

**Collective Care:
Community-Based Practices in Reproductive Justice Work**

By

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Preface

Mine: A story of birth

I call out, but no one hears

*me. Someone's screaming. I am bearing the scream,
in my belly, against my core.*

*The screaming has a kick, legs, arms, heart. The screaming is mine,
but it is also hers. And she is mine.*

I lay there, but no one sees

*me. Someone's crying. I am holding the tears,
in my arms, against my breasts.*

*The crying has a face, eyes, ears, breath. The crying is mine,
but it is also hers. And she is mine.*

I think of all the things I have, and the things

*I don't have. How do I share what's mine with
what's mine? The time I thought I had escaped
me, and instead of time, I have life. Mine
and hers. And she is mine.*

Poem by Author

I don't have children.

I have never given birth, and I have never been pregnant.

And yet, the above poem is still a personal story—not *my* personal story, but one that belongs to countless parents. It is a story rooted in the voices, feelings, and expressions of people I have spoken to, pieces I have read, conversations I have listened to. It is an ode to those who have dealt with the challenges of becoming new parents in an environment where support is scarce. It is a call out to the lack of care provided to those who need it most.

This project emerged out of a desire to bring obscured voices out of the shadows. My journey leading up to this point started many years ago. I spent my childhood summers in the Dominican Republic to visit my father's side of the family and noticed the high numbers of young sex workers and pregnant girls around. It took a while before I understood the concept of pregnancy, and even longer for the concept of sex work, but once I did, there was a seed planted in my mind. Sexual and reproductive health became a core interest of mine, primarily concerning women's autonomy.

Sometime later, when I was 17, I went to an STD testing clinic for the first time. I learned that Broward and Miami-Dade Counties of South Florida, where I was born and raised, had the highest rates of HIV/AIDS among people aged 18-25. At this point, the seed began to sprout. I was so struck by this statistic—or rather, by the fact that I was unaware of it—and in awe of how poorly educated we were about the sexual and reproductive realities in our own hometown. I knew that the ones being most impacted by this were folks who came from underserved communities, and I was upset because I couldn't see what was being done to remedy this.

When coming to college, I was able to get my hands on academic sources that have helped me contextualize the historical, social, and political factors influencing reproductive health in America. And although I could acknowledge how important these books, articles, and research papers were in grounding myself in my interests, I was not satisfied. My interest had shifted from simply *knowing* about the issue to *learning* about it—directly from those whose voices were not as perceptible.

As I am writing this now, I realize that this is a story of voices.

INTRODUCTION

“We take care of us.” The words, spoken in an Instagram Live I was watching as a part of my research, stuck with me. A seemingly simple phrase, yet one that holds a great deal of history and power. In a world where institutions demand control over our bodies, our decisions, and our futures, what does it mean to care for and be cared for by each other?

On June 24th, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade*—which made abortion access a constitutional right—putting an end to 50 years of precedent (Totenberg & McCammon, 2022). This very quickly caused an uproar in protesting, rallying, and political organizing—particularly in states where so-called trigger laws banned abortion immediately. Since this ruling, reproductive rights have been a hot topic of discussion in political, academic, and medical settings. This is not to say that this was not being discussed before. The “pro-life, pro-choice” debate has been around for many years, only it has recently jumped up the ladder of relevance—that is, relevant to what is made more visible to the general population—as a result of this ruling.

However, what do these discussions look like on the ground, outside of powerful, wealthy, and elite institutions? How are local communities coming together to combat the harmful effects of reproductive oppression? These questions are at the heart of this project. Through ethnographic research, I explored what role community-based initiatives have in the fight for reproductive justice (RJ). I specify *reproductive justice* as both a framework for social change and understanding inequality in reproductive rights, and as a movement that makes visible the specific needs of women of color (WOC) and queer folks. I am particularly interested in highlighting those at the forefront of this movement, doing the work on the ground. Who is the “we” in “we take care of us?”

I primarily dedicate my focus towards grassroots RJ work, and how the folks with intersecting identities who develop and lead movements for this cause have created an inclusive space for coalition building. The National Black Women’s Reproductive Agenda describes RJ as “the human right to control *our* sexuality, *our* gender, *our* work, and *our* reproduction” (National Black Women Reproductive Agenda, n.d.). I emphasize the word “our” here to bring into light the role that community and partnership play in this work. Through this thesis, I examine how sexual and reproductive health progress might rely on the relationships that folks build with each other, and how community-based organizing might be necessary to help sustain these relationships. I was driven to go beyond simply studying how people find support in one another to determine how this search for support looks for queer folks and women of color. As I will demonstrate in this thesis, class ultimately revealed itself as another significant identity in relation to RJ work, as well as a factor in people’s decisions on who to lean on. Race, sexuality, and poverty are all factors affecting access, which is an exceptionally pertinent feature of the RJ movement—*access* to the resources necessary to make informed decisions regarding one’s own body and future.

My research was guided by the overarching question: How is community shaped by health, and how is health shaped by community? The following are more specific questions I aimed to answer through my investigation: 1) How does solidarity among individuals from marginalized communities impact the way they navigate their wellbeing? 2) How do different forms of care manifest within community-centered initiatives/programs? What does care look like in the process of social movements focused on sexual and reproductive health justice? 3) How do people talk to each other about reproductive health? What does this reveal about trust and interpersonal comfort within these spaces?

I approached this project by acknowledging the reproductive system as a life source—not only in the biological sense but in a way of “giving life to” or “birthing” social movements targeting RJ and autonomy. And just as biological birth can do, the metaphorical birth I reference here has produced multiple children. One child has grown up as the star of the family—always eating first at the table, getting first pick of the movie, being placed front-and-center of the family picture, getting a “Great job!” sticker even when they’re wrong. The other child has been forced to live in child #1’s shadow—having to manage with leftover dinner scraps, watching the movies that never pertain to them, shoved to the back for the picture despite being the shortest, and never getting recognition even though everyone secretly knows they’ve done the best work. By comparing these strings of activism to children birthed by reproduction, I attempt to articulate a clear image of what the relationship between *Reproductive Rights* (child #1) and *Reproductive Justice* (child #2) looks like.

Reproductive Justice: An Overview

There is a clear distinction between the *reproductive health* movement, which specifically advocates for better services in reproductive healthcare, the *reproductive rights* movement, an advocacy-based model that essentially operates based on the pro-life/pro-choice binary, and the *reproductive justice movement*, whose agenda is promoted through movement and organizing-based practices and calls attention to the central role intersectionality plays in reproductive oppression. Intersectionality theorizes that multiple identities, such as race, class, and gender, do not operate individually, but are rather intertwined, informing the different oppressions and obstacles one encounters throughout one's life (Crenshaw, 1991).

Writer Audre Lorde exemplified the meaning of intersectionality in practice before Crenshaw coined the term. In her book, *Sister Outsider* (1984), Lorde writes about the particular

experience of being “a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother” (p. 107). She explains that this identity has led her to often be excluded or made inferior in many social spheres. It is important to note here how Lorde describes herself in a singular fluid phrase, rather than separating the individual identities. She is not Black AND lesbian AND a mother—she is a Black, lesbian mother. This distinction is important because it demonstrates how intersectionality is not merely about identifying with multiple groups, but rather about how these identities work in conjunction to inform one’s life experiences, as Crenshaw (1991) proposes.

Lorde (1984) also writes that “it is not [the] differences between us that are separating us...[but]...rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation” (p. 108). She wrote this long before RJ was officially founded, but her words are key to understanding the fundamental principles of the movement. RJ fills in the gap created by the separation Lorde is describing. The reproductive rights movement’s “refusal to recognize the differences” between folks is exactly what prompted the development of RJ.

When viewed through the lens of healthcare, intersectionality theory makes the claim that factors interact to determine inequalities and injustices in health outcomes (Kapilashrami, 2019). RJ takes this argument and makes it a central component of its agenda—addressing intersectionality in reproduction is imperative to making any sustainable progress. The RJ movement gives a voice to those who are usually silenced or pushed to the background of the conversation. The term, “reproductive justice,” first coined by one of the founders of the movement, Loretta Ross, is a combination of *reproductive rights* and *social justice*, acting as both a framework for activism and thinking around reproduction, as well as a political movement (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Ross explains that the RJ agenda operates with a focus on three main

tenets: the right to not have a child, the right to have a child, and the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments. The first tenet is one shared by most pro-choice activist organizations centered around reproduction, however, the last two are what set RJ apart from more mainstream reproductive rights organizing. Reproductive rights movements, often under white leadership, generally work towards a single objective, which is to achieve the right to contraception and abortion—the right *not* to have children. However, this overlooks a battle that women of color have struggled against for centuries, and that is population control (Stern, 2016).

In both the anthology, *Undivided Rights* (2016), and the book, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (2017), Ross discusses the harmful effects of making “choice” the central feature of reproductive rights advocacy. She explains that this implies the presence of a “marketplace of options” where all women’s decisions are “legally protected,” neglecting the fact that for many WOC, there are social and structural factors at play that limit what choices they can freely make (Ross et al., 2016, *Redefining Reproductive Rights*, para. 4). In the chapter, “Beyond Pro-Choice versus Pro-Life: Women of Color and Reproductive Justice” of *Radical Reproductive Justice*, Andrea Smith (2017) writes

[W]hile there is certainly a sustained critique of the choice paradigm, particularly among women of color reproductive justice groups, the choice paradigm continues to govern much of the policies of mainstream groups in a manner that sustains the marginalization of women of color, poor women, and women with disabilities (p. 161).

She argues that the pro-life/pro-choice binary masks white supremacy and capitalism as structures that contribute a great deal of influence to women’s reproductive decisions.

Organizations like Planned Parenthood operate off this binary and have roots in eugenics and are

hence complicit in the promotion of population control within communities of color.¹ Dorothy Roberts (1998) writes, in *Killing the Black Body*, about the birth control movement being “marked by racism from its very inception,” drawing attention to its promotion of the eugenicist belief that reproduction should be reduced among the “unfit ” (p. 57). Birth control has been an emblem of women’s freedom and the feminist movement since its introduction into society. Behind the mask of freedom and justice worn by the BC movement, however, lies a more sinister reality—one where the definition of “choice” varies depending on whose bodies are involved.

The goal of RJ is not to dismiss the importance of one’s right to contraception and abortion, but rather to advocate for the right to have children simultaneously. RJ activists include an “opposition to population control and support for voluntary birth control and abortion” as fundamental to their agenda (Ross et al., 2016, Fighting for the Right to Have--or Not Have--Children, para. 21). Population control and reproductive injustice within the Black community have a long history, with roots in the racialization of women and the implications of race on women’s bodies. Enslaved women’s reproductive circumstances were entirely subject to their masters, who forced pregnancy and birth upon them as a way to expand the labor force (Roberts, 1998). While at this point Black women were not prevented from having children, the objectification and racialization of their bodies as profitable machines effectuated a different kind of population control. Rather than employing methods to reduce Black reproduction, the opposite was done. However, because of how Black bodies were used during slavery, this was still a strategy to control the population in favor of white supremacy. Post-slavery, Black

¹ Margaret Sanger, who founded Planned Parenthood and is recognized as a pioneer of the birth control movement, was known to have beliefs based in eugenics. Planned Parenthood has even addressed this, asserting their staunch “opposition” to such beliefs (Planned Parenthood, n.d.)

people—women in particular—were no longer legally subject to being property, and thus the expansion of their population became a perceived threat. Roberts writes about the “Welfare Queen” stereotype², which elicited beliefs that Black women were purposely having more children in an attempt to obtain more government-supplied monetary benefits. Ideologies like this seeped into quotidian thought and led to systemic practices targeting Black women’s reproductive fates. At this point, population control had a different objective, which was to prevent the growth of the Black population. This exemplifies Ross and Solinger’s (2017) point when they write, “Culture and laws were meant to identify which female bodies were marked for which kinds of administration and management by the state” (p. 15). The consequences of the racialization of reproduction and one’s deemed reproductive purpose have extended into the 21st century, indicating the need for a movement that takes into consideration historical, social, and institutional influence on reproduction.

Community organizing is another basic principle of RJ and is integral to how the movement was developed. Reproductive Justice was created by a group of 12 Black women—one of whom was Loretta Ross—at a national pro-choice conference in Chicago in June of 1994 (Ross et al., 2017). Conferences are said to act as “catalysts” for community-based organizing (Ross et al., 2016, *Coming Together: The Impetus for Organizing*, para. 1). Heavily influenced by Black feminist theory, these women “could not, and would not, isolate discussions on reproductive healthcare from other critical...issues because [their] lives are interconnected and interdependent” (Ross et al., 2017, p. 17-18). The RJ movement stems from a collective desire to bring intersectionality into the spotlight when discussing reproduction and reproductive freedom.

² The “welfare queen” is a derogatory title placed on Black women in the U.S who are said to, through fraudulent activity, abuse the welfare system. The stereotype emerged after Linda Taylor, a Black woman, was convicted of welfare fraud.

Although RJ was formally introduced as a movement and theoretical framework in 1994, Black women and other WOC have banded together to promote reproductive and sexual justice since much earlier. Enslaved women found ways to unite to share knowledge and resources on controlling their own fertility (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Later, in the mid-late 20th century, Black, Native American, and Latinx women joined forces to combat sterilization abuses (Ross et al., 2016). This is to say that the formal introduction of RJ into the reproductive activism sphere was nowhere near the first instance of alliance between and among WOC, though it established itself as a platform to amplify the strides being made by these communities.

Along with forced sterilization, WOC have been coerced into using contraceptives without being informed of the risks and painted as irresponsible in their sexual and economic decisions, and therefore encouraged to stop reproducing (Ross et al., 2017). A notable example is the case of Norplant, a contraceptive introduced in the early 90s, where welfare recipients were offered financial incentives to obtain the device (Jekanowski, 2018). Roberts (1998) highlights the disproportionate effect that welfare-related policies targeting women have on Black women due to the higher number of Black people relying on those benefits. This demonstrates the power that state-sanctioned reproductive policies have had, historically, in defining Black women's ability to have agency in making their own reproductive decisions.

Ross coined the term, "reprocide," to refer to the "reproductive genocide" of WOC (Ross et al., 2017, p. 24). The prevalence of "reprocide" is what makes the right to have children such a significant component of RJ work. WOC have faced continuous obstacles preventing them not only from having children but from having them under safe circumstances and from the ability to raise them in good conditions. RJ activists have made a "radical shift" from the mainstream "choice" to the all-encompassing "justice" to "locate autonomy and self-determination in

international human rights standards and laws” (Ross et al., 2017, p. 18-19). Providing access to materials that elevate the social, economic, and institutional conditions in which birthing persons live—addressing reproductive oppressions at the source—presents the possibility of true autonomy in the reproductive decisions they make.

RJ grounds itself in its intention of being an inclusive movement—one that, as said before, looks at the *intersection* of different factors of life and identities, and represents the interactions between them as drivers in reproductive outcomes. RJ can therefore not be properly discussed without the inclusion of queer influence and participation in the movement. Lauren Silver (2020) writes that “a queer orientation to RJ allows us to look critically at what we mean by family and to consider webs of care among and across kinship groups” (p. 220). A queer perspective of RJ, as a movement advocating for the right to have full control of when, where, and how to start and raise a family, allows a more holistic understanding of the significance of “choice” when it comes to building a family. Queerness is also integral to RJ as many people who give birth fall under the LGBT+ umbrella, including lesbians, trans men, and non-binary folks. Syrus Marcus Ware (2015) writes about his experience with pregnancy as a Black trans man, and how the intersection of his identities as being Black and trans introduced him to struggles throughout his journey with parenthood. The RJ movement includes queer activists of color, who work to unite the LGBT+, queer liberation, and reproductive movements (Lusero et al., 2017). The following are excerpts from three contributors to the chapter “Love Letters to the Queer Liberation and Reproductive Justice Movement(s),” from the anthology, *Radical Reproductive Justice* (2017):

“I wanted to share all of these feelings with you, the movement that has given birth to this space, the ability to feel whole and vulnerable and safe and liberated and empowered. You’re like family to me.” (p. 418)

- D Queen B

“This is for those of us who know that building intentional families, intentional community, intentional love, genders, and bodies can never be separated from justice; can never be separated from healing, from truth—and will always be transformative.” (p. 422)

- Mia Mingus

“We ask for a justice that we call “reproductive.” What we want is a way to sustain our communities, to survive these deadly times. We want our kids to grow up knowing that no one will beat them down and say they should never have been born because they look this way, move this way, love this way. We want this love to outlast our bodies and fill time.” (p. 426)

- Alexis Pauline Gumbs

Through their letters to the Queer Liberation and RJ movements, these three authors illustrate the community and “families” they have found through these spaces and this work. This is one of the points I am trying to investigate in my research—how relationships are created and sustained through community organizing, and how this looks for folks who do not fit within the lines of white heteronormativity. By embracing queerness, the RJ movement strives to dismantle heteronormative structures and foster a more comprehensive understanding of bodily autonomy and family-building within an intersectional framework.

RJ proposes a more holistic agenda than the typical reproductive rights framework—one that gives visibility to multiple systems of oppression operating in unison against women of color, queer folks, and other birthing people and provides an avenue for addressing problems at their root, rather than merely developing solutions to their consequences. By centering intersectionality, RJ targets issues that mainstream reproductive rights movements do not—most notably, those of population control and economic and institutional oppression that give “choice” a different meaning for marginalized communities.

