



# Souls

A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society

ISSN: 1099-9949 (Print) 1548-3843 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usou20>

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To cite this article: Loretta J. Ross (2017) Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism, *Souls*, 19:3, 286-314, DOI: [10.1080/10999949.2017.1389634](https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2017.1389634)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2017.1389634>



Published online: 16 Jan 2018.



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# Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism

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*Reproductive justice activists have dynamically used the concept of intersectionality as a source of empowerment to propel one of the most important shifts in reproductive politics in recent history. In the tradition of the Combahee River Collective, twelve Black women working within and outside the pro-choice movement in 1994 coined the term “reproductive justice” to “recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from the sharing and growing consciousness, to a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression.” Its popularity necessitates an examination of whether reproductive justice is sturdy enough to be analyzed as a novel critical feminist theory and a surprising success story of praxis through intersectionality. Offered to the intellectual commons of inquiry, reproductive justice has impressively built bridges between activists and the academy to stimulate thousands of scholarly articles, generate new women of color organizations, and prompt the reorganization of philanthropic foundations. This article defines reproductive justice, examines its use as an organizing and theoretical framework, and discusses Black patriarchal and feminist theoretical discourses through a reproductive justice lens.*

*Keywords: abortion, black feminism, human rights, intersectionality, neoliberalism, reproductive justice, sterilization abuse, white supremacy*

Reproductive justice activists have dynamically used the concept of intersectionality as a source of empowerment to propel one of the most important shifts in reproductive politics in recent history.<sup>1</sup> In the tradition of the Combahee River Collective, twelve Black women (including this author) working within and outside the pro-choice movement in 1994 coined the term “reproductive justice” to “recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from the sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression.”<sup>2,3</sup> Almost precisely twenty years after the historic beginning of the

Combahee River Collective, Black feminists created an original intersectional theory and praxis called reproductive justice, using it as a platform for articulating our demand for recognition of our full reproductive and sexual human rights.<sup>4</sup> As the original Combahee statement said in 1977, “to be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.”<sup>5</sup> We created new self-definitions to validate our standpoints, and offered a fresh worldview of our epistemological power to articulate our conscious resistance to all forms of reproductive repression.

Reproductive justice has generated new theory and practices that explain the phenomena at the intersection of race, class, and gender in reproductive politics to coherently account for events across time and include multiple events. In doing so, reproductive justice has eclipsed the binaried and under-theorized pro-choice/pro-life frameworks among both women of color and predominantly white organizations.<sup>6</sup> Its popularity necessitates an examination of whether reproductive justice is sturdy enough to be analyzed as a novel critical feminist theory and a surprising activist success story. As a theory, can it be used to explain groups of facts and make predictions about reproductive politics, particularly in the United States, explaining how reproductive relations get produced and reinforced in various contexts and for different individuals and populations?

Reproductive justice theory examines the meanings assigned to reproductive relations and externally imposed policies and practices. Such theory unmask the power relations of the world in narrative forms, to paraphrase Barbara Christian, in “the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas ...[are how] we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity.”<sup>7</sup> As Patricia Hill Collins has said, “Assuming that only a few exceptional Black women have been able to do theory homogenizes African-American women and silences the majority.”<sup>8</sup> The artificial separation between theory and practice risks reducing reproductive justice analysis and activism to a simplistic description of geography, where thinking occurs, rather than embrace the holistic challenges to domination offered by radical Black women outside and within the academy across many domains and the futurity of possibilities.

This article will focus on reproductive justice praxis, one Black woman’s way of thinking and feeling an approach toward optimizing reproductive health, rights, and justice, to go beyond pro-choice politics using the human rights framework. Praxis is a term most often used by oppressed groups to change their economic, social, and political realities through social justice actions based on theoretical reflections. Reproductive justice praxis puts the concept of reproductive justice into action by elaborating the connection between activism and intersectional feminist theory. Activists intentionally employ a complex intersectional approach because the theory of reproductive justice is inherently intersectional, based on the universality and indivisibility of its human rights foundation. This article defines reproductive justice, discusses under what circumstances the concept arose, and describes how it built a new movement. These are conceptual, functional, situational, and interactive questions reproductive justice theory and practice address by applying intersectionality to reproductive politics.

