose CRT and other race-based theories and knowledge (Schwartz, 2023; Sawchuk, 2021). Additionally, many states and counties are passing laws that restrict the rights of transgender individuals (ACLU, 2023; Branigin & Kirkpatrick, 2022), particularly regarding bathroom use (Movement Advancement Project [MAP], 2023a; Reynolds, 2023), healthcare access (MAP, 2023a; Florida Department of Health, 2022), and participation in sports (MAP, 2023b). The political efforts to restrict the rights and perspectives of transgender and racially minoritized communities have been met with resistance and dissent from LGBTQIA+ rights groups, civil rights organizations, and community allies. Meanwhile, schools of social work and the profession’s governing bodies have been largely silent. For example, while the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) finally made a statement against this legislation in March 2023, they focused on how restrictions on critical theories threaten academic freedom while failing to mention anti-transgender legislation altogether (CSWE, 2023). Since then, they have yet to call for or move towards advocacy efforts to overturn and stop this legislation. In our refusal to accept this response, we present a critical analysis of some of the most imminent and glaring anti-CRT and anti-trans policies that have been passed throughout the United States. Of note, this is not an exhaustive list and further reading into the widespread

adoption of these policies is encouraged as this is a rapidly changing landscape, with new legislation still actively being proposed and voted on.

### **Anti-CRT Policies**

CRT started as a legal theory used to understand how racism continues to persist following the passing of civil rights laws (Crenshaw et al., 1995). It has been adapted into academic scholarship in education to theorize how racism informs curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Although CRT is not taught within P-12 schools, white and conservative people have begun to label the overarching ideas of diversity, equity, or inclusion as Critical Race Theory (Kelly, 2023). This has led to the larger anti-CRT movement. Over 16 states have now implemented anti-CRT policy, with nine others currently moving bills through legislation (Schwartz, 2023). The following is a general overview of some of the most harmful anti-CRT laws that have been adopted within the last three years.

Politicians, parent groups, and the like have fought to ban P-12 teaching of race and racism through a critical lens arguing that it promotes division and builds resentment (Sawchuk, 2021), ultimately limiting the freedom of educators and students to explore and understand the ways in which racism has historically, and currently, impacted all aspects of society. A primary example of this is Florida House Bill 7, commonly referred to as the “Stop WOKE Act,” which asserts that the teaching of race in K-12 schools is allowed but it has to be done through a “neutral” lens without the teacher applying any meaning (H.B. 7, Florida, 2023). This begs the question, neutral for whom? As research has long identified the disproportionate behavioral and academic outcomes among Black and Latinx youth (Love, 2019), recent work has begun to determine how schools can become safe spaces for all students. Findings call for an increase in training and programs aimed at ameliorating biases present in harmful responses to student behavior (Joseph-McCatty et al., 2022; Sonsteng-Person & Loomis, 2021), which HB7 renders illegal.

Initially focused on P-12 institutions (Kelly, 2023), many policies now also apply within higher education. Recent legislation in Florida prohibits public universities from funding any program, activity, or function that “advocate[s] for diversity, equity, and inclusion, or promote[s] or engage[s] in political or social activism” (Florida Chapter No. 2023-82, p. 6), without the approval of the State Board of Education or the Board of Governors. The state of Tennessee among other states have implemented laws deeming content on privilege a “divisive concept” that infringes on the rights of students and faculty who may feel targeted and blamed for holding such privileges. Faculty accused of upholding divisive concepts in the classroom may receive consequences that could threaten their employment and lead to litigation (Ross, 2022; H.B. 2670, Tennessee, 2022). Furthermore, bullying and intimidation tactics have become more common in higher education as faculty that teach about race and racism continue to receive death threats after their syllabi have been posted online (Moreno, 2022). Assaults like this on social work values and practice lead social work practitioners and academics to ask how social workers might continue to practice despite these restrictions (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Fine & Teram, 2013; Roose et al., 2012).