In the Field: Review of Methodology

My research primarily relies on the following methods: participant observation of both in-person and virtual events hosted by community organizations, interviews with folks involved in the RJ scene, review of literature focused on the RJ movement and reproductive health, including ethnographic texts exploring similar subjects and informational publications on methodology, and finally, media analysis to demonstrate how RJ is advanced through different social media platforms. The main forms of digital content analyzed were on Instagram, namely from posts and live videos made by different organizations' accounts.

This ethnography is multi-sited. The data comes primarily from initiatives in the Southern United States, where many organizations doing RJ work are based, however, the virtual components of my research (online events and social media posts) include folks from all over. I attended in-person events hosted by or involving Florida Access Network in South Florida and Breastfeed Durham in North Carolina, and virtual events with SisterSong. When attending events, I paid attention to both what was being intentionally taught or discussed, as well as what was being said between folks in casual conversation. This way, I was able to investigate how community events operate as 1) places for education, resource distribution, and advocacy, as well as 2) spaces for community-building and making relationships. I was intrigued by how care developed within these spaces, whether it be the care expressed by folks for one another, or the care demonstrated for a particular cause, topic, or event pertaining to social justice. I was just as interested in the side chat between two folks, questions, or post-event conversations as I was in the group discussions directly related to the event. It is in all of these forms of interaction that I found evidence of care present. The level of comfort exhibited by people was also an indicator of how these relationships were being formed. If in-person, I paid close attention to the physical

setting and what, if anything, it contributed to the event. If virtual, I focused on how many cameras were kept on, and of those whose faces were shown, what their backgrounds looked like. The small details often matter just as much as the “bigger” things, as most anthropologists will claim.

I interviewed people who were either involved in RJ work, either directly or indirectly. These folks came from the organizations whose events I attended, like Breastfeed Durham and Florida Access Network, as well as other community organizations or networks whose missions align with the goals of the RJ movement, including Mobilizing African American Mothers through Empowerment (MAAME). The focus of my interviews was to better understand what RJ meant to my interlocutors, and how their experiences with community-organizing for RJ have influenced their perceptions of it. I asked questions about their personal involvement in RJ work, as well as how they feel their identities play a role in the way they engage in the work. I wanted to find connections between what I had read and what I was seeing in the field. I let my interviewees stray from the questions if what they were discussing remained pertinent to my research—this generally worked to provide additional information that I would not have gotten through my questions alone.

My decision to include a virtual component to my ethnography primarily came from the initial stages of the development of my project, where I learned that many organizations hosted events through the Zoom videochat platform. I then decided to take this further and make social media an additional “field” of my research. I found that many reproductive health and RJ-related organizations had large social media presence with notable followings. I saw a possibility to include these social media platforms as more than just a means of connecting with people. On these social media pages, people tend to post and respond to relevant news articles, engage in

thoughtful discussion, and actively build relationships with one another, which I believe are all pertinent to the concepts I am investigating through this study. These virtual spaces also existed as avenues through which different forms of care could manifest—users express their concern for, pride in, and acknowledgment of various social issues, as well as others’ stories, which is crucial to my development of *collective care* as a driving approach to advancing RJ.

The digital sphere is a space where communities are mobilized to raise awareness and fight against oppressive systems and entities. These virtual platforms have been integral to community-based and non-profit organizations, as they are also used for promoting events, calling for volunteers and employees, lobbying and advocacy, and community-building (Oparah & Bonaparte, 2015).

“Hashtag activism,” a term used to describe “the act of building up public support via social media for a cause” through the hashtag symbol (#), has grown to be a widely adopted method of using social media as a tool for activism (Goswami, 2018, p. 1). Hashtag activism first gained traction through Twitter (now “X”)—where hashtags have always been used to popularize different topics—but has now expanded to various social media platforms, notably Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Reddit. Two hashtags that illustrate the far-reaching capabilities of hashtag activism are #BlackLivesMatter, a movement of resistance against police brutality, and #MeToo, a callout to the “widespread nature of misogyny, sexual harassment, and sexual assault” towards women (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Lindgren, 2019, p. 420). I bring attention to these two social movements in particular because of the global traction they both obtained, demonstrating how social media can provide a platform and a voice to folks who may not usually have the opportunity or support to speak out. This form of activism is especially significant to

RJ, as it allows folks from all over to unite and spread awareness about issues that overlap with and are relevant to the movement.

Through these methods, I attempt to unveil the lived experiences of community leaders, organizers, activists, and members in RJ work. I try to give a platform for people engaged in this kind of activism to freely share their stories—the good and the bad. I listen to them, and I learn from them. I watch as people around me form new relationships and strengthen pre-existing ones, as I do the same. I use physical and virtual spaces to observe the progress being made in the name of RJ.

Positionality

Ethnography has its roots in the concept of the “other.” In this thesis, I actively move away from this style of ethnography, which has historically dominated the field, through my positionality as a “native anthropologist.” I am a queer woman of color who studied a movement whose leaders are largely queer folks and women of color. As such, I had to pay very close attention to the distance between myself and the participants in my work.

It was admittedly difficult to find my footing as a researcher in environments where I felt very close to those around me, and where the issues being addressed often pertained to me. I often had to reflect on my own race and sexuality in spaces where they were the central topic of discussion, and this largely informed the way I approached my research. However, it did not take long for me to realize that despite being able to relate in some way or another to most of the folks I interacted with, we were all individuals with our own distinct personal stories. It was incredibly important for me to continuously remind myself of this fact throughout my research process, so as not to diminish the contributions of my interlocutors, regardless of whether they did or did not align with my own experiences and beliefs.

It is also crucial for me to acknowledge here that I am not a parent. Despite my ability to relate to the experiences of being queer and being a WOC, I cannot fully grasp the complex experience of parenting as a person with these identities. No matter how much I sympathize with my participants who are parents or who have been pregnant, I simply cannot claim that I “understand” what they have gone or are going through. Because parenting is at the core of RJ, I needed to remain consistently vigilant about this fact. I thought carefully about the way I was digesting, responding to, and analyzing content regarding matters of parenting.

Chapter Progression

The following chapters mirror what I have determined to be pivotal elements of the human experience. The first chapter is centered around Birth. I discuss RJ as it relates to the beginning stages of life, including conception, pregnancy, birth, and early childhood. The objective here is to illustrate how RJ addresses challenges pertaining to these different phases of reproduction. I spend time drawing attention to the history of reproductive health, personal experiences of reproductive health matters, and the role of community in helping folks out through the process of starting, sustaining, and grieving a family.

The next chapter is rooted in Life—more specifically, in people’s environments and living conditions. In this section, I analyze RJ as a framework that is used to approach social issues that affect people’s quality of life. These issues include affordable housing, education, environmental justice, police brutality, racial justice, war and conflict, and incarceration. Throughout my research, I have seen RJ organizations discuss matters that fall within these topics in the context of being “RJ issues.” The virtual component of my ethnography is especially significant for this chapter, as social media is used as the primary method of raising awareness about the relationship between RJ and different social justice concerns.

In the third and final core chapter, I shift my focus to Community. This is where my theorizing of collective care largely takes place. I expand on the relationship-building aspect of the RJ movement and how this contributes to its growth and advancement. Narratives obtained from my interviews, as well as behaviors observed at community events, form the basis of my analysis here. I consider how community and care function as integral components to both the collective and the individual, the former demonstrated through broader impact on the movement as a whole, and the latter through the way individuals navigate their own RJ.

Finally, I conclude by analyzing the connection between the RJ movement and joy. I explore how joy is relevant to my theorizing of collective care, and what possibilities there are for joy amid the difficulties of fighting for reproductive justice.

ONE

Birthing: Reproductive Justice and Reproduction

RJ activism in the US is largely fueled by the state of Black maternal health across the nation. However, a thorough grasp of Black maternal health as it currently exists first requires a contextual and historical understanding of the relationship between reproductive health and Blackness. In the book, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*, historian Deirdre Cooper-Owens (2017) performs a deep dive into the roots of gynecology by unpacking of the relationship between slavery and medicine. She illustrates the history of the practice as one that came out of the exploitation of enslaved women, used for the experimentation of reproductive medicine by white, male doctors, pointing to the irony in the simultaneous need for and hatred of Black bodies³. Owens makes two key arguments—that “reproductive medicine was essential to the maintenance and success of southern slavery,” as a method for ensuring that enslaved women remained capable of reproducing a labor force, and that the gynecological practices of southern male doctors during slavery made them particularly keen on the reproductive capacities of enslaved women (p. 4). As such, their medical evaluations were used by slave owners to assess the economic benefit of enslaved women. These arguments represent the reinforcement of racialized and gendered power structures through medicine and are important to understanding how the American system and model for reproductive healthcare is an inherently anti-Black structure.

³ Dr. James Marion Sims, known as the “Father of American Gynecology,” spent 5 years on a slave farm in Alabama carrying out experimental procedures to cure vesicovaginal fistula—the development of a hole between a woman’s vagina and bladder—on enslaved women, 3 of whom are remembered by the names of Anarcha, Betsy, and Lucy. Within these 5 years, these women were operated on over 30 times, with no anesthesia and with the expectations that they still perform their duties as bondwomen, until Dr. Sims successfully completed the procedure (Owens, 2017; Wall, 2006).

This history of gynecology in the US as a practice grounded in the perceived “bioavailability”⁴ of Black, enslaved bodies set the foundation for what reproductive health looks like today. The consequences of this history are far-reaching—for all people who encounter the American reproductive health system. Because its development is intrinsically tied to a system of oppression and violence, the American reproductive healthcare system is not built to provide care for *anyone*, not just Black women—though they receive the brunt of the impact. This is why the RJ framework operates in the way that it does, acknowledging that a Black feminist lens works in everybody’s favor—because when you fix the problem where it’s the most harmful, you fix it everywhere else.

On the morning of March 6th, 2024—well into the final stages of writing this thesis, while I sat in the audience of an RJ Conference that Duke was hosting for the second time ever, I watched people poignantly communicate the consequences of this violent, racist, and yet obscured history. The room was occupied with around 70 people seated at round tables of between 3 and 5 each, all with their heads turned toward the large projected screen and the speaker at the front podium. This year’s conference theme was “Healing Black Bodies and Black Maternal Health,” and the space consisted of folks from all occupational backgrounds—students, academics, physicians, birth workers, politicians, authors, and community organizers. About 95% of participants were femme-presenting individuals, and around 80% were Black. Considering the demographics of the general Duke University population, this space felt very different from what I was used to on campus—it felt safer.

⁴ In her article, “Plantation Politics, Paranoia, and Public Health on the Frontlines of America’s COVID-19 Response,” anthropologist Yesmar Oyarzun uses the term, “bioavailability,” to refer to the historical use of Black bodies for experimental purposes in the fields of medicine and public health (Oyarzun, 2020, p. 586).

The first panel, “Black Maternal Health: Local to State Activism,” comprised four guest speakers from political and grassroots backgrounds. I recognized the familiar face of Maya Jackson (Maya J), director of the local organization, Mobilizing African American Mothers through Empowerment (MAAME), whom I had previously interviewed. Beside her were North Carolina Representative Julie Von Haefen, North Carolina Senator Natalie Murdock, and Tina Braimah, midwife and director of the Black-led birth center, Aya Wellness.

A student moderator for the panel asked the panelists what Black maternal health meant to each of them, and they gave responses that cement the impact that the history of reproductive health has had on reproduction. “When I think of Black maternal health, I think of maternal health for all people,” Maya J asserted. She expanded on the deep connection that Black reproductive health has with all gynecological reproductive healthcare in America, citing Dr. Sims’ experiments on Black women that ultimately birthed a practice that impacts all people who seek this care. Senator Murdock reaffirmed this sentiment and referred to Black maternal health as something that “grew out of a need to call a thing a thing.” She explained that because of the historical societal neglect of Black women’s particular experiences in maternal health, there was a need to specify *Black* maternal health—rather than sweeping everything under the general term of “maternal health”—as a necessity to prevent continued ignorance.

In Tina’s response, she connected her understanding of Black maternal health to an idea that reflects the principles of RJ:

Me, coming from a midwifery perspective, Black maternal health means that people can birth when, where, and with whom they want to. And I know we use the word, ‘maternal,’ but we’re also talking about queer and trans bodies that won’t consider themselves women, per se, you know. I think that [until] we can all deliver where we want, decide if we want to have babies, if we don’t want to have babies...we’re never going to have health...

Tina did not specify *reproductive* or *maternal* health when she said, “we’re never going to have health.” By framing it in this way, she speaks to the interconnectedness between reproduction and overall health. The word, “never,” suggests that the achievement of health, in all capacities, is fully dependent on the achievement of RJ. Whether Tina was intentional in this phrasing is uncertain, but she still emphasizes the importance of reproductive choice and autonomy. The inclusion of queer and trans folks in her understanding of maternal health is also an active representation of how the RJ framework holds a space for those who are often underrepresented in these discussions. What Maya J, Senator Murdock, and Tina share about Black maternal health helps us see the line connecting RJ to the history and current state of reproduction in the US.

In this chapter, I intend to dissect RJ as something both familiar and unfamiliar. The familiar develops as I expand on issues previously discussed in the introduction—issues that readers likely already associate with RJ, i.e. abortion, conception, and birth. The unfamiliar comes through in the connections I make between these issues to other components of reproduction and reveal how they are relevant to the RJ framework. Using personal stories from interviews, events, and social media, I analyze what RJ looks like in the early stages of life, parenthood, and conception. With this chapter being the “birth” chapter, I want to disrupt mainstream assumptions about these issues, aiming to “birth” a new understanding of reproduction that encompasses the complex, emotional, and communal nature of RJ.

The following sections each represent different stages of reproduction: conception, pregnancy and delivery, and post-birth. The first section focuses on RJ in relation to sexual education, abortion, and alternative family planning methods. Choice—as it pertains to the ability to get pregnant, have an abortion, or start a family using alternative methods—is an

important concept here. In this section, I aim to illuminate the importance of RJ advocacy at the very beginning of the reproductive process. The next section follows the experience of pregnancy and delivery, and the challenges that folks face while expecting and delivering. There is a great deal that goes into being pregnant and delivering a baby, and many of these factors become obscured—especially with regard to Black and Brown women—in larger discussions of reproduction. I use this part of the chapter to explore the various forms of support promoted by RJ advocates for expecting parents. Finally, I discuss the post-birth experience, providing an overview of the ways that the RJ movement provides for folks who have recently become parents. By following a chronology of reproduction, this chapter walks us through the development of RJ in these various contexts—peeling back the layers of the movement to get to the core that holds them all together. In this case, I argue collective care is at that core. This chapter ultimately serves as an explanation for how RJ—through collectivity and intimacy—offers a space for improving the experience of all things related to reproductive well-being.

CONCEIVING/CHOOSING

As I've stated in the introduction, the principal delineation between the reproductive rights and reproductive justice movements is that the latter expands beyond matters of abortion and conception. However, that does not mean that RJ is not deeply concerned with these issues as well. As I will demonstrate in this section, the way that the RJ movement organizes around family planning is anchored in collectivity, storytelling, and historical and sociopolitical knowledge.

On January 18th, 2024, the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective (SisterSong) posted on YouTube an hour-long roundtable discussion titled “Destigmatizing the Dialogue”, with model and TV personality Chrissy Teigen, whose public image has recently

been linked to reproductive health advocacy. This collaboration between Teigen and SisterSong—the nation’s most prominent RJ organization—offered a place for seven women of color to share their personal stories about abortion, pregnancy, and advocacy; the intention was, as the roundtable’s title indicates, to destigmatize conversations around reproductive health, with a focus on abortion.

Executive Director of SisterSong Monica Simpson established to the audience that “our stories are the fuel for our activism.” Storytelling as a revolutionary device is key to how the RJ movement advances, which goes hand-in-hand with the community-based initiatives that allow these stories to be told. In the case of this roundtable, SisterSong and Chrissy Teigan use their digital platforms to amplify how community-building and storytelling take place in the context of abortion and reproduction. The women at the roundtable are all involved with RJ in different capacities, and they all have stories that help those who are not familiar with abortion beyond the scope of law and biology understand the experience of abortion as well as the context behind the political and social discourse surrounding abortion.

Nancy Pena—the Campaign Director for a national campaign advocating for access to self-managed abortion, which she defines as an abortion procedure that occurs outside of a clinic setting—opened up about her own experience with this sort of abortion:

For me, when I terminated my pregnancy and I had a self-managed abortion with medication [for] abortion, it was a really powerful experience. I wanted to be able to decide how I did it, when I did it, and I was able to do that with a self-managed abortion.

Highlighted here is the meaning of agency when it comes to making reproductive decisions. For Nancy, being in control of the “how” and the “when” made terminating her pregnancy a powerful experience; beyond access to abortion alone, RJ also advocates for the right of all

people to have access to this feeling of power and control when choosing whether or not to remain pregnant.