Intersectionality, according to Kimberlé Crenshaw who named the concept long provisioned by Black women, “captures the way in which the particular location of black women in dominant American social relations is unique and in some sense unassimilable into the discursive paradigms of gender and race domination.”<sup>9</sup> Intersectionality recognizes the power differentials between self-described identities and the oppressive nature that society contributes in conversations on race and gender by describing the places where multiple identities come together, or intersect. The concept of intersectionality describes the confluence of oppressions, not merely enumerate diverse identities. How you see yourself is frequently mismatched with how society views you, often with deadly consequences for Black, trans, disabled, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, and non-white immigrant groups of people.

Black women are often asked to separate our racial and gender identities, but intersectionality demands that all of our identities be honored concurrently to address the specificities of Black women’s reproductive oppression. Crenshaw was not the first Black woman to demand an intersectional analysis. She echoed other intellectuals and activists like Zora Neale Hurston, Frances Beal, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Smith, for example, who demanded innovative theory based on the lived embodiment of African American women. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, described the intersection of race, gender, and class as the “matrix of domination” to explain how intersecting oppressions are actually organized.<sup>10</sup> Intersectionality, however, has become the more popularized term that “refers to the ways that black women’s marginalization within dominant discourses of resistance limit the means available to relate and conceptualize our experiences as black women” in an imbrication of white supremacy, patriarchy, and neoliberal capitalism lined up like dominoes.<sup>11</sup>

Reproductive justice was developed because previous generations of Black feminists partially documented the reproductive experiences of African American women and provided the connective tissue for theorizing and organizing around our embodied experiences to coalesce our epistemological power. We developed our intersectional praxis outside of the academy and even traditional male-dominated organizations to build a new movement for influencing reproductive politics because new political movements do not emerge disconnected from previous movements.

As Black feminist writers challenged the concept of a universalized woman offered by some white feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, they created the conceptual space for focusing on the experiences of Black women as a fertile site for creating new theory and activism based on shared—but not identical—stories of reproductive oppression.<sup>12</sup> We needed theory and practice that could equip us to intervene in the pejorative dominant narratives of Black women’s reproduction, sexuality, and victimhood. We had to “use alternative ways to create independent self-definitions and self-evaluations and to articulate them through our own specialists.”<sup>13</sup>

We desired more analyses that thoroughly analyzed the commodification of Black women’s reproduction and resistance, that, in the words of Nicole Rousseau, “takes into account her position as: a person of African descent in a nation fundamentally rooted in a racialized slave economy; her role as a woman in a profoundly patriarchal

structure; and her position as a laborer: productive, reproductive; and biological, within a capitalist system.”<sup>14</sup> In particular, the accounts of Black women’s organizations in the 20th century need to be revisited through the lens of reproductive justice, distilling the fragments of evidence that demonstrate that Black women created their own oppositional narratives to eugenics while fiercely claiming their human rights to bodily self-determination and racial uplift.

The vilification of Black motherhood and Black women’s sexuality was the topic of various theories that pathologized Black women’s reproductive behaviors, such as E. Franklin Frazier, Daniel Moynihan, and William Julius Wilson. Seeking a counter-narrative, Evelyn Hammonds wrote in 1997 that “To date, there has been no full length historical study of African American women’s sexuality in the United States.”<sup>15</sup> When Dorothy Roberts wrote *Killing the Black Body* in 1997, she refuted such theories with a strong historical, political, and economic analysis connecting Black women’s reproduction and mothering and the legal systems of control. She wrote about the “explosion of propaganda and policies that degrade Black women’s reproductive decisions” for the political and economic enrichment of white elites.<sup>16</sup>

Only more recently has the gynecological labor of Black women been deeply explored, such as Harriet Washington’s *Medical Apartheid* in 2006.<sup>17</sup> As Nicole Ivy reports:

The 19th century surgical theaters in which American gynecological science was perfected were sites animated by multiple forms—and myriad conceptions—of labor...the lives and work on enslaved women...were alternately effaced and re-imagined in support of the dominant narratives of medical progress. ...It troubles prevailing historiography of slavery and medicine by considering the repetitive representations of black women’s bodies as part of the reproductive work that they were called to do.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, aiming to profit from Black women’s gynecological labor, medical professionals led the campaign to end access to midwifery services in the Black community. Black “granny” midwives had provided most of our reproductive health care since the Middle Passage using indigenous knowledges brought from Africa. For the most part, African Americans were denied services by white physicians and hospitals because of segregation until the middle of the 20th century. Starting in the 1950s, laws restricting the practices of midwives were passed around the country. For example, in 1976 there were more than 100 lay midwives in practice in Alabama and nearly all of them were Black. The state passed Act No. 499, revoking the permits of these providers upon whom rural Black women depended. This story of the massive illegalizing of Black midwives is told in *Listen to Me Good: The Story of an Alabama Midwife* by Margaret Charles Smith and Linda Janet Holmes.<sup>19</sup>

Fortunately, more Black women are writing about reproductive politics than ever before. Historian Cynthia Greenlee and lawyer-turned-writer Imani Gandy, among others, diligently document the reproductive experiences of Black women. Greenlee excavates the history of Black abortion providers before *Roe v. Wade*. Gandy, a legal analyst, pays close attention to the reproductive laws and policies affecting African American women. Toni Bond-Leonard, founder of Chicago’s Black Women for

Reproductive Justice and the first Black woman to manage an abortion fund, is completing a Ph.D. dissertation developing a theology of reproductive justice, examining the attitudes of Black Christian women in comparison to the theologies of their respective religious institutions. She has migrated from frontline activism to the academy to enrich this emerging body of scholarship using intersectionality and the legacy of Combahee to develop a theory of “Just Reproduction.”

Obviously, the Black community has a variety of opinions about abortion, contraception, motherhood, and even Black feminism. Reproductive justice is not reducible to identity politics and is fundamentally anti-essentialist, because no one viewpoint can fully express the multiple meanings and subject positions of diverse people who experience reproductive injustices. Countering caricatures of Black women’s sexuality begins with deconstructing the racialized, misogynist discourse that pervades popular culture and social understandings.

Offered to the intellectual commons of inquiry, reproductive justice has impressively built bridges between activists and the academy to stimulate thousands of scholarly articles, generate new women of color organizations, and prompt the reorganization of philanthropic foundations.<sup>20</sup> Activists created connections with other movements such as Black Lives Matter by using an intersectional approach.<sup>21</sup> Some mainstream organizations rebranded themselves in response to the power of the women of color who conceptualized, birthed, and propagated this new paradigm.<sup>22</sup> These are significant achievements for a radical concept created in the margins only twenty-three years ago.

### **What is Reproductive Justice?**

In June 1994, twelve black women working in the reproductive health and rights movement birthed the concept of reproductive justice at a pro-choice conference on health care reform in Chicago.<sup>23</sup> We created “reproductive justice” because we believed that true health care for women needed to include a full range of reproductive health services. While abortion is one primary health issue, we knew that abortion advocacy alone inadequately addressed the intersectional oppressions of white supremacy, misogyny, and neoliberalism. From the perspective of African American women, any health care plan must include coverage for abortions, contraceptives, well-woman preventive care, pre- and postnatal care, fibroids, infertility, cervical and breast cancer, infant and maternal morbidity and mortality, intimate partner violence, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted infections. In simplest terms, we spliced together the concept of reproductive rights and social justice to coin the neologism, “reproductive justice.”

Reproductive justice is based on three interconnected sets of human rights: (1) the right to have a child under the conditions of one’s choosing; (2) the right not to have a child using birth control, abortion, or abstinence; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments free from violence by individuals or the state.<sup>24</sup> Reproductive justice was never meant to replace the reproductive health (service provision) or reproductive rights (legal advocacy) frameworks. Instead, it

was an amplifying organizing concept to shed light on the intersectional forms of oppression that threaten Black women's bodily integrity. It rapidly propelled a growing movement of women of color activists from many social locations to fight for reproductive dignity.

Reproductive justice is rooted in the belief that systemic inequality has always shaped people's decision making around childbearing and parenting, particularly vulnerable women. Institutional forces such as racism, sexism, colonialism, and poverty influence people's individual freedoms in societies. Other factors—such as immigration status, ability, gender identity, carceral status, sexual orientation, and age—can also affect whether people get appropriate care. For instance, undocumented immigrant women in U.S. detention centers are denied counseling after sexual assault, reproductive health care, and access to menstrual supplies. Many are civil detainees, rendering legal aid inaccessible, leaving their health care and human rights to immigration authorities and the criminal justice system.