These policies, largely implemented after the Black Lives Matter uprisings following the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and countless others, are part of a larger political movement to restrict the teaching of race and racism within the United States. These policies uphold white supremacy in education as they legally require a narrow teaching of history and current events. Further, they limit the perspectives and voices that are allowed in both P-12 and

higher education, instead centering whiteness (Schwartz, 2023; Odera et al., 2021). Without the ability to think critically about the impact of policies on society, it becomes difficult, though not impossible, to challenge racist policies, like the ones outlined below, that seek to legalize oppression.

### **Anti-Trans Policies**

There has been a steady increase in the introduction of anti-trans legislation in the United States. In 2018 there were 19 bills introduced, in 2019 25 bills, in 2020 60 bills; in 2021 131 bills, and in 2022 there were 155 anti-trans bills introduced across the United States. At the time of the initial writing of this piece, there were 150 proposed bills in legislatures across the country; by the time of editing and publication, that number had grown to more than 525 (HRC Staff, 2023; Branigin & Kirkpatrick, 2022; Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2023). Currently, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is tracking 491 anti-LGBTQ bills in the United States. (ACLU, 2023). These bills refer to education, civil rights, freedom of expression, and access to health care. Since 2018 over 34 anti-trans bills have passed in the United States, with Tennessee specifically introducing 25 bills and passing 7 (Branigin & Kirkpatrick, 2022). In the 2023 legislative session, 79 anti-trans bills have been signed into law across the United States. (“2023 anti-trans bills tracker,” 2023). While several of these laws have been blocked by the court system, many states affirm that they will challenge these rulings (MAP, 2023a).

In early 2022, a Directive was introduced by Governor Abbott of Texas compelling the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to open investigations on families with children who were receiving gender-affirming healthcare services such as puberty blockers and hormone therapies (Abbott, 2022). The Directive came nearly a year after a failed Senate Bill whose intention was to include the administration of gender-affirming medications and/or medical procedures within the existing definition of child abuse (S.B. 1646). An abuse investigation began a mere two days after the Directive was announced when a case was opened against a Texas DFPS employee with a transgender teenager (Paúl & Parks, 2022). While continuation of this investigation was soon blocked, its initiation was allowed even with condemnation from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. Health and Human Services, 2022).

Florida has also utilized non-legislative means to pursue bans on gender-affirming health care for trans youth. In April 2022, the Florida Department of Health issued its own guidance as a direct response to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services guidance on providing health care to trans youth (Florida Department of Health, 2022). The Florida Department of Health claimed that social transition should not be a supported option for children/adolescents, nor should anyone under 18 have access to hormone blockers, hormone therapy, or gender affirming services. Additionally, in June 2022, the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration proposed a rule that gender affirming care would be prohibited under Medicaid (Luneau, 2023).

In addition to bills impacting child welfare and health care agencies, anti-trans bills have also been implemented throughout schools. In Pennsylvania, the passing of Policy 321 in the Central Bucks East School District requires teachers to remove any symbols or indications in the classrooms of their support for LGBTQIA+ students (Rizzo, 2023). Florida passed a so-called “Parental Rights in Education Law,” (Florida H.B. 1557, 2022) which limits how teachers can discuss issues of sexuality, gender identity, and sexual orientation. It further specifies that if parents find teachings offensive, they can sue the school district (Strauss, 2022). In Iowa, SF 482 prohibits anyone in P-12

schools from using any bathroom that does not correspond with their sex assigned at birth (Reynolds, 2023).

Along with these, as of March 2023, twelve states had implemented either “Don’t Say Gay or Trans” bills, or bills that allow parents to refuse their children be taught LGBTQIA+ inclusive curricula (MAP, 2023b). Several of these states further require that teachers “out” transgender students and students opting for new names or pronouns to their families (Alfonseca & Jones II, 2023; Opsahl, 2023; Rodgers, 2023). Nineteen states had passed bans that prohibit transgender youth from participating in sports (MAP, 2023b). These bans were introduced despite scientific evidence that proves that trans athletes do not necessarily have an advantage (Strangio & Arkles, 2020) and that in all sports there are “variations in physical characteristics” (HRC, n.d., para. 6). These bills, combined with the influence of anti-CRT bills being passed in P-12 settings, are particularly concerning as research highlights that schools can and should be safe havens for children (Hobbs et al., 2019), with more recent work delineating how schools can become safer for students to learn (Sonsteng-Person, 2022; Joseph et al., 2020).