This notion of agency is also reflected in social worker Briana McLennan's story, which expands on the added stigma of having multiple abortions. In sharing her experience, Briana touches on consistency and love as important actors in how and why she tells her story:

I want to have full control of my story, and so that's why I try to make sure—especially [with] the stigma around multiple abortions, right—that's why I try to make sure I'm constantly telling my story, because each abortion I've had, it's been for many different reasons. And I felt different each time, you know? So I just try to make sure that I'm constantly talking about it, and I just want people to know, like, it's okay like, look, we love you—everyone loves someone that's had an abortion, right? So I just want people to understand that.

The repetition of “I try to make sure” and “I just want to make sure” represents Briana's strong desire to help folks who have had or are considering having an abortion feel seen, supported, and cared for. Reassuring her audience that they are loved is a depiction of how abortion activism through the RJ framework operates. Through storytelling, Briana carries the mission of reproductive freedom forward.

Kaniya Harris, a college student and RJ activist, expressed a similar sentiment regarding what her intentions are in sharing her abortion story:

So just me telling my story, I feel like it's just a way for me to just send [a] love letter. It's like my community and letting people know, like, this is okay.

Like Briana, Kaniya views storytelling as a communal and caring endeavor. By likening the sharing of her story to sending a love letter, she solidifies the prominence of what I call *intimate collectivity* in her work as an RJ activist. Intimate collectivity, as I theorize it, denotes a particular kind of relationship through which people share a deep personal connection and feel passionately invested in the well-being of one another. In the context of RJ, intimate collectivity

is grounded in folks' desire to uplift and empower their communities to fight against the forces threatening to limit their reproductive freedom.

Kaniya, who also carried out a self-managed abortion, highlighted the widespread misinformation and misconceptions that exist regarding self-managing, reassuring the audience that it is a “very safe” undertaking. Aside from the safety she felt with the abortion itself, she cited being “able to do it in [her] own home and be comfortable instead of going to a clinic with so many angry protestors” as a reason for feeling safe. She would later reveal in an interview I had with her the difficulty she faced in accessing abortion options. Because of statewide bans, many people from the South travel to D.C.—where she is based—to terminate their pregnancies. Because of this, Kaniya was not able to find a clinic with available appointments for months. She eventually connected with WeTestify, an organization that advocates for the representation of folks who've had abortions, who helped her access the resources to have a self-managed abortion. Through WeTestify, Kaniya began to share her story publicly and deepen her connections with folks within the RJ movement. She expressed that she found a support system in this environment and that she greatly appreciated being in RJ spaces marked by “Black joy, [where] Black people love each other.”

For Kaniya, one of the most difficult parts of processing her experience with pregnancy and abortion was the internal conflict she faced as someone who was actively engaged in promoting sexual education initiatives around her college campus, as well as someone coming from a Southern Baptist religious background. She shared that the experience forced her to come to terms with her own internalized stigma and biases surrounding abortion, and ultimately accept that it was okay that she had gotten pregnant and had an abortion—that this didn't lessen her worth as an activist, and as a person in general. Being around other folks—particularly other

Black women from the South—who also had their abortion stories to share was instrumental to her being able to regain her confidence as someone who has had an abortion.

Dr. Jamila Perritt, a D.C.-based OB/GYN present at the roundtable, echoed the safety of abortions in response to the stories of those sitting beside her:

I think that if you take anything away from this conversation it should be that abortion is safe. However you have your abortion, whether it's a self-managed abortion, it's an in-clinic abortion, if it's procedural, if it's medicat[ed] abortion, abortion is safe and abortion is effective. And so if you don't remember anything else, remember that. And it looks different depending on who you are, where you live, what your resources are. The decision to be pregnant or not, to parent or not is shaped by the context of our lives, the context of our communities.

As a physician, Dr. Perritt brings a different perspective to the conversation. Her medical understanding of abortion—particularly as someone who has performed them before—adds to the reassurance and knowledge the group is collectively trying to spread. Dr. Perritt's assertion that abortion “looks different” depending on people's individual circumstances connects to the fundamental pillars of the RJ framework, further conveying how RJ specifically helps change perceptions of abortion.

Referencing the recent abortion bans throughout the nation, Dr. Perritt also discusses safety regarding the inequities in access to abortion care:

And these bans are not impacting communities equitably. And so we know that some folks are bearing the brunt of these restrictions. Wealthy people, resourced people, will always have abortions. They've always had it, whether it was illegal or not. They've always had it where it was safe for them and unsafe for the rest of us. But folks with lower resources, folks who are young people, those who are immigrants, undocumented people who cannot travel—oftentimes even within the state, much less out of state—LGBTQ folks, folks living in rural communities, feel the brunt of these restrictions because we are already marginalized from healthcare systems more broadly. So when we think about the impact of these bans, who is paying the price?

The question at the end of this quote forces us to recognize the severity of the consequences of these bans, particularly in terms of which communities are facing the biggest threat. When

thinking about what RJ does, specifically, for social causes related to abortion and conception, it is exactly this: the movement and the framework confront us with the realities in which we are living, where these issues go beyond what we are usually shown, impact different people to different extents, and require the sharing of knowledge and experience (like this roundtable) and community-based initiatives to be fully addressed. Nancy also shed light on the role of community work in abortion care:

There is always work to be done in communities because community is safety. Our safety is not with our courts, our safety is not with politicians. There is no law, there is no bill that can guarantee our safety and access to abortion care.

The claim that *community is safety* speaks to why RJ organizers focus so much on grassroots work. Together, Nancy and Dr. Perritt's words can be understood as a clarification of what RJ means in the context of abortion care and access.

Looking past abortion, the notions of conception and choice within RJ work are also incredibly pertinent to alternative family planning methods. RJ organizations engage in various ways to provide resources on family planning to folks in need. For example, the Durham-based non-profit organization, Breastfeed Durham, which advocates for lactation support and promotion in the Durham community and beyond, recently organized a Queer Family Planning Health Fair. Although I didn't attend, Love, the organization's director, proudly described to me in one of our first conversations that the fair had been a huge success. By involving representatives from fertility clinics and sperm banks, healthcare providers and lactation consultants, birth workers, and representatives from adoption agencies, the fair was meant to help LGBT+ folks looking to start and grow their families access the right resources to do so. This emphasizes the way that the RJ movement, through collective action, acknowledges the

distinct experiences of different communities and works to bring those experiences to light by providing resources and support specific to those experiences.

For LGBT+ folks and women of color, starting a family in non-traditional ways, such as through assistive reproductive technologies⁵ (ART), has historically, and continues to be, made difficult by different systems of oppression. For instance, as recently as February 16th, 2024, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled that “embryos held in a cryopreservation tank were legally equivalent to living children” (Bayefsky et al., 2024, para. 1). This quickly and severely limited access to in vitro fertilization (IVF) procedures. For fertility patients in Alabama, this ruling hinders the possibility of having a family. The brunt of this decision is felt by the most marginalized—namely Black and Brown folks—who largely do not have the same level of access as their more privileged counterparts to the resources to seek safe out-of-state alternatives.

Many RJ activists took to social media to showcase their staunch opposition to the decision. For instance, Instagram user @liberaljane posted a graphic representing a Black pregnant woman holding her stomach with the words, “Protect access to IVF” largely printed next to her. The words, “IVF helps queer & trans people, single women, older people, disabled people, & couples struggling with infertility” are printed in smaller font in a circle around the



image of the woman. The post’s caption reads, “[purple heart emoji] when reproductive justice activists told us that overturning roe [sic] was just the beginning, this is what they meant. The ruling from Alabama is an outrageous violation of bodily autonomy.” User @liberaljane does two things in this caption. First, they specify RJ activists—and not reproductive *rights*

⁵ ART includes fertility treatments where eggs or embryos are handled. (CDC, 2023)

activists—as understanding the extent of the impact the Dobbs decision would ultimately have. This is likely due to the framework’s inherent acknowledgment of the different relationships that reproduction has with social structures and with individual lives. Second, they call out the connection between autonomy and reproduction, signaling the importance of choice—beyond the context of abortion—in RJ activism. This post serves as just one example of how RJ activists respond to public decisions that threaten people’s access to and experience of conception.

Anthropologist and RJ scholar Dana-Ain Davis (2020) writes about Black women’s experiences using ART through a lens of obstetric racism, which she argues is a framework that “attends to the differential histories, experiences and knowledge of the reproductive lives of people” (p. 63). In her article, “Reproducing while Black: the crisis of Black maternal health, obstetric racism, and assisted reproductive technology,” Davis explores the interactions between care providers and Black women using ART as a site of obstetric racism, where she concludes that while Black folks accessing ART in itself is an issue that illuminates anti-Blackness, what happens after they’ve already accessed it is also worthy of attention when discussing racism in reproductive healthcare (Davis, 2020). This analysis of race, reproduction, and healthcare is deeply rooted in the RJ framework, as Davis looks at the intersection of identities (Blackness, womanhood, and motherhood) and of analytical frameworks (obstetric violence and medical racism), pointing to the importance of considering reproduction as a multilayered issue that can, and should, be explored in various capacities.

EXPECTING/DELIVERING

It is common for people to say that they are “expecting” when they are pregnant. The space after the term is generally understood to be a placeholder for the words, “a baby.” However, the notion of “expecting” can mean different things, particularly regarding what

people’s expectations might be for their experiences of pregnancy, labor, and delivery.

Oftentimes in the US, women and birthing people of color who expect a certain level of support and care during their pregnancies and deliveries never receive it. The RJ movement holds a great deal of space for advocating to ensure that these folks have access to the pregnancies and births they desire, as well as for educating folks about various forms of support for pregnancy and birth—specifically through midwives and doulas⁶.

Thinking back to Black maternal health, emotionally- and physically- distressing birthing experiences are a significant part of the problem with Black women’s reproductive well-being in the US. Julia Chinyere Oparah, co-editor of *Birthing Justice* (2015), a collection of narratives showcasing birth justice activism and the reality of birth injustice, criticizes the RJ movement as “hav[ing] been slow to confront the medical violence” experienced by Black mothers in reproductive healthcare settings (p. 17). Oparah acknowledges the RJ movement as a generally powerful and inclusive entity; however, she claims that despite its recognition of harmful contraceptive methods being advertised for WOC, it has failed to “ma[k]e the connection between [this] and unnecessary medical interventions in childbirth” (p. 18). In *Birthing Justice*, Viviane Saleh-Hanna recalls wanting to pursue a natural birth for her first pregnancy:

I wanted my black child to enter this crazy world on his own terms, in his own time, if he could...I wanted to be part of a larger ritual and practice that women have performed for centuries. I wanted to allow my body to do what it needed to do, and I wanted to learn about and experience my own body’s potential. (p. 62)

Saleh-Hanna's desire to seek out a natural birth represents one of the many facets of birth justice. Saleh-Hanna's pregnancy journey was far from easy, and she had to fight hard to get the natural birth she wanted. For women like Saleh-Hanna, practices and resources

⁶ Midwives: Medically-trained professionals who provide individually tailored care throughout pregnancy and labor
Doulas: Offer emotional, educational, and non-medical physical support to folks during pregnancy, through labor, and postpartum (*Midwife vs. a Doula... What’s the Difference?*, 2024)

are not readily available for natural birth to be an easily accessible option. With greater internal organizing and discussion, the RJ movement has the potential to bring into light issues specifically related to medical violence during all stages of pregnancy, and correct the criticisms made by Oparah.

The graphic ethnographic article, “A Birth Story,” details the experience of LeConté, whose birth unfolded completely differently than what she had expected and hoped for (Davis et al., 2021). LeConté, a 40-year-old Black woman who decided with her husband that she wanted a vaginal birth with little intervention, had developed a well-thought-out birth plan with a team of doulas and nurse midwives. 35 weeks into her pregnancy, LeConté was diagnosed with severe preeclampsia and found to have protein in her urine, which led to her being admitted to the hospital for an induced labor. Although her birth team supported her while in the hospital, the care she received from other hospital staff was quite negligent, with a nurse having very little regard for LeConté’s comfort while drawing her blood, and an anesthesiologist ignorantly suggesting she just have a C-section so that he wouldn’t have to be bothered again. Although she was ultimately able to give vaginal birth to a healthy baby, she was subsequently sent walking with no aid in the middle of the night to the postpartum floor. LeConté had spent months imagining and working toward a particular birthing experience, as Davis et al. demonstrate here, but her expectations were not met due to an incompetent medical system that failed to prioritize her needs and desires.

The unfortunate reality is that stories like LeConté’s are far from uncommon, and they don’t always occur within the walls of a hospital⁷. Without the proper tools and support, homes

⁷ Dana-Ain Davis’ *Obstetric Racism* thoroughly explores the “adverse birth outcomes” disproportionately experienced by Black women and expands on the relationship between race and women’s birthing experiences (Davis, 2019).

can also be sites of undesirable birthing experiences. During the RJ conference, Maya J recalled finding her friend—who was voluntarily having her second “unassisted birth”⁸—having a stroke, unable to keep herself up. Because of the lack of support available to Maya’s friend, she was unable to have the at-home birth she wanted. Maya J also expanded on the privilege of being a birth worker who has access to the necessary resources and systems of support to have an at-home birth:

I want to highlight the lack of resources that are available to home birth as someone who first became a parent 16 years ago and just had a baby the year before last. I literally birthed at home 3 weeks after having COVID because the hospital here could not make an appointment for me to be seen. And I knew that I had to seek someone that was going to provide care—it is very difficult finding support three weeks before your estimated due date. But because I had the knowledge and tools and support and resources as a perinatal health worker, I could do that—that was a privilege for me to do that.

Maya J’s recognition of her own privilege implies that the circumstances and outcomes would likely be much different for folks in different positions.

Another critical aspect of RJ in relation to pregnancy and birth that is often overlooked is the disproportionate experience of miscarriage and stillbirth experienced by Black women. Expecting life and encountering loss is a tragic reality for many birthing people, and the strategies in place to help people prevent or get through this burden are virtually non-existent. Legal expert and RJ scholar Jill Wieber Lens (2020) writes that Black women are twice as likely to experience stillbirth than white women, and while she acknowledges the RJ movement’s “holism,” she critiques its failure to specifically identify miscarriage and stillbirth prevention—which is undoubtedly a matter of RJ—as important parts of prenatal care.

⁸ In this context, and “unassisted birth” refers to a birth—usually at home—without a healthcare professional. Unassisted births can, however, involve doulas and close friends/family. (Birthrights, n.d.)

In a SisterSong Instagram Live, Monica Simpson and Shavon Arline-Bradley, CEO of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), spoke against governmental restrictions on women's bodily autonomy. Despite being personally against abortion, Shavon explains that she recognizes the implications of political limitations on what folks can decide to do with their bodies, and what this particularly means for women of color. In the conversation, Shavon briefly shared her experience with child loss and the poor care that she received at the time to solidify the importance of advocacy:

Having the opportunity to birth a child and having an opportunity to lose them—it's an opportunity, I need to say it that way—uhh I've lost three...*(trails off)*. Intersectional experience means my loss, my birth, my pain, my Black woman-ness, my education, didn't matter when I received the care that I received in the moment. And if it wasn't for Black women coming through for me, my intersectional experience would have been different. Let me just say it that way. So let me just offer my children who are in heaven, because I need to name that from me. And I'm very sensitive to what sisters may hear in this moment. This is about the opportunity to advocate for the initial woman's opportunity to say, "this is mine to have." No government, no man, no woman, no policy, can intrude their intentions on what is for me.

Shavon refers to the loss of her children as an "opportunity," indicating that she was still able to gain something from these experiences of loss. She also brings intersectionality to the forefront, describing how none of her identities meant anything to those who were supposed to provide care for her. She emphasizes that the support she got instead came from Black women around her. She connects all of these things to the importance of advocating for bodily autonomy and for freedom from politically enforced limits on people's reproductive decisions. Through her vulnerability in sharing her story of loss, Shavon sheds light on what the RJ movement works to achieve, from equitable healthcare to communal support to policy change.

This conversation about birthing experiences is significantly linked to the role that midwives and doulas have in community-centered reproductive health work. Like gynecology,

the history of midwifery and doula care is interconnected with Black history. Dr. Perritt elaborated on this connection in the roundtable discussion, citing it as a reason for the notable “lack of midwifery and perinatal support care in this country”:

That was by design. If we take a look at the history of the American Medical Association and the American College of OBGYNs in particular, this was a concerted effort to discredit Black midwives in the South. To stigmatize, to criminalize and discredit the folks who have been providing on the ground community-based care. So the lack of midwifery support, the lack of doula support is not accidental—it is absolutely by design. And it is tied to racial capitalism and a desire to build profit from the healthcare system—it is not community based.

By tying community, midwifery, doula care, and Blackness together, Dr. Perritt highlights the inherent connection that exists to the RJ movement, a Black feminist movement also grounded in community-based work. She continued by inserting into the conversation a personal connection she feels to this kind of care:

[Doula care] started out as something [from] Black women who came together supporting people through birth in their communities. I think about my grandmother who delivered all of her children at home with a community of folks who helped support her—midwives and doulas. At that point, she could not access hospitals in the state of Virginia because of segregation and Jim Crow laws, but she had a community of folks that were helping her bring her children to earth-side.

Dr. Perritt illuminates the importance of community to the birthing experience, especially for Black women who were not allowed to seek care elsewhere. By establishing the history of this sort of care and personalizing it with a reflection of her grandmother, Dr. Perritt demonstrates to us a real-life example of RJ work in action—collective effort to support members of the community who are having children. In this case, the expectation is that women are still able to access this kind of communal support while pregnant and/or delivering.

At the Duke Reproductive Justice Conference, Tina specified the importance of midwives in addition to doulas and expressed her frustrations with North Carolina’s lack of a foundation supporting CPMs (Certified Professional Midwives):

I want to talk about midwives for a second, because [lives] are on the line, right? And while it’s great to have an advocate (*doula*) there for you—and you need an advocate in these systems, you [also] need to work on who’s delivering the babies. A lot of money—a lot, a lot, a lot of money—has gone to pregnancy crisis centers and midwives are like, “Hey, can we see some of that money”... Part of the conversation I want to have is, what can we do to get licensure for CPMs this state? CPMs, for people that don’t know, are the *only* midwives that are trained specifically to deliver babies in an out-of-hospital setting. So you’re talking about a birth center, you’re talking about *home*...If I want to start a birth center,...I need people who know what to do in an out-of-hospital setting.

In this discussion, Tina is referring to the consequences of the North Carolina law that restricts where and how midwives can practice. Up until 2023, Certified Nurse-Midwives (CNM)—who have different training backgrounds and credentials than CPMs—were not allowed to practice at all without the supervision of a physician. Now, they are allowed to practice alone—though they have to jump through a number of hoops in order to do so (Crumpler, 2023). However, CPMs are still not granted the same access to practicing, despite, as Tina exasperatedly explains, being the only midwives trained to provide care in out-of-hospital settings. This conversation about midwifery is representative of Dr. Perritt’s recognition of the fact that “the lack of midwifery support is by design.” By limiting people’s ability to give birth with a midwife outside of a hospital, these systems are ensuring that the economic profit coming from medical institutions is not threatened.

In my interview with Simran, the Membership Coordinator for SisterSong, they reflected this notion of there being an intentional design behind the birthing system in the US:

Before, people were giving birth—like the person who [helped] birth you was same person who helped birth your mother or—yeah, like birth your child, like a community midwife. But, all of a sudden, they don’t have the right *training*. And

who has access to training but white people and wealthy people? And so nobody can actually engage with doulas and midwives of their own community anymore.

Here, Simran is speaking of a past where community midwives were a normal thing that was disrupted by the hyper-medicalization of birth and reproductive health, including abortion. They essentially articulate that where folks used to be able to give birth or have an abortion at home with community midwives who were not certified, they are now largely forced to have a much less communal experience in a hospital. Critical to why this is an RJ issue is this hindrance to being in community that Simran talks about. Given the community-driven establishment of the RJ movement, any issue that impedes birthing people's ability to have a satisfying communal birthing experience is a reproductive justice issue.

While doing this work, I've come to find that many folks within the RJ activism space are also doulas or midwives, which indicates a strong recognition of the importance of this kind of care within the movement. The large proportion of birth workers in the movement allows for more impactful organizing strategies that draw directly from what these advocates encounter in their work and in their own lives. Tina and Maya J both spoke about the intimate experience of being birth workers who have been through or are close to folks who have been through many of the issues they are working to solve through the movement. According to Maya J,

Just about everybody in my organization who works with us, who has been trained has had a traumatic birthing experience. So these are like real-life experiences that people are going through. So it's not just like being in the moment of time, but it's making sure that if the next time I decide to give birth, I don't have to go through that or a loved one doesn't have to go through that again, or our children don't have to be set up in a system that is allowing these horrible practices to happen again. And so for us, advocacy is legacy work, it's abolition work, we want to make sure that we are dismantling the status quo...

RJ activists have very personal ties to the work that they do, as Maya J demonstrates here. The concept of RJ advocacy "legacy work" implies an intergenerational connection between RJ

activists who want to honor the histories of their predecessors while ensuring a safer future for their successors in the movement. In a similar vein, Tina brings up an alarming statistic about birth workers' intentions behind the work they do:

95% of Black birth workers went into birth work because they didn't want people to have to go through the traumas that they went through. Either in their own childbirth, or that they saw with their mom, or that they saw with their cousin. I'm lucky enough to be in the 5% that did not. I had wonderful homebirths for three of children, the last one was born in a hospital with midwives and I felt very much in control of the process. So for me, I want everyone to have the experience I had. I want you to feel empowered, I want you to be able to have the baby, wherever you want, whenever you want, with whoever you want, right? So I think the one thing I want you guys to keep in mind is that most of the birth workers that you meet, they're dealing with their own trauma. So when someone says, "I'm a doula," ask them, "Oh, what made you want to be a doula?" Let them tell you their story.

By showcasing the different reasons birth workers advocate for RJ—whether it be to prevent the repetition of their own experiences or promote it, Tina characterizes this kind of birth work in a way that is symbolic of the RJ movement as a whole—as a community-based undertaking. She also touches on something that I rely on in this chapter to get the message across—storytelling. By encouraging the audience to offer a space for birth workers to tell their own birth stories, Tina shows us how interpersonal connections can be built through this movement.

As this section ultimately emphasizes, RJ as it relates to pregnancy and birth operates as a continuous acknowledgment of all these moving parts—tragedy, loss, community, vulnerability, advocacy, and history. RJ actively fights for everyone's right to have the birthing experiences they expect and desire and carries over into how they are supported after the point of delivery.

NURTURING

Whereas the reproductive rights movement does very little to continue advocating for care after people have already had a baby, RJ remains consistent in its advocacy for postpartum and early parenthood support. For new parents, regardless of the family planning method, finding

support while learning how to support another being is a long and difficult process. RJ activists are aware of this and work towards developing various strategies to ensure that folks feel cared for in their transition into parenthood. This is where doula care is significantly helpful, as postpartum doulas work to provide comfort to those who have just had children.

In the RJ roundtable, Chrissy Teigan expressed that “she wishes so badly that we had access to better after-care,” and mentioned her frustration with the misconception that exists around doulas, where people view them as a “hippie-dippy thing.” By this, she means that some folks do not see the true benefit of doula care, and instead assume that it is merely a performative bohemian occupation. RJ work reveals that doulas are incredibly valuable sources of support for folks who may be experiencing postpartum blues or struggling with the early stages of nurturing their young. By providing educational support for childcare, birth recovery, and parent-child bonding, postpartum doulas help create those safe and sustainable environments relevant to the third principle of RJ (American Pregnancy Association, 2019; DONA International, n.d.).

Under the post-birth care umbrella, lactation support is another critical component to RJ work. Lactation consultants are also largely involved in the movement and specialize in directly educating folks on how to breastfeed, or how to access breastfeeding resources if they cannot do so themselves. Breastfeed Durham, who I spent a bit of time working with over the last year, carries out this kind of work on various levels, offering support to different specific communities. Since their inception in 2018, Breastfeed Durham has acquired over 1000 members from different institutional and community sectors including health systems, non-profit organizations, and governmental entities (Breastfeed Durham, 2019). Their overall mission is to promote breastfeeding-friendly communities—particularly for historically marginalized

groups—and spread knowledge about the benefits of breastfeeding, and the possibilities for all people to be able to breastfeed.

In the various community events that I attended as a Breastfeed Durham volunteer, I witnessed the organization’s staff and volunteers articulate to community members and other RJ advocates the importance of learning about breastfeeding in all its forms. They have determinedly worked to highlight the benefits and diversity of breastfeeding, and by grounding their work in the RJ framework, have created a platform for Black, Brown, and queer folks across Durham to shed light on their experiences with breastfeeding and parenting. Lactation support functions as both a physical and emotional resource for new parents, as it is connected to matters of bodily autonomy, self-confidence, and empowerment, as well as the physical health of parents and babies.

In the context of reproductive health, learning how to nurture goes hand-in-hand with *being* nurtured. The care and support offered by RJ activists in terms of this post-birth period is just as important as the support offered before and during birth. The importance of this care in the post-birth period is present both in terms of parents caring for children and birth workers caring for parents, and RJ activism is deliberate in its intention to sustain the systems of support they push for throughout the earlier stages of reproduction throughout this postpartum/early parenthood phase.

**“KEEP IT IN YOUR HEARTS
KEEP IT IN YOUR MINDS
KEEP IT ON YOUR TONGUE”**

This chapter reminds us that the difference between reproductive justice and reproductive rights largely falls in how the work of both movements is carried out. Although many of the issues discussed here relate to the work of the reproductive rights movement, they are not

addressed in the same way. Maya J firmly remarked while on her panel that “liberation begins at birth for all people.” This chapter serves to help better understand how RJ helps achieve this liberation. RJ activism necessitates a particular understanding of reproduction in that at each stage of the process, there is room for different work to be done. And all of this work is embedded into collective action to some capacity. By drawing from the stories of RJ activists, analyzing RJ literature, and breaking down the American history of reproductive healthcare, I aimed to reveal exactly how RJ offers a more attainable success in the creation of better support systems for each stage of reproduction.

In order to uphold the strides made through RJ organizing, Maya J urges us to “listen to Black women,” who are at the forefront of this movement. As the folks in this chapter have proven, storytelling is an essential part of advancing the RJ movement forward, especially as it pertains to reproduction. On the conference panel, Tina confirmed this notion, and advised those of us in the audience to

Keep talking about [these issues]. Talk about it when you leave [this conference], post it on your social media, talk about it at the dinner table, when you go to your class tomorrow, say, “Yeah, I went to this great conference! Let me tell you one thing I learned,” right? And that sparks the interest of other people... **Keep it in your hearts, keep it in your minds, keep it on your tongue.**

Once we have a well-rounded grasp of how RJ work impacts issues related to reproduction—which we can obtain, like Tina said, by consistently starting and engaging in discussions about them—we can then begin to understand how RJ connects to other parts of our lives.

TWO

Expanding Beyond Birth

Reproductive Justice: “To make decisions or live free from a place of fear around being able to access food, housing, quality education, climate change—all of these issues that are impacting how we make decisions about ourselves and our families...*what would be possible if they were all just, by default, understood as something that we all deserve access to.*”

- Maya H

Reproductive justice does not end at birth. The common misconception that it does is what leads people to focus solely on matters of conception and abortion as being relevant to the movement. In reality, every social issue that exposes individuals to violence, poverty, displacement, houselessness⁹, and any other inequitable living conditions, is a matter of RJ. In short, anything that influences a person’s ability and choice to have children is a RJ issue.

While carrying out this research, I had to come to terms with this fact in my own life. For as long as I can remember, I have always said that I don’t want kids. *It’s not that I don’t want children—of course, I want to have children, I just don’t want to raise kids in this messed up world.* This is how I’ve always justified myself when asked, “Why not?” It was not until I had one of these conversations—of which I have had many—*after* having begun this project that I realized this was a RJ issue. Is my choice not to have children truly *my choice*? Or is it one informed by the circumstances in which I have lived, the things to which I have been exposed, and the overwhelming culmination of socioeconomic and political instability in the world around me? Deep down, I *do* want to be a parent, but the fear of having my children grow up in a

⁹ I use the term, *houselessness*, here instead of *homelessness* to demonstrate that “home” refers to more than a physical living space. Home can be found in a person, in a hobby, or in a space that does not belong to you. Those without a *house* can still have a *home*.

dangerous and unsustainable environment is what drives my opposition to doing so. I now understand that this relates to the pursuit of RJ—my decision to have children should not depend on whether or not I feel like they would be brought up in a “messed up world.” My sentiments are not uncommon. Several people I have known in my personal life have stated that they do not want children because they fear the worst when it comes to raising them. A plethora of issues are linked to why so many folks—especially young ones—envision a future for themselves where parenting does not seem feasible. As for many folks who are already parents, these same issues expose them to obstacles against which they do not have the resources or support to fight. RJ activists, recognizing these challenges, frequently coordinate events that address not only explicit reproductive health matters but also people’s fundamental needs.

When I spoke with Ciné, the 22-year-old Reproductive Justice Organizer for Florida Access Network, they shared about the role of social media in their work and in the movement, more broadly:

...there are a lot of spaces that people create on social media specifically to share [social] justice, actions, rallies, events... Instagram is a really good place to follow any type of organization, any type of accounts that are focusing on social justice issues, and just circulate information. That's a really good way to learn more about different social justice issues, and finding different ways to plug in and contribute to different movements.

Maya H, from SisterSong, made a similar point when describing how social media has been useful to her:

I would say it's a lot of political education around the history of the reproductive justice framework and movement, and then, a lot of connecting current issues...just working to connect...different movements and getting folks to understand how their work is part of the reproductive justice movement. So even folks who are doing housing justice, or climate justice, or public education, like that—that’s reproductive justice. Folks just don't necessarily have the history and language to know that, and so just like really working to connect those dots.

Maya H and Ciné both shed light on the power of social media in making *connections*. This has a dual function—connecting to other movements and connecting to other people. As people who work in the organizing side of RJ, they both have first-hand knowledge of the potential digital platforms have in creating room for vital discussions and disseminating crucial information regarding these relationships that exist with other issues. In fact, they have both used their digital voices in a related fashion for their respective organizations (SisterSong and Florida Access Network). By using the Instagram “Live” tool, which allows folks to livestream content for their audiences to view in real-time, Maya and Ciné have both spoken with members of other organizations to highlight the links to RJ. The Live feature allows viewers to ask questions and leave comments as the conversations occur, creating a more engaging space, even while only seeing the faces of those speaking. In a series called, “RJ Is...,” Maya H has met with folks from different communities to discuss how RJ involves much more than birthing and abortion. Likewise, Ciné has represented Florida Access Network (FAN) in a monthly series they call “FAN Chats,” which operates comparably to SisterSong’s program. Because of digital instruments like these, social media has been an incredibly valuable field site for my research, through which several matters frequently came up as being inextricably linked to the movement.

In the following sections, I unpack how the RJ movement intersects with various topics, to provide a comprehensive understanding of their collective impact on individuals and communities¹⁰. I focus on housing, environmental justice, and law enforcement as these were the most prevalent issues I observed throughout my research. However, that is not to say that these are the only matters related to RJ. This would be far from the truth. RJ activists and organizations have maintained that the movement connects to a wide array of issues including

¹⁰ This kind of collaboration between social movements is referred to as “cross-sectoral work” (Zavella, 2020).

disability justice, Palestinian liberation, COVID, sex work, and public education. I do not aim to invisibilize these important components of RJ work; I am simply highlighting what the bulk of my findings have been, which largely fall under these three categories.

Because racial justice is inherent to the origin of RJ, and queer liberation is fundamental to its development, I find it out of place to discuss these two social causes in the context of merely “intersecting with” RJ. As foundational elements to the structure of the RJ framework, racial justice and queer liberation do not operate within the movement in the same way that housing security, environmental justice, or anti-policing efforts do. RJ is always racial justice and queer liberation work. That connection is never disrupted because race and sexual identity are ingrained into the fabric of the RJ movement.

This chapter is meant to make sense of the RJ framework’s third tenet, providing a comprehensive overview of what a “safe and sustainable environment” looks like and what the pursuit of safety and sustainability in this context entails. How do institutions, systems, or organizations that are not inherently about reproduction and parenting still cause reproductive injustices?

SHELTER

In the movies, the pictures on the fridge that the kid draws always look the same: the stick-figure family holding hands, standing against a blue sky and a golden sun. And in the background, there’s a house. A rectangle and a triangle joined together to represent the structure of the home that keeps the family happy. There is always a house.

In real life, there is not always a house. For many people, there is no roof, there is no bed, there is no shelter. For something that seems so fundamental to the human experience, housing

security is increasingly scarce. Folks are being forced out of their homes due to gentrification¹¹, working jobs that won't pay rent, or being denied entry into shelters because there's simply no room. This is the reality for the half a million unhoused people living in America, and the additional nearly 4 million people facing some sort of housing instability (Pagaduan, 2021). The uncertainty of whether or not you will have a roof over your head or a bed to sleep in quickly begins to contribute to all other aspects of your life, including your ability to start or sustain a family. For this reason, housing security is an indispensable facet of RJ. Almost all of the people I interacted with, in person or online, mentioned housing insecurity as being crucial to the RJ fight, especially because of the disproportionate effect on communities of color; the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated these issues, bringing to light the extensive need for action towards housing instability (Chun et al., 2023; Freeman, 2002).

At the forefront of those taking action have largely been RJ advocates, and many folks from different RJ organizations have taken steps toward providing aid for unhoused folks, or those on the verge of becoming unhoused. Maya J from MAAME shared with me the specific need there is in Durham, NC regarding RJ and housing:

With the housing crisis here in Durham, some community members asked us just to come down to support. We supported and we stayed. We stayed because we wanted to make sure that the community leaders knew that there was going to be a place or someone that can come in and make sure people have diapers...there were wellness checks going on.”

She acknowledged that Durham is a site of housing instability and expressed an apparent feeling of responsibility to “support” and “stay” with those members of the community who are dealing with the struggles of houselessness, not being able to pay rent, or not being able to find an

¹¹ Gentrification: “a process in which a poor area (as of a city) experiences an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate and rebuild homes and businesses and which often results in an increase in property values and the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents” (Merriam Webster, 2024)

affordable and accommodating place to live. For parents, something so seemingly simple as obtaining diapers for their children can essentially become impossible when living under these circumstances. Organizations like MAAME, which are more often than not led by women of color, act as pillars in communities like Durham because of their role in not only recognizing the relationship between RJ and housing but also providing some level of relief to those most impacted by this plight.