### **IMPACT OF POLICIES**

The impact of these policies is not limited to the states where they have been passed, as this legislation presents a model for other states to follow. Taken together, anti-CRT and anti-trans policies foster a cultural climate that encourages racism, prejudice, and discrimination. The attempted erasure of transgender and racially minoritized groups are far-reaching, impacting everyone in the social work profession regardless of their state of residence. It is a necessary step for moving towards the radical reimagining of schools and social work to first highlight the harm that is enacted upon us, our students, our faculty, and the communities we serve. We, therefore, outline the impact of the aforementioned policies on how we teach and how we learn, and how this influences our practice and ability to provide ethical social work services.

#### **Impact on Faculty**

These policies have had an egregious impact on social work faculty. New legislation transforms what were previously lessons in ethical practice, centering client empowerment and self-determination, and transforms them into lessons on civil disobedience, inevitably forcing faculty to either collude with these policies or become teacher-activists. This forced activism is also felt by the practitioners they teach for example, in Florida under House Bill 1557 (2022), school mental health practitioners are now required to notify parents of any changes in students’ “mental, emotional, or physical health” prohibiting school personnel from maintaining student confidentiality, potentially limiting the safety and comfort of LGBTQIA+ students to talk about their sexual orientation during sessions. Faculty are accustomed to teaching students how to build rapport and respect their clients’ autonomy and self-determination; however, this legislation creates conditions that directly contradict those skills. As such, social work faculty are left in a bind: how do they teach students to think critically and build new skills to support LGBTQIA+ students while legislation constrains what they are permitted to discuss in the classroom? The result is a parallel process for faculty and their students wherein the only ethical pedagogy and practice may simply be illegal. Faculty, particularly junior faculty and faculty who have been minoritized, rightfully fear repercussions such as removal or bullying, for teaching about certain subjects. Laws prohibiting the

teaching of so-called divisive content in higher education can result in the hyper-surveillance and dismissal of faculty (Ross, 2022; H.B. 2670, Tennessee, 2022). These changes result in further negative consequences for faculty, particularly those who have not been tenured or teach in states that are removing tenure (Barnes, 2022; Drozdowski, 2021).

In addition to legal ramifications, faculty are being emotionally and mentally harmed through death threats and other intimidation tactics used by watchdog groups that track faculty who teach and publish on topics like race, racism, and CRT (Dress, 2021; Moreno, 2022). For example, the “Professor Watchlist,” a website funded and maintained by Turning Point USA to ostensibly “expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom,” publishes the contact information for a number of faculty across the United States, leaving them vulnerable to threats and intimidation (Turning Point USA, 2023). Furthermore, TGD faculty maintain the additional burden of speaking up and being forced to be the advocate for their communities in the academy (Greenwood & Pacey, 2023; Kinney et al., 2023). Together, these tactics can impact both the socio-emotional and professional well-being of faculty which can impede productive scholarship and diminish the quality of social justice-oriented education social work students are receiving.

The outcomes of these laws are also a systemic problem impacting social work departments. States with anti-trans and anti-CRT laws limit the recruitment and hasten the departure of highly skilled, talented, knowledgeable faculty as scholars of marginalized identities or those who conduct research on marginalized populations may be less inclined to work in an environment that is combative to their identities and scholarship (Kumar & Hodgson, 2023). This is a planned outcome from those shutting down DEI (Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion) efforts as it results in the homogeneity of instructor identities and perspectives (Odera et al., 2021; Cox & Greene, 2018). Therefore, these policies ultimately deny social work students a diverse faculty from which to learn, while also failing to educate them on critical concepts that they will need to engage in order to provide social work services that are reflective of our profession’s stated goals and values.