On September 18th, 2023, I tuned into the fifth installment of Maya H's Instagram Live series, called, "RJ Is...Investing in Affordable Housing."

She spoke with Durham City Council member Jillian Johnson about the affordable housing crisis, and how it ties back to the fight for RJ. Being that this was the first of the series I was attending, I wasn't sure what the discussion would be like. When I logged in, it felt less like a formal interview and more like I was sitting in on a FaceTime call between two friends. Jillian joined in wearing a lavender-colored sweatshirt, sitting in what seemed to be a living space, and she radiated a very warm, comforting energy as she



spoke. She had a soft voice but still spoke very powerfully and passionately. Maya H, also looking comfortable in the space she sat in, probed Jillian with questions about affordable housing and exhibited a look of genuine interest in each response. As I listened to the conversation, I realized how little I knew about the state of housing stability in Durham and the nation overall. According to Jillian, market rent in Durham went up 50% in the last few years, and fewer people can pay. With that, the need for affordable housing has increased. She shared an anecdote that put things into perspective: "I bought my house [in Durham] in 2004. I was 23

making 13 dollars an hour working at Duke Hospital and was able to buy a house...that can't exist today." She was right. The average cost of a home in Durham is currently upwards of \$400,000, which is more than a 30% increase from what it was in 2020 (Redfin, n.d.). Buying a house off of what would now be ~\$20 an hour is unthinkable.

There were two things that Jillian said in this 42-minute conversation that particularly struck me:

The fact that we buy and sell housing, which is something every human being needs, on a capital market...is fundamentally ludicrous.

...

What is against us, fundamentally, is the structure of our economic system and the actors within that economic system who benefit from and profit from this fundamental human need.

The repetition of the word *fundamental* transmitted a palpable feeling of intense frustration through the phone screen on which I was watching her speak. From these two quotes, I immediately understood the severity of the housing crisis and its long-lasting impact on the community. Maya H reaffirmed Jillian's sentiment when she said, "No one should have to consider, 'If I have a child, will they have a roof over their head?'"

Raising children in a safe and sustainable environment means having a secure space to live in. Jillian fervently spoke to this point when describing how not having access to stable housing "ripples out into every piece of [one's] life," citing the toll she has seen this problem take on people's mental and physical health. It consumes their lives and eventually obstructs their capacity to be a provider. Housing instability obstructs RJ because it ruptures people's ability to secure shelter. Housing insecurity prevents all children from being able to draw the house in the background of the family picture.

ENVIRONMENT

Now even if someone has a place to call home, a bed to sleep in, and a roof over their head, what about the land on which the home sits? Or the air that flows through the windows, and water that runs through the pipes? The home itself is not enough if its surroundings are threatening the well-being of those being sheltered.

Environmental justice—a movement whose roots lay 63 miles from where this thesis is being written, in Warren County, NC—is defined as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income as “with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies,” has a deep relationship with RJ (US EPA, 2015). Due to the overlapping objectives of both movements, which center communities of color, RJ advocates tend to engage with efforts focused on the environment. On Instagram and TikTok, I came across numerous posts from RJ organizations outlining the link to environmental justice. There were also several individuals heavily involved in environmental causes that I saw spreading awareness about how both justice movements are intertwined.

Environmental justice is deeply embedded in Indigenous people’s sovereignty movements. Because of Indigenous tradition that calls for frequent interactions with their physical environments, they are often at higher risk of being exposed to environmental contaminants. However, tribal lands are still often made more available to environmentally harmful ventures (Hoover et al., 2012). Indigenous communities have long spoken out about and protested the hazardous conditions to which they have been exposed. Midwife Katsi Cook of the Akwesasne Mohawk American Indian community shed light on the long-lasting consequences of contamination from a nearby industrial plant. She eventually coined the concept of

“environmental RJ” to emphasize the threat of environmental degradation on “physical and cultural reproduction” (Hoover, 2018, p. 12). Per sociologist Elizabeth Hoover, Cook maintained that “environmental and RJ intersect at the very center of woman’s role in the processes and patterns of continuous creation” (Hoover, 2018, p. 11).

Following the conception of environmental RJ, many folks have taken to social media to draw attention to the different ways in which it manifests. When I typed “environmental RJ” into TikTok’s search bar, the first post that came up was one by 24-year-old Latinx user @plantawhisperer. In the video, she is eagerly responding to a comment on a previous video of hers asking for “examples of environmental reproductive justice.” In the 2-minute-long TikTok, she provides an overview of what environmental RJ means before covering its roots, crediting Katsi Cook as the originator. She then describes an example of an environmental RJ issue, drawing attention to the “extremely toxic chemicals in nail polish” and their reproductive harms on women who work in nail salons. She uses TikTok’s “Green Screen” filter, which allows users to display images as they speak, to share slides with information reflecting her words. One of these images is a screenshot of her Instagram page of the same username, showing an infographic defining environmental RJ. In the comment section of the video, other users express their gratitude for the sharing of this content, claiming how “necessary” and “helpful” the post was. In another



post, the same user addresses people who deem it selfish to have children because of the climate crisis: “we cannot be thinking that having children is something that is inherently wrong and morally bad, because it is not, and that completely goes against RJ.” Here, she is confronting the incongruity of championing environmental justice while neglecting RJ.

@plantawhisperer’s posts offer something important to the environmental RJ movement, which is the dissemination of knowledge. By sharing this sort of content, and providing sources to support the information being discussed, she is making the movement more accessible. Using TikTok, she highlights the existence of a very tangible relationship between reproduction and the environment through the virtual medium of TikTok, and welcomes input from a global audience. In doing this, she exemplifies how these digital spaces aid in the building of the connections that Maya H and Ciné were both referring to.

In another TikTok posted on November 19th, 2023, user @abolition4life shares a news story coming out of Louisiana. Also using the “Green Screen” filter, the user reads the title of the article displayed aloud, “Louisiana’s Governor-Elect Wants to Withhold Funds for New Orleans Decaying Water Infrastructure Until Women Who Seek Abortions Are Prosecuted.” There is a tone of frustration and exhaustion as she elaborates on the issue, “This is collective punishment. I want you to understand what it looks like in real time.” The user urges the audience to grasp the severity of this headline, which demonstrates yet another way that environmental and RJ issues are intertwined—in this case, through political platforms. The threat of using environmental manipulation tactics as a way of criminalizing abortion typifies the different forms that environmental RJ may take in the real world.

User @brennas_burner also shared a TikTok discussing this relationship. In the post, she details the reproductive consequences linked to air pollution, naming pre-eclampsia, gestational

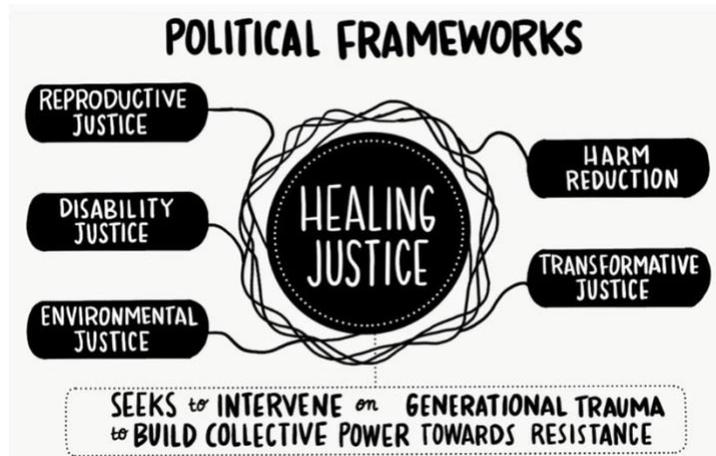
diabetes, and lower fertility as potential outcomes. Through this post, Brenna connects people to information that is not widely available to the general public. The mere explanation of air pollution as a cause for reproductive concern allows folks to obtain knowledge that may inspire discussions or action within their own communities.

On Instagram, the account for National Now, a non-profit organization “of feminist grassroots activists in the US organizing to promote intersectional feminist ideals & lead societal change” posted an audio clip from a podcast with sociologist Dr. Leslie R Hinkson, who serves as Chief Officer of Racial Justice and Equity for the League of Conservation Voters. In the clip, she, too, comments on environmental justice being integral to the RJ movement. She contends that environmental RJ is fundamentally about “keeping the people that populate this planet healthy” and ensuring that they have “access to clean water and clean air.” I found her word choice interesting here because although I have no doubts that her desire to protect those affected by environmental matters is sincere, she gives the impression that they only merit this protection under the condition that they reproduce. This wording also assumes that people—humans—are the only beings who populate. Reflecting on the second tenet of RJ, which declares a pursuit of the right to *not have* children, it is worth considering whether Dr. Hinkson’s statement truly speaks to the entirety of RJ. Nonetheless, her claim produces a particular sense of urgency—keeping the “people that populate this planet healthy” is a big responsibility. It calls for a collective effort to ensure that humanity has a future. Irrespective of the apparent inattention to the complete definition of RJ, Dr. Hinkson amplifies the public understanding of its ties to environmental justice.

During a Zoom interview with Lori, the Training Coordinator for SisterSong, she spoke ardently about her work promoting RJ in different spaces. As Training Coordinator, Lori’s job is

to host educational RJ workshops with various organizations or entities, including universities, medical facilities, and non-profits. Being in this role has allowed Lori to plug the RJ framework for thinking and acting into several domains, while also gaining a deeper understanding of how it encompasses a mosaic of complex social issues. I recalled my first time joining a virtual SisterSong Membership meeting, where Lori briefly mentioned an environmental justice workshop she was developing, and I asked her to elaborate on this project. She promptly sat up from her laid-back posture on the couch from which she was viewing the meeting to respond, “Environmental Justice is one of those frameworks that is next to—that overlaps with RJ, but is distinct...Here, I actually found this image, let me share my screen with you.” She used Zoom’s screen-sharing tool to display an image of a diagram, whose center was the words, “Healing Justice,” written in bold inside of a large circle. Branching out from this circle were smaller circles, two of which had “RJ” and “Environmental Justice” at their centers. The other circles read, “Disability Justice,” “Harm Reduction,” and “Transformative Justice.” Lori used this diagram to explain to me that while being separate, RJ and environmental justice both operate as substructures to the larger framework referred to as “healing justice”:

“I think it's incredibly useful way to think about these different movements, the way they are interrelated and the way they're also part of a larger conversation. Yeah, so basically, this is all falling into the larger healing justice framework. And we're thinking about, like, Healing Justice as a rigorous political framework, not just, you know, self-care, making sure you're comfortable and you know? Like what does it actually mean to foreground healing as the center of our work? I think this is going to become an incredibly—I mean it is an incredibly relevant conversation. And it will only become more and more relevant because we're, we're, we're living in an increasingly, you know, very desecrated and broken world.”



The diagram of healing justice helps conceptualize the relationship between environmental and RJ as being converging elements within a larger context, operating towards the same broad mission: to uproot the systems in place that are harming marginalized communities. Keeping the overlapping nature of these justice movements in mind, it is not difficult to see how this harm manifests in the world around us.

Diamond, the Black Organizing Program Director at Planned Parenthood in Florida, spoke to the tangible combined effects of these issues when she explained her thought process when considering having children:

For me, it's like, I don't know if I want to have children. And a lot of that comes from *[pause to think]* I'm a poor person. I live in Liberty City, which is currently being gentrified. So will I have a home? Especially in Miami *[motioning to the space around us]*, like climate, gentrification, it might all be underwater, and that influences where *[the children]* are...

By expressing her worries about climate change and gentrification as potential hindrances to parenting, Diamond demonstrated exactly what it is like to live at the intersection of the compounding housing and environmental issues I've discussed thus far. And, as Crenshaw argued back in 1989, "any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinate." It would be remiss here not to acknowledge that Diamond being a Black woman exposes her to an inevitable

experience of racial and gender-related injustice that only intensifies the impact of these harmful environmental conditions.

Maya J articulated the long-lasting impact of an unhealthy climate on the physical well-being of birth when she said, with a tone of exasperation in her voice, “If you are living in a space, where that environment also has like chemicals and toxicity, all these things happen, and with the land and the air—like all of these things (*motioned her hands in a circle to emphasize “all of these things”*) will impact the genetics of that unborn child and generations to come.” Maya does two important things here. First, she situates “space” as a critical element of the reproductive experience—one’s physical surroundings have an undeniable impact on their body and health. Second, she centers on the intergenerational consequences of hazardous physical surroundings. The “chemicals and toxicity” to which she refers not only affects the lived experience of the imagined pregnant individual but also subjects their future children to a potential lifetime of harm. Through her statement, Maya showed how space and time both become manipulable in the context of environmental danger. Addressing both the spatial and temporal aspects of environmental RJ in these ways presents a clearer image of how far-reaching its consequences are.

Conversations about RJ cannot be had without mentioning the environment. Land, air, and water determine a great deal when it comes to how folks are able to live and inevitably dictate the reproductive futures of the most marginalized populations. Katsi Cook understood this, and her voice triggered a widespread conversation that has not ended since. As I’ve demonstrated in this section, activists turn to social media to share information about the past, present, and future states of environmental justice, intentionally highlighting its connection to race and gender. With this in mind, RJ organizers know that their work cannot achieve what it

aims to if they fail to acknowledge environmental justice as a sister movement. This only furthers the point that RJ tries to make through its third tenet—that the framework is tied to, as Maya J put it, “all of these things.”

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Field Note 10/3/23: National Night Out

The drive there was only ten minutes long, but it felt like worlds away from my starting point at Duke. I was traveling to a part of Durham that I had never seen before, and I felt a pang of guilt for being so unfamiliar with the place where I had spent most of the last 3 years. At the same time, it's well-known that Duke has a habit of sheltering its students from Durham. In the last year, I had come to understand the extent of that sheltering. Duke is its own bubble, and without individual effort or intention, it is too easy to go all four years without ever knowing Durham outside of the university perimeter.

I was on my way to an event that Love, from Breastfeed Durham, had invited me to. “National Night Out” was a community event organized by Breastfeed Durham’s executive director and sponsored by the Durham Police Department. Love warned me of the latter fact, assuring me that I didn’t have to show up if this made me uncomfortable. However, she explained that she thought it might be interesting for my research. RJ often works in conjunction with anti-policing efforts, so she proposed that it might offer a unique experience compared to what I would likely see at other community events. Love told me that SisterSong, one of Breastfeed Durham’s usual partners, declined the offer to help table at National Night Out because of the police force’s involvement, which did not align with their mission. When I interviewed Simran from SisterSong a week prior, they reiterated the organization’s disinterest in being involved in an event where police are not only present but also acting as sponsors.

As I pulled up to the neighborhood where the event was taking place, I saw a bright red firetruck protruding from the street ahead, blocked off with orange and white traffic barricades. There was also a bouncy house peaking out

from behind the houses on the street, and the sound of children hollering and laughing indicated that I was in the right place. I parked around the block, and my girlfriend and I walked towards the blocked-off road. Right in front of the fire truck, which seemed to take up most of the space on the street, were about 3 rows of chairs occupied predominantly by Black and Latinx women, with some men and children scattered about. All eyes were on the older Black man and young, Latinx woman standing before them. The man appeared to be giving a sermon and the young woman beside him, translating his preaching into Spanish. Those in the audience nodded their heads, affirming his powerful words and claiming them for their own lives. The sound of children shrieking, coming from the bouncy house a few yards away, drowned out the audience's comments. I had to rely on the passionate closing of their eyes and clapping of their hands to determine the general mood. We arrived at the crowd right as the man, who I assumed to be a pastor, wrapped up his speech. Another man took the mic from him and thanked people for coming out, before passing the mic to a new pastor—this time, white—to say a short prayer.

I noticed the bright yellow Breastfeed Durham shirts on the other side of the fire truck and walked over to say hello. Love, with her honey-colored curls loosely tied back, was sitting behind the Breastfeed Durham table. Resource pamphlets, fliers, and “Human Milk” tote bags were spread out on the table; packs of baby wipes, diapers, and other baby-related items were laid out on the ground. Next to Love was a young woman I did not recognize, passing items out to those coming up to the table. She was on the Breastfeed Durham team, as Love informed me, and a student getting her Master's in Public Health online. We didn't speak much, but I watched as she interacted with the mothers and children who came to the table, offering them a warm smile. “This is impressive, there are more people here than I thought,” I motioned to the crowd behind me as I expressed myself to Love—I was genuinely surprised by the turnout. Speaking very candidly, she responded, “For me, knowing my kids know the cops, and knowing the cops know my kids makes me feel better, and I think they'd be less likely to shoot my kids.”

...

I often come back to this moment, remembering the straightforward look on Love's face as she said these words. *I think they'd be less likely to shoot my kids.* The statement almost implies that forming relationships with law enforcement functions as a defense mechanism against that same entity. Opening a communal space to the police to gain protection from the police. It seems paradoxical, but Love's assertion represents the logic behind such an event. She is merely expressing her thought process as a parent, suggesting that familiarity may one day be the deciding factor in whether an officer pulls the trigger or puts the gun down. Love addresses both the historical tension between police and Black and Latinx communities, as well as the role of law enforcement in parenting and RJ.