### **Impact on Students**

Experiencing silence from schools and governing bodies of social work as students watch anti-trans and anti-Black policies being adopted makes us question our professional values, creates a sense of invisibility, and causes them/us to feel isolated and alone (Akapnitis et al., 2023; Greenwood & Pacey, 2023; Kinney et al., 2023). Furthermore, TGD students and students of color may experience constant “noise” or the persistent awareness of their own identities (Akapnitis, 2023; Olson-Kennedy, 2019), which is amplified in schools of social work that are typically predominantly white and cis/heteronormative. The noise manifests as hypervigilance and/or self-monitoring through, for example, self-editing and managing the perceptions of other people by engaging strategies such as code-switching. This burden can result in greater stress and trauma, particularly for TGD students of color.

Along with this, racially minoritized and TGD social work students face ongoing and consistent challenges in their social work education programs (Austin et al., 2019). For example, 40% of trans social work students have reported that faculty did not intervene when students said or did transphobic/cissexist things (Austin et al., 2016). This, combined with practicum placements with anti-trans policies or values (Messinger et al., 2020; Shelton et al., 2023) often leave students feeling isolated and ostracized (Austin et al., 2016). In addition, social work students of color have reported



both witnessing and experiencing racialized microaggressions in their practicum placements, with little support from their universities (Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021). This lack of support reflects the inherent racism of much of social work education and amplifies the cost of social work education for racially minoritized students (Johnson et al., 2021). Within the context of this lack of support, these student interns are forced to choose between acting on what they feel is right for their clients and communities versus what legal policy is telling them is right. The lack of response to anti-trans and anti-CRT policies from schools of social work therefore confirms what many TGD and racially minoritized students already know: that schools of social work (and the profession) do not support them (Akpanitis et al., 2023).

In response to the failure of social work to address this harm, TGD social work students have organized spaces within academia that are empowering and hopeful (Greenwood & Pacey, 2023). Similarly, Black students continue to build spaces that support both individual and collective Black healing and development (Sonsteng-Person & King-Shaw, in press). That these acts of resistance and healing are necessary highlights that schools of social work currently replicate many of the institutional harms of academia, particularly in their failure to resist these new policies.

#### **FAILURE OF SOCIAL WORK TO ACT**

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (COE) calls on social workers to advance social justice (NASW, 2021), while the CSWE requires social work students to engage in anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (CSWE, 2022). We therefore insistently question: how can we claim to advance social justice and to engage in anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion if we are not allowed to teach it? How do we dismantle the white supremacist roots of our profession if we are not holding schools of social work accountable for their failure to speak out against policies that actively threaten the supposed foundation of our profession?

The NASW COE is frequently cited as articulating the values base that is core to the identity of the social work profession (Brill, 2001; Reamer, 2023) and situates its own six ethical principles as the “core values” of the profession (NASW, 2021). The COE has faced substantial criticism for exemplifying how the social work profession’s stated mission and actual practice do not align (BlackDeer & Ocampo, 2022; Bisman, 2004), yet it remains central to the social work profession’s articulation of itself. Similarly, the CSWE Educational and Policy Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (CSWE, 2022) outline nine competencies that social work programs must ensure their students meet in order to be accredited programs within the United States. While we hold these documents alongside a critique of the profession’s failings to meaningfully embody some of their principles (Murray et al., 2023), we also take social work at its own word and use this document as a guide for our analysis about the social work academy’s response in this current political moment.

In particular, the ethical principle of social justice exhorts social workers to challenge injustice by “[pursuing] social change... on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” (NASW, 2021). To accomplish this, social workers, per the NASW, must center culturally responsive approaches that acknowledge the role of oppression in arranging inequity in society. This is made manifest in the directive to professional social workers to “promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice” (NASW, 2021, 6.01) by ensuring that the people with which social workers work have “equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their

basic human needs...” (NASW, 2021, 6.04(a)). These ethical principles directly connect to the CSWE EPAS, which designate two competencies key to our analysis: that social workers will “advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice” and that they will “engage anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in practice” (CSWE, 2022, p. 3). This connection makes clear that the classroom education that allows future social workers to “understand how racism and oppression shape human experiences... and the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination” (CSWE, 2022, p. 9) directly informs their capacity to promote social justice in their post-graduate practice.

The legislation banning teaching – and by extension learning – about structural racism and sexual and gender identity directly undermines these core values and practices of the social work profession. While knowledge is not enough to dismantle systems of oppression on its own, it remains a necessary first step toward building social workers’ capacity to realize the profession’s overall aim of eliminating oppressive systems (Plummer, 2022). If social work educators cannot provide instruction about oppression, the graduates of their programs will not be social workers by the profession’s own definition. Furthermore, while the NASW has provided practice guidance over the past two years to social workers impacted by state policy that attempts to redefine gender affirmation as child abuse (NASW, 2022) and actively engaged in policy work to resist anti-transgender legislation (NASW, 2023) social work education, as evidenced by the CSWE’s late and lukewarm response, has largely failed to act. While this condemnation is preferable to silence, in failing to provide meaningful guidance to programs that we argue cannot presently ensure that they are meeting CSWE accreditation standards, the CSWE is failing to support sound social work education and practice in the aforementioned states. This represents the ongoing failure of social work education and practices to meaningfully reflect our ethical standards (Murray et al., 2023; BlackDeer & Ocampo, 2022; Bisman, 2004) and must be addressed if social work as a profession intends to meaningfully embody the values we state are our core.

### **ABOLITIONIST FRAMEWORK FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION IN SOCIAL WORK**

Social workers are known for their willingness to *discuss* pursuing social justice. We excel at opening conversations, convening webinars, and writing open letters (Murray et al., 2023). Social work has, historically, relied on critical reflection and consciousness-raising within itself as the key to addressing systems of oppression and their impact on social work practice (Mattsson, 2014; Morley, 2016; NASW, 2022). But, we argue, we cannot think our way to liberation and we cannot believe that we only must “free [one’s] mind and the rest will follow” (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Instead, we need to confront the foundation of social work practice and question whether it is in alignment with what we take for granted about our social justice foundation. Professionalized social work calls on us to accept the systems as is until they can be changed through formal processes. In response, we pull from the thinking of Moten & Harney (2004) to argue that this process of professionalization does nothing more than convert “insurgents into state agents” (p. 110-111). Those of us who are “incorrect” social workers have known that professionalization is not for us (Mehrotra et al., 2016; Mehrotra et al., 2019) and know that to wait for the reform of the system is to assure our own continued marginalization. The profession has reached a moment where the only ethical thing to do may be illegal, and social workers must grapple with the implications of that for our relationship with our own professional structures. In response, we have laid out 3 key components of an

abolitionist framework for collective action that we believe schools of social work, social work scholars, social work practitioners, and social work students must collectively take on immediately. These are: the embrace of fugitivity, collective action to disrupt power, and the transformation of justice through accountability.

### **Embrace of Fugitivity**

First, social work must embrace the inevitability of our own fugitivity; that is, our proximity to and the possibility for freedom, but, importantly, never its realization (Snorton, 2017). From our position of fungible “incorrectness,” we follow C. Riley Snorton in holding that this shifting space of humanity and inhumanity allows for modes of escape that treat freedom as an ontology, rather than an experiential reality (2017). We hold that social workers must acknowledge that while we are always working toward liberation, it is simultaneously always foreclosed by the very history of our profession. Developed in part to “mitigate the consequences of capitalism and to care for its casualties” (Finn, 2021, p. 73), social work as it has developed in the United States is concomitant with neoliberalism. Social work relies on inequity to sustain itself (Reisch, 2019) and therefore can never actually achieve the liberation it claims to seek.