In the same way that I have discussed housing security and environmental justice as being fundamentally tied to RJ, law enforcement also has a deep connection to the movement. Policing and incarceration have both been used to carry out reproductive violence regarding all three tenets of RJ. However, the focus has mainly been on anti-abortion laws, through a narrow lens that often overlooks the multilayered impact on non-white women. Diamond expressed her frustration with this fact after sharing with me the story of an incarcerated woman who gave birth in prison; the woman was subsequently put in solitary confinement as a "remedy" for her post-partum depression, and was then restricted from seeing her daughter: "...these are RJ stories, and they don't get told as much as (mockingly) 'this white woman is pregnant and now she had to go to some other state to get like an abortion,' and she *had the resources* to even get there!" This is a perfect example of the relationship between the RJ movement and the reproductive rights movement, where the latter has a very one-dimensional approach to and conceptualization of what constitutes a reproductive-related concern. Along with abortion, birthing and parenting

have both been made more difficult by law enforcement on various levels. RJ activists are hyperaware of this fact and are thus frequently seen at the frontlines of anti-law enforcement efforts.

One of the most visible instances of the overlap between RJ and anti-policing organizing has been the recent #StopCopCity movement. “Stop Cop City” is linked to housing, environmental justice, police violence, and RJ. The movement comes out of Atlanta, Georgia, where the proposed development of “Cop City,” an international police training center, is currently afoot; sponsored by the Atlanta Police Foundation and the City of Atlanta, Cop City is expected to be the largest training facility for police in the nation (Versey, 2023). A major concern of Cop City is the land on which it is set to be built. As Versey writes, “The facility would be built on a prison farm located directly in the Pittsburgh neighborhood and the Weelaunee Forest” (p. 405). Defend the Atlanta Forest, a self-described “autonomous movement for the future of South Atlanta,” alerts the general public about the Atlanta Police Department’s intention to “turn 300 acres of [the Weelaunee] forest into a tactical training compound featuring a mock city” (Defend the Atlanta Forest, 2023). Building such a center in this area brings into discussion concerns about housing security and environmental well-being in Atlanta due to the deforestation and displacement it would require. And, given what I have already discussed in this chapter, since housing and the environment are so intertwined with RJ, Cop City is inevitably also a RJ issue.

Atlanta is home to the headquarters of many RJ organizations—to the point where most of my interlocutors have referred to it as the “RJ Mecca.” Many of these organizations have played a very active role in promoting #StopCopCity through social media, as well as orchestrating or advertising in-person demonstrations against the facility’s construction. Three

organizations in particular—SisterSong, SPARK RJ NOW, and ARC-Southeast—have regularly uploaded Instagram posts denouncing Cop City.

In one animated drawing posted by SisterSong, a Black woman wearing yellow standing against the backdrop of a forest is seen holding a picket sign with the words, “Stop Cop City” written in large, bolded font, and the SisterSong logo in small print. The caption quotes their Georgia Coordinator, Danielle Rodriguez, who states,

The connection between RJ and Cop City is clear. By destroying our environment to build a facility for those policing and upending our communities, Cop City sends a clear message that our lives, our families, and our collective well-being are of little consequence.”

She makes no attempt to hide her evident frustration and anger towards the project and deliberately calls out the Atlanta Police for threatening what is assumed to be the communities of those most affected by matters of RJ.



SPARK and ARC-Southeast share comparable sentiments on their Instagram accounts, both of which explicitly detail how Cop City is related to RJ. Referencing the right to raise children in a “safe and healthy environment,” SPARK shared that

An overpoliced city is not safe. Militarized police forces are not safe. The real and drastic effects of the climate crisis are not healthy. Stopping Cop City is a RJ fight.”

In a similar vein, ARC-Southeast uploaded a detailed explanation of the potential consequences of Cop City. One slide reads,

“The construction of Cop City would violate the most basic tenets of RJ (RJ) by providing the police with additional resources to practice their tools of surveillance, criminalization, and intimidation of the most vulnerable among us—contributing to the expansion of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC).”

This more explicitly outlines the specific police tactics that are detrimental to the achievement of RJ and goes further to include the broader implications for the prison industrial complex.

Although these specific organizations are based out of Atlanta, #StopCopCity has reached RJ collectives across different cities and states. Simran, Maya H, and Diamond—none of whom are based in Atlanta—all referenced the movement at some point during their interviews, highlighting their involvement. The movement quickly gained national traction, and social media has allowed an increasing number of folks to access the education necessary to understand why Cop City falls under the RJ umbrella.

The involvement of RJ in anti-law enforcement endeavors, however, extends far past Cop City. Police departments and carceral systems are both generally seen as entities acting in opposition to RJ’s overall mission, so folks within the movement tend to take quite an active role in leading or participating in these efforts. Diamond, for one, was very direct about her position on policing:

Some institutions are just so far gone, that I don't see a way that they can ever work with community. Like cops, I fucking hate cops. They started off as slave catchers—there is no way in my mind that I can restructure the police force to not do what the police force does. They have been created to protect assets and property for whoever's hiring them to protect those assets and property, whether that be people or areas or whatever. Same with prison. I hate privatized prisons so much, where they're literally incarcerating us just because they signed a contract



to keep the prison 80% full. And if they don't keep it 80% full, then they're not doing things. So institutions like that...abolition is the only way to go.

The way her neck tensed up and eyes widened as she delivered this rant was a clear indication of her vehement disapproval of these two institutional bodies. Diamond personalizes her standpoint by using the word, “us,” including herself in the population she describes as being harmed. The “us” in this case is a representation of her Blackness, queerness, and womanhood. To reintroduce Crenshaw’s point about intersectionality, these identities operate in conjunction with each other to amplify the burden that Diamond feels with regard to the imprisonment and policing of the “us” she refers to.

In the same breath as when she spoke about her experience worrying about climate change and gentrification when imagining a future as a parent, Diamond added her fear of police brutality: “...well, if I raise my children, am I just like, sentencing—sentencing them to death because the system does not support them?” Here, she speaks to the widespread issue of police brutality towards Black folks. Equating the delivery of a Black child to the delivery of a death sentence signifies a haunting fear that is likely shared by other Black folks in America who envision parenting. Diamond seems to grieve a loss that has not happened as a reflection of the grief felt for all of those who have already died at the hands of racialized police violence. This is an evident depiction of how policing directly influences people’s reproductive decisions.

Maya H called attention to many of the implications that policing and incarceration have for RJ in March 2023 in another episode of SisterSong’s Instagram series, “RJ is...Defunding the Police.” In this live video, Maya met with AJ Williams from Durham Beyond Policing, a Durham-based grassroots organization focused on “[divesting] from policing and prisons, and [reinvesting] resources in Black and Brown communities.” Together, they discussed “the history

of the movement to Defund the Police, how defunding the police impacts our reproductive lives, and the joy and hope ahead as we continue to fight for a future free of state-sanctioned violence.”

Maya and AJ shared an obvious chemistry that once again made me feel like I was sitting in on an ordinary conversation between friends. AJ humbly talked through his understanding of what “defunding the police” represents, pointing to community-led de-escalation-centered responses to emergencies as the imagined alternative to. He posed the question, “What would it look like if Durham residents were able to build a tool that folks can tap as opposed to calling the police?” to concretize his standpoint. He and Maya both spent the next half hour navigating the many layers of anti-policing as it relates to RJ, touching on anti-queer and trans legislation, the broken child welfare and foster care systems, and inhuman living conditions in prisons, and public education to portray how law enforcement obstructs the achievement of RJ.

With a look of disappointment and almost disbelief, AJ commented that “folks claiming to be pro-life are fighting for the death penalty for women who get abortions.” In saying this, he highlighted the hypocritical thought of many anti-abortion/pro-life activists, who seem to only support the protection of human life if it concerns a life that has not yet begun. This is also reflected in the question he later asks: “Whose life is sacred or worth keeping?”

AJ also centered on the significance of care and community in getting the movement off the ground:

In our movement...Black and Brown femme women, gender-non-conforming, and trans folks are often at the front of those fights...maternal labor is required in our movements when we're tasked to keep things moving or operating...we have to think about anti-trans legislation from Georgia, Florida, Texas...there's an obvious intersection there...

Here, he establishes the role of “maternal labor”—which encompasses caretaking, delegating, and leading—on the operational end of the movement to convey how RJ is involved. He also

speaks to the intersection between race and sexual identity as an integral component of the movement's leadership, acknowledging anti-trans legislation as a threat to the entire movement because it targets those who keep things running. In doing this, he demonstrates care toward the members of the movement and reveals how collective action is a driving force for this work. When thinking about who the RJ framework aims to serve, AJ's words are a powerful indication of the importance of pursuing RJ for the success of anti-police organizing.

When situating the RJ framework alongside Cop City, police violence, incarceration, and anti-law-enforcement organizing, there is evident overlap between the matters. Safe and sustainable environments seem unattainable in the context of over-policing, violence, and a political climate centered around restricting reproductive freedom. This, along with the failure to look beyond anti-abortion legislation as the sole issue concerning law and reproduction, complicates the achievement of RJ.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this chapter was to illustrate the relevance of RJ in various contexts. Through the investigation of housing security, environmental justice, and law enforcement as they each relate to the principles of RJ, I aimed to clarify the point that the advancement of this movement requires a firm understanding of its ties to virtually all things significantly impacting people's lived experiences. I used social media as a central mode of analysis to show how digital spaces offer valuable information concerning these connections. Understanding that RJ is 1) grounded in a radical racial freedom movement and 2) led by folks who exist on the margins of society is key to properly recognizing why things like shelter, climate, and law are all pertinent to the movement's architecture. "The right to live and raise children in safe and sustainable communities" is a tenet of RJ because the founders knew—through personal experience—that

their reproductive decisions were largely influenced by their surroundings. They also knew that dismantling these systems could not happen through isolated work and would require a communal effort, which leads us into the final chapter looking at how exactly community-centered work functions within the RJ framework.

THREE

Producing Community/Productive Communities

After circling around 3 times to find parking, I finally reached a small blue house at the corner of a main road with 5 cars parked in front. After contemplating ringing the doorbell for a minute or so, a surge of confidence came over me and I reached for the doorknob to let myself in. There were piles of boxes lined up against the walls of the living room, a doorway to a kitchen, a dimly lit hallway leading to a bathroom, and some other rooms I did not go into. Not far behind me were two more community members also coming to join the Period Kit Packing event being hosted by Florida Access Network's (FAN) Reproductive Justice organizer.

The space felt like a home as much as it looked like one. Everyone was settled in around the short living room table, sitting in whatever space they could find—sofas, chairs, boxes, and the floor for those who came later. I signed in on a clipboard at the entrance and handed the bag of baby wipes and menstrual pads I brought with me to someone in the middle. I squeezed through boxes and bags filled with feminine hygiene products, snacks, and basic toiletries to get to the last available chair. It was clear that not everyone knew each other. Some folks stayed quiet with shy smiles on their faces, waiting to be given a task. It wasn't difficult to tell who the organizer was, all eyes staying on them as they opened boxes of pads and tampons to place on the table and told folks to "take a seat anywhere" as people continued to come through the door.

The organizer was Ciné; it was my first introduction to them. They made their way to me, "Here, take these bags. There's 150 of them. Open them and pass them down so they can be filled." Turning around to address the room, they eagerly thanked everyone for showing up. "Alright everyone, so"—they leaned back towards me to ask for my pronouns, and after hearing my response redirected their attention to the room—"she (gesturing towards me) will be prepping the bags for us to fill. Each bag gets 3 pads of any size, 2 panty liners, 2 tampons, and 1 of each miscellaneous item until we run out." Before they could continue, someone to my left wearing a Planned Parenthood T-shirt—Diamond—interrupted them, "Wait, wait, before we start, can we please go around the room and do quick introductions?" Everyone stopped what they were doing to get situated.

Ciné began speaking, "How about we do names, pronouns, where you're from, and maybe what brings you here today? I can start." They shared that they became involved with organizing a few years back and had taken up this position at FAN not long ago, organizing events across the entire state. Next was a young woman living in Delray, Florida, who worked as a medical resident and had

recently signed up to be a volunteer for FAN. With her was her younger sister and fiancée, who was the only cisgender man present. They both briefly introduced themselves in relation to the young resident. The next to speak was the Diamond—it was also my first time meeting her. She made it clear that this was not a Planned Parenthood (PP) event and that she was just here to sit back and help where help was needed. Even so, she pointed to a clipboard holding a pile of papers, indicating to us that these were petitions for “Ava’s Law,” which would protect pregnant inmates’ reproductive rights, and that she would appreciate us signing. I was next in the group for introductions, and I stated that coming to events like these was part of the research I was doing for my senior thesis, which elicited some “that’s so cool!” or “oh wow, that’s interesting!” kind of comments. The medical resident would later go on to ask me a few more questions about my research and where I was studying. She thought the work I was doing was “great!” The four women to go after me were all new volunteers of FAN, stating that this was their first event. Two were close friends, Jenny and Kayla,¹² and decided to come together. They were very outgoing and charismatic throughout the afternoon. The other two came alone and were quite reserved compared to the rest of us.

The next person to introduce themselves was Jason¹³, who works for a non-profit whose mission is to promote unity within the transgender community. Jason was the oldest person in the room, at 65 years old, and shared that he has been on testosterone since 1996. He very passionately expressed his devotion to reproductive justice work as a trans man who is also affected by oppressive systems that target reproductive freedoms. The last one to speak was Jasmin, the owner of the space we were in, which she explained was home to a non-profit of which she is the director. She explained that it is a trans-led organization focused on providing a space for refuge and distributing resources to Black and Brown LGBT+ folks in the South Florida community. As Jasmin described her work, Diamond and Ciné chimed in from time to time to sing her praises. At the end of Jasmine’s introduction, Diamond perked up to say, “She does it all, y’all. Anything LGBT+ related, this is who you go to. Not those big orgs like Pridelines.”

Introductions were over, and it was time to get to work. Everyone immediately began organizing themselves accordingly, some people volunteering to work on pads and tampons, others on snacks, and the rest wherever there was room. I stayed in my corner unfolding the small paper bags, and it didn’t take long for it to start feeling mechanical. Grab the bag, unfold, pass it to the front. Once everyone was settled, we started to develop a rhythm, working in sync.

¹² Pseudonyms

¹³ Pseudonym

From one corner of the room, someone said we had a “strong assembly line” going. It was true. Each person had their station, and the paper bags quickly made their way down the group, starting with me and ending with the “snacks station.” We finished within half an hour, despite the 2-hour slot of time Ciné had planned for. Once the bags were stored in boxes which I assumed were set to be delivered for distribution, we were all encouraged by Ciné and Jason to grab some food from the kitchen.

For the next hour or hour-and-a-half, conversations became increasingly intimate. Folks began sharing their experiences with healthcare, beyond the context of reproductive health. Jason spoke for a while about his current health concerns and the medications and lack of appetite that came with them—he had recently gotten an operation to have a part of his stomach removed. When the conversation shifted to focus on people’s recreational and/or medicinal smoking habits, Jason spoke about an issue with his lungs that he had been living with for a while. This got the attention of the resident, who happened to specialize in pulmonology. She seemed excited at the opportunity to talk about her work.

Through this conversation, Diamond and Kayla learned that they had previously worked for the same Cannabis Dispensary chain at different locations and bonded over their shared hatred for the company. Soon, more people were involved in the conversation and started discussing their thoughts on medical marijuana dispensaries. I didn’t have much to contribute to the conversation considering how little knowledge I have about South Florida dispensaries, but I remained engaged through my listening. Someone complained about dispensaries and sighed, “Bring back plugs, man,” referring to local dealers. Somebody else firmly responded from across the room, “No! Now, I like plugs but also, I am a woman and I’m not tryna fuck for weed every time I want to cop¹⁴!” I was not unfamiliar with the notion that male drug dealers will often try to give their women clients discounts in exchange for sexual favors. “Very true,” others shrugged in defeated agreement. Jenny perked up to talk about her good experience with a dispensary, “I don’t like smoking, so I’m trying to find other ways to get high. I can’t do edibles.” She then mentioned these patches, or maybe it was an infused balm, that she used to help with cramps she gets from having Endometriosis. Soon, people were going back and forth to share what kind of weed they prefer and how they prefer to consume it. I assumed that those not participating in the conversation were non-smokers.

At one point, Jason started to talk about his mother, who was living under his care. He expressed sincere gratitude for being 65 and still having his mother, who I believe he said was around 86. Jenny shared that her grandmother, who

¹⁴ To *cop* something essentially means buying or obtaining a product. In this case, the word is used to reference buying marijuana.

was in her 90s, was also under her care, and the two bonded over how they cared for these important maternal figures. It was a tender moment between two people with vastly different backgrounds—in age, race, gender, and sexuality—who still found a way to connect.

...

I begin this chapter with the above field note to point out that several things were happening in that small blue house. What brought us there was a shared intention to provide aid to people in need of menstrual products and other basic toiletries. What kept us there was a shared desire to connect. Considering that most of us stayed in that living room for almost 3 hours despite having accomplished the goal of the event in less than 30 minutes, it is reasonable to assume that we *wanted* to be there and that this feeling was fueled by some level of pleasure. The intimate nature of our conversations—reflective of the *intimate collectivity* discussed in Chapter 1—suggests that the participants not only enjoyed themselves but also felt comfortable enough in the space to be vulnerable with their words and actions. Bonding over the troubling experience of attempted sexual coercion over a dime bag¹⁵ is quite telling of the kind of environment that was created—one that gives folks room to cope with potentially harmful encounters through half-humorous-half-serious dialogue. The subtle touch of a neighbor's shoulder to show sympathy, the harmless elbow to someone's rib to supplement a burst of hearty laughter, the warmth of a friendly hug to couple a goodbye. While seemingly having nothing to do with reproductive justice, these moments of tenderness are all quite significant to the movement. It is in these instances that we see a crucial component of the fight for reproductive justice—community.

¹⁵ *Dime bag* – About half a gram of marijuana, usually costing \$10.00 in South Florida.

In this chapter, I break down the various experiences and perceptions of community within the reproductive justice movement through analysis of interview responses and the various events I attended. I mention “community” quite broadly here, but it is important to distinguish the different forms of community that exist in relation to reproductive justice—each producing a particular kind of intimacy. Larger events like “National Night Out” detailed in Chapter 2 are more likely to include direct interactions between organizers or vendors who have something to offer, and community members in need. These spaces tend to generate more of what writer Beverley Golden (2011) calls “experiential intimacy,” through activities like dancing, preaching, playing games, etc. This is different from what happens at events like the Period Kit Packing Party, where a handful of folks—often all volunteers and/or organizers—sit side-by-side in a room, sharing personal stories about their struggles, accomplishments, and relationships. This deeper form of intimacy is not seen at larger, more festive gatherings simply because the environment is not conducive to those profound conversations. These sites of community all function as *brave spaces*, a term I was introduced to by Diamond, who during her interview declared her preference for the phrase over the more popularized “safe space”:

I navigate away from ‘safe space’ because I can’t guarantee safety. But I can guarantee and hope that we all aspire to be brave, right? To be brave to share things that may not feel comfortable to you, and to be brave to challenge the ways in which you think other people are responding.

Although she didn’t come up with the term herself, Diamond’s use of the words has helped me frame the events I’ve attended in the months since our conversation. *Bravery* as a grounding principle in creating these community spaces is particularly interesting when thinking of how we understand the relationship between community and reproductive justice.

I also use this chapter to dissect the reciprocity of this relationship. As communities labor to advance reproductive justice, the movement also works to strengthen and create communities. I demonstrate how this reciprocity is revealed through community-based organizing and initiatives, as well as through personal experiences articulating details of intimacy and identity relating to the reproductive justice movement.

My analysis of this relationship between community and reproductive justice is grounded in the idea that collective care and radical love are central to the reproductive justice movement—just as they are to the Black freedom movement (Moore, 2018). As a movement stemming out of a desire for Black feminist liberation, reproductive justice is deeply intertwined with ideas of mutual love and care. As Moore writes,

In fact, nothing but Black radical love can activate a Black politic shaped by an ethic of mutual care: an ethic that rests upon a grounding principle of shared concern and a responsibility to care for the different—the other, that person other than the self—in this moment of perpetual anti-blackness, fed by and large through this nation’s consistent investment in militarized capitalist patriarchy. I believe only this particular type of love can create the break in this mess that impedes our collective freedom (p. 325).

I consider the argument being made here to be just as relevant to the reproductive justice movement, which operates off a level of care for the work being done, for the people doing the work, and for the people being impacted by the work.

GROUNDING COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY IN REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Communities are comprised of intimate relationships, and whether they be familial, romantic, platonic, or casual, these relationships are fundamental parts of our experiences as human beings. My decision to include Community as the third “pivotal element of the human experience”—the phrase I have previously used to describe the foci of each chapter in this thesis—is grounded in the understanding of our relationships with the people around us as

crucial to how we navigate our lives. Our communal ties serve as sources of motivation, preparation, counsel, emotional and physical support, pleasure, and in some cases, conflict. Each of these is valuable in its own way, contributing to how we navigate the various issues in our lives. This is particularly relevant to reproductive justice when thinking of its origin, which, as I will discuss, is ultimately the product of community between Black women.

At the heart of this thesis is an intention to illustrate the reproductive justice movement as a vehicle that is kept in motion by the fuel of community-led efforts and community-building practices. Inherent to the role of community in reproductive justice organizing is care, which shows up in various ways. To use the Period Kit Packing Party as an example, care was evident in the collective effort being put into the actual packing of the resource kits—we cared about getting the job done; care was also clear in the ways folks were interacting with each other—we cared about 1) what those around us had to say and 2) creating a brave space for one another.

This mirrors the reciprocal relationship that exists between community and reproductive justice. On one end, the pursuit of reproductive justice requires community-based and community-led initiatives as a primary mode of organizing. It is through events like FAN's Kit Packing Party that reproductive justice is mobilized, largely because they lead to tangible results and because the sharing of knowledge at the ground level allows for a bottom-up approach that ensures people's lived experiences inform larger-scale change. On the other end, the reproductive justice movement offers people an opportunity to build community. Folks who identify with one another in race, sexuality, class, or other can bond over shared experiences, which then creates a stronger foundation on which the reproductive justice movement operates.

In her book, "The Movement for Reproductive Justice: Empowering Women of Color through Social Activism," anthropologist Patricia Zavella writes about the "three levels of

reproductive justice organizing”—base-building, culture-shift work, and policy advocacy (Zavella, 2020; p. 14-15). The first refers to a phase of organizing where reproductive justice non-profit organizations do grassroots work in communities of color. It is through this level that community presents itself as an indispensable feature of reproductive justice work. Culture-shift work represents the act of drawing on the “strength, resiliency, and spirituality” of people of color to enact effective change within these communities. This is key to understanding the way that being aware of folks’ different identities is essential to community-based initiatives. Policy advocacy, as Zavella discusses it, occurs at the local, state, and federal levels, and includes lobbying, working with legislators, and “crafting legislation.” Although this has more to do with politics and law, community-based work still plays a vital role in successful policy-related undertakings. When efforts that target policy are created from the ground, they include the perspectives of folks who are frequently ignored by the government. As such, they lead to more inclusive policy suggestions that have the potential for further-reaching impact.

An important part of the way that community functions within reproductive justice is identity. When reproductive justice was founded, it was done so by twelve Black women who saw each other and each other’s experiences in ways that those in power seemed not to. These twelve women formed a relationship based on this acknowledgment and care for one another and those like them. In the words of Loretta Ross,

As Black women, we shared a unique standpoint that expressed how the reproductive privileges of some women depended on the reproductive disciplining of other women in ways that did not challenge racism or other vehicles of inequality. This new reproductive justice perspective began to explain how all people experience their reproductive capacity according to multiple intersecting factors including their class, race, gender, sexuality, status of their health, and access to health care. In 1994 we had no idea we were literally at the forefront of a new movement that would revolutionize reproductive political activism in the United States. Yet at the end of the twentieth century, **reproductive justice**

offered new visions of self-determination, collective unity, and liberatory practices. (Ross & Solinger, 2017 [my emphasis], p. 65-66)

Ross identifies the founding of reproductive justice as a product of shared experience between Black women that led to a novel way of fighting for reproductive freedom, grounded in community practices. Other women of color eventually implemented the reproductive justice framework into their organizing work, and the reproductive justice movement soon became a place where community-building occurred within and across identity groups. Through reproductive justice organizing, members of these different identity groups together form a “collective identity,” which “also emerges out of common experiences that distinguish women of color from dominant society” (Zavella, 2020, p. 16). This collective identity is central to how the reproductive justice framework fits into organizations that may focus on different populations. Zavella (2020) makes another important point about how reproductive justice organizations “recognize both the diversity within communities of color and the historically specific struggles faced by particular social groups” (p. 66). Knowing that the existence of a collective identity does not overshadow the distinct challenges faced by different groups of people is a core principle of reproductive justice work. This basic understanding creates a space where folks can be validated in their experiences and feel heard by those who may not come from the same background, despite working towards similar goals through the reproductive justice movement.

While walking me through her experience as director of MAAME, Maya J touched on the diverse populations served by the organization. Despite having a primary focus on Black women, MAAME is open to folks from other marginalized backgrounds and holds spaces specifically meant for Latinx and Middle Eastern community members. MAAME regularly holds what Maya J referred to as “listening sessions,” where women come together in a private space to share their experiences, primarily of motherhood, and talk about their needs. There are

specific listening sessions for different groups, and Maya J was firm in her belief that each session should be led by a member of the specific community in the space. She shared that she does not attend the sessions that do not pertain to her as a Black woman, and that it is possible—necessary, even—to be supporters of one another while still being conscious of the differences that exist between people:

So I see us as kind of, like, a catalyst for people in the community to have a safe space to tell their stories. But we're also going to back them in spaces for when it's their time to get up and create change in the communities in which they serve. And to me, that's what solidarity and allyship look like. We can't speak for everybody, we should not be trying to share things with everybody, because there are differences. And it's okay to respect differences. I think a lot of times—I think progressives sometimes miss the point that we all got to do the same and be on the same board at the same time. Because it's just not—we're just so different in so many ways. And so we need to celebrate those differences. But we need to show up when our peers are out here advocating for themselves and their community without trying to take over.

Maya J affirms her positionality as an advocate for her own community, and an ally to the groups of which she is not a part, recognizing the significance of knowing when to step back and give others a platform. Her call for a celebration of differences is critical to grasping what reproductive justice is grounded in, which is the need for a framework that visibilizes the specific needs of separate groups. Using the word, “celebrate,” suggests that central to reproductive justice is a pursuit of happiness—a pursuit that cannot be achieved without communal efforts. I find this to be another form of care that comes up within the movement—caring enough for the experiences and the needs of the people around you to acknowledge the times when it is not your turn to speak. This kind of validating, “I see you,” moment between individuals serves as a driving force behind reproductive justice organizing, empowering its members to be aware of and use their own voices.

Maya H, from SisterSong, alluded to something similar when I asked her how she has seen the reproductive justice movement lead to community-building between diverse groups of people:

I think that it's necessary to understand that reproductive justice is really about sharing and honoring the experiences of all historically oppressed communities. And so there's no, like, hierarchy of who's more oppressed. It's like, as Black women, or as queer and trans folks, or as working-class people, it's our job—it's our duty as reproductive justice organizers to connect those dots to people—for people to understand how all of our freedoms are like tangled up in one another and we can't—we're not truly free if just cis-[gender]women have access to everything that they need.

In claiming that “all of our freedoms are tangled up in one another,” Maya H illustrates the reproductive justice movement as being a sort of mechanism for “detangling” a web of challenges that prevents folks from obtaining their freedom—challenges that, individually, do not impact everybody to the same extent, but, together, still act against reproductive justice for all. This visual of entanglement highlights the complex nature of reproductive justice and the many issues that must be addressed for its advancement; it also solidifies the argument that multiple perspectives and voices are needed to be successful in the movement.

The inextricable link between community, identity, and reproductive justice is revealed through Maya J and Maya H's words. They both concretize the idea that one cannot be in community with other folks in this movement without being able to acknowledge the differences that exist within the group and act according to these differences. This is essentially what differentiates reproductive justice from reproductive rights, in practice and ideology—whereas the former is rooted in an understanding of people's particular needs based on identity, the latter assumes a level playing field where everyone needs the same thing, delivered in the same way. The reproductive justice movement's emphasis on working in community makes its mobilizing efforts more impactful altogether.

ON THE GROUND

I remember leaving the Period Kit Packing Party with a newfound sense of confidence, inspired by the people I'd met. Being a part of something like that was empowering, and seeing folks like Ciné in action made me think of how capable we can be as advocates for change. At only 22 years old, Ciné transmitted such a powerful energy of revolutionary leadership that I knew could be felt by everyone else in the room. Hearing the others there recall things they have been a part of, whether as leaders, as caregivers, or simply as individuals acting within their communities, made it clear to me that I was in a space marked by potent heroism.

This empowering energy has been present at all the events I attended since then, both in person and online. As a participant in events held by different organizations, in different locations, for different purposes, I was able to understand how the operational side of reproductive justice looks; I was exposed to the various forms reproductive justice organizing may take through a community-driven lens and learned that, from an organizational standpoint, money is often a driving force behind how much can actually get done.

In September of 2023, I joined Love to table for Breastfeed Durham at a Hispanic-Heritage Month event hosted by El Futuro (*The Future*), a Durham-based bilingual mental health clinic servicing the city's Latinx population. Although this wasn't a reproductive justice-specific event, Breastfeed Durham's presence there served as an example of how reproductive justice work fits into various places.

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Field Note 9/24: El Futuro Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration

I could hear the thumping bass of loud music before even pulling up to the big shopping center where El Futuro was located. After driving over about 5 potholes in the worn-down asphalt, I finally got a spot at the far end of the lot, in front of a Food Lion. The first two rows of the plaza's parking lot were occupied

by over a dozen tents and tables, all decorated with different colors, signs, and merchandise. About half of the tents belonged to local food merchants, all from Latinx backgrounds—the tents selling pupusas, birria tacos, and horchata seemed to be the most popular. The event resembled a block party—young children joyously running around with juice-stained shirts and adults stressfully running after their juice-stained children, friends laughing together as they wandered from tent to tent, people gathering at the center of the open space to dance and sing along to whatever was coming from the speakers.

I noticed Love wearing a yellow Breastfeeding Durham shirt standing at a table right next to the DJ booth, by the entrance of El Futuro. When I walked over to her, she handed me an identical shirt and pointed out the intense volume of the music. “So you do speak Spanish, like fluently?” I nodded. She sighed with relief and laughed, “Good. I speak some Spanish, but you know [chuckle]...Nina¹⁶ will be here soon. She speaks Spanish, too. She’s great, always helping out.” She began fingering through the stacks of English and Spanish flyers promoting Breastfeed Durham and its different resources—for moms, dads, queer parents, and Spanish-speaking families—laid out on the table. She then pointed to a blank sign-up sheet, telling me to try and ask for the names of anyone who came up to the table, even if they didn’t express interest, and write it down on the sheet—“We get paid by the name.”

Love continued going through the rest of what was at the table, which included “Human Milk” tote bags, diapers, and wipes. She shared that Breastfeed Durham can also provide a breast pump—which costs upwards of \$100.00—to parents who may be in need, so I had to be sure to share this with folks at the event. I realized I didn’t know how to say “breast pump” in Spanish.

On either side of our table were a few other locally based enterprises that provided resources for different issues, including housing, healthcare, and education. We engaged in conversation here and there to pass the time while waiting for folks to come up to our tables. Little by little, people walked past us, curiously sticking out their necks to figure out what we were promoting. “Que es esto?” (“What is this?”) We eagerly responded with our spiel of Breastfeed Durham’s mission, highlighting the resources we had to offer. Children who were with their parents kept their eyes on the tote bags and other miscellaneous merchandise on the table. Keeping what Love had previously told me in mind, I asked for names and wrote them down.

I spoke to Love about this event and those similar to it, which led to a more thorough conversation about Breastfeed Durham and Love’s experience with community organizing. She spoke about the struggle to obtain adequate funding, the “broken systems” that impede progress within the movement, and the

¹⁶ Pseudonym

poor management at the Durham Women, Infants, and Children, (WIC) Office. After explaining that they rely heavily on the help of volunteers like Nina because of the difficulty of being able to pay their employees, she made an interesting point on “the inequity of volunteerism:” “the people who need [the work being done through community organizing] the most don’t have the resources to participate.”

Soon after, we were joined by Nina, a regular Breastfeed Durham volunteer, and a Duke Med student. We spoke about her interest in breastfeeding work, and I learned that she was getting certified to be a lactation consultant at a nearby university. As people began walking up to the table, Nina took the lead in engaging with them, and she appeared to be very comfortable switching between languages—she didn’t have to look up how to say “breast pump” in Spanish. I closely observed these interactions, watching the faces of those at the table slowly brighten as they became more drawn to Nina’s warm character. The conversations lasted anywhere between 2 to 10 minutes and sometimes trailed off the topic of breastfeeding, but it was clear that the community members felt comfortable in Nina’s presence.

Although most people who came by did not need breastfeeding support, they generally still seemed interested in the work being done at Breastfeed Durham; some folks knew of a friend or relative who was either pregnant or had recently given birth and may find the resources helpful.

After about an hour, there was a sequence of vocal and dance performances showcasing a range of Latinx cultures, including Mexican, Colombian, and Chilean folkloric dances. The community members quickly formed a semi-circle around the performers, cheering and recording throughout. The dances were put on by groups containing a mix of young children, teenagers, and middle-aged adults; the youngest ones drew the most excitement from the crowd. The Colombian group’s performers ended their set by pulling in audience members—mostly friends and family—into the center to join them in dance. Everyone erupted in jubilant applause, celebrating the community spirit.

...

I remember seeing a young girl run into the arms of her parents after having just finished dancing with one of the groups and thinking, *this is what reproductive justice is about*. The event was a 4-hour example of what it looked like to be supported and celebrated by those around you, surrounded by love. This achievement of communal joy is an innate part of what the reproductive justice movement is working towards. Breastfeed Durham being there was a more

literal representation of community-based organizing for reproductive justice—“bring[ing] all resources into one space,” as Love put it. Experiencing this event from the perspective of an organizational representative allowed me to get a glimpse of what it was like to be on the functional end of reproductive justice work. I understood more clearly that community-based work requires a particular level of strength and commitment to effectively get through to the community in which you are working. The added pressure of engaging with communities who speak a different language is yet another indication of the need for the reproductive justice movement to include folks who represent a multitude of cultural groups, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

Love pointed to several unique challenges within community-based work, namely issues with funding and volunteering. By problematizing volunteerism, Love calls out the privilege of being able to act as a volunteer, signaling that there needs to be a greater effort in ground-level engagement where tools are sufficiently distributed so that those in need can also act as advocates for their own communities. She also alludes to the financial difficulties endured by community-based organizations. When she told me, “we get paid by the name,” she was talking about how Breastfeed Durham’s funding is largely dependent on its success with community-engagement—in this case, its success with gathering names at a tabling event as proof of outreach and communication.