Instead of challenging the root causes of social problems, the status quo of social work education encourages practitioners to work within existing systems to meet clients’ needs, employing the language of social justice to cover the need for social action and to obscure how this acts as social control (Reisch, 2019; Reisch & Andrews, 2001). This has never been clearer as Black, queer, and trans social workers and faculty are left defenseless while their/our governing bodies stand by and say nothing in response. This silence serves a soothing function, a way to “consciously induce unconsciousness” (Margolin, 1997, p. 6) by failing to acknowledge that there are students, practitioners, and academics who are harmed by these policies. In response to this, we call on social workers who take the label of abolitionist, radical, or critical, to cease their attempts at acceptance from a system that consistently shows us that it does not care for those it has deemed “incorrect” or disposable. Instead, we call on abolitionist social workers to embrace fugitivity, embrace our existence as outsiders as we work “toward the *underthrow* of the world” (Bey, 2019, p. 55). This *underthrow* calls us to create alternative spaces within the University to build the community necessary to resist these white supremacist policies. We must then bring into the light a refusal to whitewash our approaches to teaching, a refusal to reframe our research, and a refusal to continue to be complicit in social work’s conscious unconsciousness. Abolitionist, fugitive teaching, research, and practice are acts of “running *to* a destination that is created and determined by those who are experiencing injustice” (Stovall, 2020, p. 4), and prioritizing that destination above our own fears about retribution. We will never reach the liberation we envision if we are only seeking acceptance from the systems as they exist. By accepting a fugitive role within white supremacist systems, we are refusing the limitations they place on us. Instead, fugitivity foregrounds the need to be accountable to each other and to those most impacted by anti-CRT and anti-trans legislation as a move towards liberation (Gilmore, 2022; Kaba, 2021).

### **Collective Action to Interrupt Power Structures**

Embracing our fugitivity involves exploring what actions are available to us within the power structures that harm those of us deemed “incorrect” or disposable. Abolitionist worlds in fugitive spaces become opportunities to move beyond the dominant authority and into spaces of new

organization and relation (Reed, 2022). These spaces also become opportunities to connect with those most affected by injustice to build movements for social change. Creation of abolitionist worlds therefore represents a strategic disinvestment from social work power structures within the academy that continuously fail to recognize their own inaction in the face of harm. While “incorrect” social work academics and their accomplices may rely on the University to survive within a capitalistic system, we must be committed to building a society that transforms human relations and social structures (Bricker-Jenkins et al., 2022; Kivel, 2020). This requires holding the tensions of working within harmful systems while accepting our fugitivity within them and participating in mass refusal. As such, we call for collective action to interrupt power structures that harm through mass refusal.

Mass refusal means that our fugitive strategy is to delegitimize harmful laws and policies by refusing to implement them. Laws exert differential power, often serving to further invade and constrain those most marginalized in society, however, this constraint leads to unique possibilities for resistance (Sarat, 1990). We contend that these disproportionate harms might be mitigated with the shared risk of the masses. When faced with bans that constrain what we teach, constrain what we research, and constrain our students, we have the opportunity to refuse. We must refuse to respond to watchdog questions about our teaching topics and modalities; we must refuse to give the government the names of our TGD students. Through this mass refusal to implement anti-CRT and anti-trans laws, we refuse to legitimate them.

Furthermore, we can uphold mass refusal against long entrenched harms within the University. For example, social workers can refuse to uphold white supremacist policies present in the “professionalization” of appearance and communication. We can collaborate with student organizations to help them organize for their rights, particularly when the University is engaged in denying those rights. We can remove statements from department syllabi that reinforce racism and anti-trans/heterosexism. We can work with undocumented students to make sure they are protected. Ultimately in our refusal to obey unjust laws, we legitimize the existence of our students and, by extension, their clients.