Love also emphasizes the necessity for initiatives that center on resource provision, a sentiment shared by Ciné, who believes that kit-building events are particularly important in the reproductive justice movement:

So kit-building is a super effective tool in many realms. I think I talked about it a little bit yesterday (we spoke on two consecutive days), but [it’s] because they put all the resources in one place for people to just grab and go. And there’s a wide variety of different things that folks have access to, and like just one little easy,

like package, gift bag, whatever it is. And usually, it's a really easy place to redistribute resources.

Like Love, Ciné highlights the significance of efforts grounded in ensuring that folks have access to basic resources, whether it be menstrual products or breastfeeding products. The Period Kit Packing Party and tabling at El Futuro's community fair were two very distinct events, but both were grounded in community support and helping folks get their hands on resources that fulfill basic needs.

A sentiment shared across most of the organizers I spoke to is that although it is difficult to say that there is one model for what a “perfect community-based event” looks like, those focused on resource collection and distribution are incredibly fruitful. Opportunities where people can obtain food, resources on shelter, funds, or child-care items have the most direct impact, which is why they are perceived as being so effective. When I asked Maya J what efforts she has seen as most helpful, she recalled her own experiences with mutual aid, describing how she's seen it be a significant part of community-based work:

I think mutual aid has just kind of reshaped how we're supposed to support and nurture each other...[And it] got people back in the idea that is okay to help somebody that don't know. And you can see that a lot. Now, like on social media, there are a lot of share groups, or even like mom groups where a Mama's like, ‘Hey, I just had a baby, I don't have these resources, can someone help me?’ People are like, ‘Yes, come pick this stuff up,’ you know, so I think there is a shift that's happening. And, and I want our work to kind of contain—to be a part of that shift...but just kind of thinking about ways that we can lessen the burden on people. I feel like our work through mutual aid has been able to do that somewhere. And, and I'm always just kind of like reimagining ways to make these things sustainable, because it can be [that] we're just not thinking big enough to, you know, address those issues.

Maya J articulates care as the grounding force behind the value of mutual aid, reminding us of our responsibility to “nurture each other.” By specifying an example of a new mother in need of resources, she illustrates how mutual aid efforts are particularly relevant to reproduction. She

also indirectly highlights the function of social media in simplifying access to mutual aid, which points to what I highlighted in Chapter 2, about social media becoming a tool for reproductive justice organizing. The mention of sustainability here represents the need for consistent, collaborative, “re-imaginative” effort in reproductive justice work—even towards things as seemingly simple as mutual aid events, which offers an additional outlook on the relationship between community (working together) and the movement.

Most of my interlocutors agreed that mutual aid is a valuable community-based initiative, but when I spoke with Maya H, she expressed concerns with longevity in its impact: “It’s just not enough. Like, it meets the immediate need, but a month later, someone needs another box of diapers.” By calling out the need for government-resources solutions to fulfilling basic needs, like “providing diapers for free,” Maya H draws attention to the limits of community-based interventions when it comes to sustainability. This, however, is not meant to diminish the power of community work within the reproductive justice movement, but rather demonstrate how the responsibility of achieving reproductive justice is not solely that of community members—it also falls on those with political and economic influence, as they can help sustain these community-based efforts.

BELONGING AND TOGETHERNESS

One question I asked each of my interlocutors was, “How has your race, gender, sexuality, or other parts of your identity that you feel connected to, impacted the ways in which you’ve found community through this work?” In probing my participants to think about the relationships they have with themselves and with other people within the realm of their work, I wanted to get a better sense of how *belonging* influences the way community-centered initiatives

are carried out. Ciné responded with a thorough description of how they actively choose to show up in organizing spaces, affirming their identities and representing their community(ies):

I value identity to my core, like everywhere I go, I always tell people I'm trans. I'm Black and trans. And that's super important to me. You know that as soon as I walk in the door, because I like to pride myself in saying that I represent those in my community who can't represent themselves. And I have the privilege of working at a nonprofit and also understanding that nonprofits are institutions, and trying to do radical work within an institution itself is already hard, because you're trying to break down barriers, but also ensuring that I'm giving back to my community, ethically and authentically, as I stated before, and also the amount of energy that it takes to—to continue the fight, and to continue providing spaces for folks to be vulnerable and safe to show up for their community and even for themselves, I think is the number one thing that I try to emphasize along with my identity. Because I think those two can't be separated, especially because I'm Black, like the history and the—just the message of being Black, period. Like the foundation of organizing, I think is, like, in my blood... The joy of just showing up for other trans and Black people, I think, is really what drives me.

They bring up important points about the privilege of being in a position where they can act as a voice for other Black, trans people, emphasizing how “those two identities can't be separated for folks who identify as both.” This brings us back to the notion of intersectionality and its role in reproductive justice work: Ciné is adamant about not prioritizing one identity over another, because they are never just one or the other—always both.

This idea is cemented in Simran's response, which contextualizes how she's been impacted by finding a place in the reproductive justice movement as a queer Desi Indian person who grew up in a “really, really white town”:

All of this is about people. And so getting to connect with other people is the only way to make sense of our experiences. Like, our identities just don't exist in bubbles. Like you can't—you're not just queer in your house, when you're just doing your own little thing. We exist in community and so be[ing] able to be around other people that look like you and talk like you that are experiencing the world like you is the only way that we can make sense of the things that are happening to us. And so I think that like, for me specifically, like, putting language, my experience was a game changer. And it wasn't something that I felt like I had access to until reproductive justice.

Similar to Ciné, Simran calls attention to the way in which our identities do not exist in isolation; by discussing how communal spaces validate intersectional experiences and facilitate connections between people with shared identities, she illustrates the reproductive justice movement as one that empowers and provides folks with a “language” to better understand themselves and how they fit into different spaces.

For Maya H, parenting is a big part of her identity. In her response, she captures the intense shift in self-identification that occurs through motherhood:

I think becoming a mom has been--it's been such an interesting thing, because it's like the—it feels like it's at the core of who I am. Like, it's one of the first two or three identities I would list if someone asked me to start listing my identities. And I've worked really, really hard for it to not be my only identity, because it's really easy for it to be like, ‘I'm a mom,’ and that's it—I exist to take care of this other being that needs me all the time. But I've been working really hard on finding that balance of, like, still being a full person that has my own needs and desires outside of parenting. And so it's been nice to connect with other moms in particular, and queer parents, who are committed to being the best parent they can be and like holding all these other parts of who we are as individuals.

Having children leads to an arduous process of actively recognizing oneself and one’s purpose outside of parenting. At the same time, Maya H acknowledges the comfort she finds in being surrounded by other parents within the movement who can relate to her experiences. She explicitly references care as a key part of her experience as a parent and alludes to it in her demonstrated appreciation for how she’s been able to find community through reproductive justice work. This once again leads us to what was previously discussed about the inherence of care to reproductive justice, which is seen in the different ways that folks make connections in the movement—with their children and with other parents.

Ciné, Simran, and Maya H addressed different parts of their identities, but in doing so, communicated similar ideas about intersectionality and the significance of being in community with and for folks who they identify with—whether it be through race, sexuality, gender

expression, or parental status. Their experiences illustrate how reproductive justice organizing facilitates the formation of intimate communities and identity circles—the same entities that propel the movement forward. The responses evince a sense of pride in the individual identities they all possess, but also in how these identities represent the acts of belonging to, connecting with, and representing a particular group of people. The connections Ciné, Simran, and Maya H make between reproductive justice spaces and belonging make sense given that reproductive justice is a Black feminist-led and centered ideology, and collective identity is embedded into the making of the movement.

THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY

The reproductive justice movement is inextricably linked to community. In its dual role as both a driver and a product of reproductive justice work, community proves to be an invaluable element of the movement. The multiple kinds of community spaces that I've illustrated in this chapter generate varying degrees of intimacy and different types of belonging and care. The deep-seated events that allow for in-depth storytelling and self-expression represent one side of the reproductive justice movement. The more public, celebratory events where people gather to play, dance, and eat while represent another side. Mutual aid is a particular kind of community initiative that can take place in several kinds of spaces—intimate, festive, virtual—and points to the reliance on interpersonal support to advance reproductive justice.

Key to all these forms of community and intimacy is the concept of collective care, which I theorize to be the way people—specifically women of color and queer folks—support and empower one another through reproductive justice work. The unifying power of the reproductive justice movement is most visible in these community spaces, whether it be through an intimate exchange of personal stories in a living room, a joint sing-along to music playing in the

background of a block party, or a delivery of diapers and baby food to a Facebook friend. These examples of collective care characterize the reciprocity within the movement that I've discussed throughout this chapter—reproductive justice at once advances through and produces community.

I have decided to end with a quote from Ciné, who perfectly encapsulates the ideas brought up throughout this chapter:

I feel like being a community organizer humbles me a lot. I feel like this is a career path that should not be ego driven. It's not intended to be that way. And I feel like I have a lot of peace in that. And I feel like, if anything, that keeps me in check a lot. Because doing work like this is not to benefit one individual. As I've stated, that's like the epitome of everything that I say—it's not to benefit one person. So I am—this is my way of being authentically selfless, because it's something that I truly enjoy. And even as frustrated as it is trying to get the pieces together or trying to fundraise in order to provide for something and having to like constantly shout at people to get things done—and we have to take shit into our own hands—it's really rewarding to hear people say, 'Thank you for organizing this,' like, 'this was really fun,' like, 'I enjoyed myself,' or, 'Thank you for all the work that you do,' like that really warms my heart. And I also love seeing people, like, just get into movement with other people. And being motivated just by seeing other people enjoying just benefitting from community coming together and wanting to make that happen. Like that is the essence of joy.

Ciné conveys the importance of community to RJ as it pertains to everyone involved—organizer or not—and reminds us that despite the intensity of this work, it is still a joyous undertaking.

CONCLUSION

Pursuing Justice, Discovering Joy

I think something that's amazing about reproductive justice is how centered around joy and love it is. It's just so easy to focus on the doom and gloom, and how horrible the world is, and how we're all so oppressed, and like, the world is exploding, and everyone hates our uteruses, that is like—of course, that is true. And also, it's amazing to be a person of color. It's amazing. Like it is an incredible blessing to be able to have this kind of community. And like, it is not just something that hurts us. And so being able to focus on that joy, I think has been really, really empowering to me.

- Simran (Interview)

This has nothing to do with joy.

Nothing is joyful about Black women dying in the process of giving life. Nothing is joyful about Indigenous women becoming infertile because of the toxic grounds on which they live. Nothing is joyful about queer couples unable to start a family due to a political consensus that frozen embryos are living children. Nothing is joyful about fearing the death of a son who doesn't yet exist because of the trigger-happy police officers who may or may not think the phone in his hand is a gun.

This has everything to do with joy.

It is a joy to be around people who see you, who care about you, who empower you. It is a joy to be told that you are loved, that you deserve to have a family, that you can have control over your body. It is a joy to bond over the kind of weed you smoke with someone you just met ten minutes ago while stuffing tampons into a paper bag. It is a joy to stuff tampons into a paper bag knowing they'll go to someone who needs them.

Reproductive justice has nothing and everything to do with joy.

In this thesis, I have focused on the different ways that *collective care* shows up in RJ work; I have explored how the RJ framework navigates birth, life, and community; I have shown how the RJ movement does more for the reproductive freedom of women of color and queer folks than the Reproductive Rights movement. I now want to conclude my thesis by turning toward a discussion of joy—more specifically, a discussion of how the communal nature of RJ allows people to find and hold onto these pockets of joy while working amid the “doom and gloom” of the world, as Simran calls it.

When I first started writing this thesis, I didn’t think that I would end it like this. I thought I would just reiterate the points I made about community being central to the advancement of RJ. But by the third time “joy” was explicitly mentioned in relation to RJ work by my interlocutors, I redirected my focus. Drawing from these articulations, I’ve concluded that in the pursuit of reproductive justice, there is often a discovery of joy—usually in the context of being in community—that makes those involved feel more connected to the work they are doing. This deeper commitment propels the movement forward.

I previously referred to community as “the fuel that keeps the vehicle of RJ in motion” (see Chapter 1). Expanding on this metaphor, I now suggest that the discovery of joy in these community-based spaces acts as the pump that keeps the fuel tank full. Without these scattered moments of joy found in the work of RJ, the movement’s community-based initiatives would not succeed to the same extent. If RJ is understood to be a *movement* of resistance, then joy as I describe it is an *act* of resistance.

Because I am particularly concerned with joy in the context of community, I want to establish that love and care politics are deeply related to the joy that I am discussing here. Black feminist literature on love relates to the connection I make between RJ community-based

activism and joy. For example, Black feminist scholar Jennifer Nash writes about “mutual vulnerability” as a key concept in “[B]lack feminism’s long practice of love-politics.” She elaborates on this notion of “mutual vulnerability” as being

marked by a commitment to unleashing the “sacred possibilities” between us, to emphasizing that “nobody means more to me than you” (as cited in Jordan, 2003). Indeed, this perspective recognizes that my survival and thriving depend on yours. If our survivals are mutually dependent, we are, then, mutually vulnerable, as our thriving requires our coexistence. To act in love, with love, is to recognize this mutual vulnerability as something that must be not eschewed but rather embraced, as a necessary positionality to the project of social justice (Nash, 2019, p. 114).

This idea of mutual vulnerability is particularly relevant to the kind of community-building practices seen in the RJ movement. I argue that it is through this “mutual vulnerability” that joy is produced, shared, and felt. Considering that joy and love in the context of community are closely related, Nash’s suggestion that mutual vulnerability functions as a necessity for “the project of social justice” can also be understood as an indication of how joy, too, is related to the advancement of social justice—in this case, reproductive justice.

This brings me back to joy as an act of resistance, which is not a new concept. Writers have produced work about Black Joy as resistance for years, and because RJ is grounded in the Black experience, the specificity of *Black Joy* is important. The literature on Black Joy largely argues that in a world hampered by struggle, joy is still attainable for Black people, and the presence of joy does not obscure the presence of struggle. As writer Kim Pham says in an article on Black Joy as resistance, “Black people are able and allowed to find happiness and comfort despite their tribulations” (Pham, 2021, para. 3). The same thing can be said about RJ activists—most of whom tend to be Black: *people pursuing RJ are able and allowed to find happiness and comfort despite their tribulations.*

“To resist the omnipresent, intrusive and pervasive nature of white supremacy, we must also allow ourselves to be rebelliously joyous... This is why the act of joy is resistance and as we use our physical bodies to protest, march and demand change, we must also use them to experience the pleasure of joy” (Joseph, 2020, Joy and resistance are one and the same, para. 1). Although United Kingdom-based writer and broadcaster Chante Joseph was writing in the context of Black Lives Matter protesting in London, her words apply to the RJ movement: as activists “use their bodies” to actively protest against oppressive policies and systems, they also use them to be in community with other people, through which they discover joy. In her book *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins (2005) writes that “[l]oving Black people... in a society that is so dependent on hating Blackness constitutes a highly rebellious act” (p. 250). Collins’ quote can be used to better understand how joy—as a close relative to love—is an act of resistance under the RJ movement, which is rooted in collective care.

These descriptions of joy and love reflect the behaviors I saw throughout my research, indicating that the relationship between reproductive justice and community that I’ve made the core of this thesis also contains an underlying relationship between reproductive justice and joy. This is not a conclusion that states that everything within the RJ movement is ultimately a joyous affair. This is rather a conclusion that states that in the difficult and taxing pursuit of reproductive justice, there are possibilities for uncovering joyous moments.

WITNESSING JOY

I witnessed joy in the parking lot of El Futuro in the stretched-out arms of the little girl who reached out for her laughing father to come dance with her.

I witnessed joy at Gate C10 of Raleigh-Durham Airport in the face of the breastfeeding mother who couldn't help but smile down at her hungry baby boy wrapped tightly in the blanket pressed against her chest.

I witnessed joy in the check-out aisle of the Publix on 35th avenue in the eyes of the little boy who had finally convinced his mother to get him that Snickers bar.

I witnessed joy in the backyard of the home in the Dominican Republic, in the tender smile of my *abuela*, whose dementia-ridden mind and foggy eyes still never let her forget the life that she had brought into this world: *Tengo siete hijos, cuatro hembras y tres varones*, she repeated to herself. *I have seven children, four girls and three boys.*

In my discussion of joy, it is important to include the different way that it relates to reproductive justice. Joy as an outcome of RJ is not only evident in the interactions between RJ activists and organizers, but also in the everyday interactions between parents and children that are so critical to understanding what is being achieved. Entangled with the pursuit of bodily autonomy, desirable birthing experiences, safe and sustainable living environments, and essential resources that is so critical to the movement for reproductive justice are these moments of joy found in those subtle, yet impactful, interactions.

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