Through mass refusal we uphold student well-being, and we demonstrate for them a vision of social work practice that serves to wield social work’s power as the hinge between state and client (Epstein, 1999) on behalf of our clients, rather than the state. In so doing, we show our students the possibility of fugitive spaces, invite them in, and show them how to avoid becoming wardens of the state as they enter the profession. These fugitive spaces we share with our students become abolitionist worlds within the University. Not enclosed, but rather articulated against the white supremacist and colonial foundation of the University, these abolitionist worlds become spaces of possibility. Therefore, we propose an abolitionist approach of creation through negation – that is, if we want to create abolitionist futures, we must exist in opposition to the unjust laws of the present.

### **Accountability to Engage in Abolitionist Praxis**

Finally, social workers engaged in anti-oppressive and abolitionist practice in social work education and beyond must be accountable to others in the movement. Accountability is a collective process that expands as abolitionist social work gains traction and abolitionist social workers build fugitive community and learn and grow together. We therefore call for a transformative justice-based understanding of accountability that moves beyond punishment and into a form of community building and care (Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021).

Social work in the United States is rooted in white supremacy and colonialism; as such, social workers inevitably enact harm, even as they work toward abolition. This deeply rooted capacity for harm calls for an equally deeply rooted commitment to accountability as a way to hold us in community and connection as we collectively work to cultivate a world with less inherent capacity for harm (Kaba, 2021). As we create our fugitive community, so too must we create an accountability structure outside of the various hierarchies and procedures to which we are accountable as social work practitioners and academics. Instead, we must maintain accountability to those building community alongside us, particularly those most impacted by legislation that seeks to erase their existence in the University and beyond. Accountability within this transformative justice framework would include using facilitators to guide conversations between the community, the person(s) harmed, and the person that caused the harm. This would allow for discussions around the impact of the harm and an understanding of what the individual and community would need to maintain feelings of safety (Kaba, 2021). By turning our focus toward transforming the harm, rather than isolating and ostracizing the individual that caused the harm, we create a community of care that embodies Moten & Harney's (2004) articulation of abolition "not...as the elimination of anything but *abolition as the founding of a new society*" (p. 114; emphasis added). When we are doing the creative work of abolition, we are working without a map, which can make it easy to move off-course. Therefore, we must always stay open to redirection from those working alongside us as we take collective responsibility for the new worlds we are creating. Accountability requires us to take responsibility for the world we are building by creating.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

"Racism is entrenched in social work practice and education" (Haley in Bullock et al., 2023) as the University and the profession have historically been hostile, harmful, and exclusionary toward Black women, LGBTQIA+ people, folks with disabilities, and others (Jackson et al., 2022; Mackey et al., 2022; Patton, 2016; Stovall, 2018), including gatekeeping who had access to professional credentials (Harty, 2023). All of this is made more so with this rising tide of legislation that ensures that social work educators – and, by extension, their students – continue to uphold and reproduce harm in the very communities that we claim to be serving. Therefore, an abolitionist framework for collective action hinges on a social work education that actively examines structural oppression and takes action against inequality where it occurs. As the means to do this is becoming increasingly illegal throughout social work education in the United States, it is necessary for social work educators to occupy a space of fugitivity to continue training practitioners to maintain their ethical responsibility to the clients and communities with which they work.

Taking on an abolitionist framework for collective action is a step toward addressing the inherent white supremacy and gender binarism of social work education and practice (BlackDeer & Ocampo, 2022; Del-Villar, 2021; Shelton et al., 2019). We accomplish this by creating fugitive spaces grounded in community accountability that actively grapple with the ways structural oppression manifests in social work education and practice in the hopes of creating more liberatory spaces within the University. Yet, this need for fugitive spaces raises the question of whether the University is a place where social work education can actually occur.

There are more ways to achieve a social justice education than within formal educational institutions, as demonstrated by historical and present-day approaches to political and anarchist

education (Pusey, 2017; Shantz, 2012; Williamson, 2005). This also raises similar questions about professionalization as those faced by Black social workers in the 1970s (Harty, 2023). As social work education continues to grapple with new legislation re-shaping what topics it engages and how, we question whether the future of social work education – and, by extension, the roots of social work practice – may be outside of the University altogether.

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