Sexuality has become a political and economic driver of late-stage capitalism and right-wing political mobilizations as neoliberal elites destroy the Keynesian welfare state of the 20th century to achieve unfettered profits and global domination. As a concrete example of intersectional praxis, the reproductive justice framework includes sexual freedom and bodily autonomy, making visible the material consequences of embodiment. Not only biologically defined women experience reproductive oppression. By highlighting the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender, our analysis includes transmen, transwomen, and gender-nonconforming individuals. For example, trans and intersex people are frequently coerced to undergo gender reassignment surgery that results in involuntary sterilizations in order to obtain vital identity documentation such as driver's licenses that match their preferred identities.<sup>25</sup> Such policies limit their reproductive options as a form of covert reproductive control by the state. Reproductive justice addresses the essentialism of gender-specific accounts that neglect how differences shape people's material realities, leaving undiscovered reproductive vulnerabilities shaped by white supremacy and neoliberalism. White supremacy as used in this article is a lethal body of ideas comprised of racism, Christian nationalism, homophobia, nativism, settler colonialism, transphobia, misogyny, and authoritarianism.<sup>26</sup>

Intersectionality through a reproductive justice lens offers a theoretical and practical approach that accounts for this interlocking matrix of oppression that is frequently parsed into different disciplines such as Native American Studies, Queer Studies, Economics, African American Studies, Women's Studies, Social Studies, American History, International Relations, and so on. Reproductive justice is inherently interdisciplinary because it is a lacuna-filling "narrative shorthand riddled, in practice, with contradictions, accidents, and surprises," in the words of Hortense Spillers.<sup>27</sup> By making visible the web of apparently disparate policies that form a totalizing containment system, reproductive justice expands the meaning of population control (eugenics) to intersect practices that—regardless of intent—limit reproductive options for women of color, Indigenous people, and other marginalized communities globally. We scrutinize all public policies to comprehensively analyze systemic



reproductive restraints to consider unexpected connections that affect childbearing and parenting. These include freedom of movement, immigration restrictions, the prison-industrial complex, racial and gender binaries, racial profiling and police brutality, racist and sexist media portrayals, resource allocations through tax policies, welfare and public assistance, health care systems, insurance affordability, housing availability, eviction policies, food insecurity, educational opportunities, zoning regulations, public utilities, internal displacement through natural disasters or eminent domain, voting rights, religious bigotry, credit, finance regulations, civil liberties restrictions, and environmental racism. Nearly every field of human endeavor affects and is affected by reproductive politics because empires need bodies.

Reproductive justice provokes and interrupts the *status quo* and imagines better futures through radical forms of resistance and critique. Dictating who can and should have children, and under what conditions, is one way the U.S. government exerts power over all communities, but particularly singles out communities of color for reproductive punishment, linking racial differences with sexual differences to maintain white control. These decisions always benefit the economic and racial interests of financial and social elites.<sup>28</sup> These interests are imperfectly disguised by the manipulative cynics who believe that white people are superior to people of color, despite the ontological uncertainty of racial categories as analyzed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant.<sup>29</sup> Systems express this ideological viewpoint that concretizes many false binaries such as male/female, Christian/non-Christian, immigrant/citizen in deciding who is targeted for reproductive management.

Reproductive justice as a conceptual frame interrogates the ongoing biological and non-biological power relationships between people of color and variations of “white people,” centering in its foundational analysis a critique of the ideology of white supremacy as it temporally affects reproduction. A pro-choice myopia only analyzing misogyny inadequately responds to multifaceted attacks. For example, failing to differentiate between the beliefs of formal and informal white supremacists regarding democracy, capitalism, people of color, Jews, Muslims, and non-Aryan “white people” offers a thin analysis of the rationale for restricting abortion rights, limiting sex education, and prohibiting health care coverage for contraceptives while deregulating corporations, ruining the environment, and attacking democratic institutions.

Pro- and anti-natalist policies change over time depending on the perceptions of elites who dictate public policies. For example, the state of Vermont targeted white French Canadians for sterilization to reduce their population during the eugenics campaign in the early 20th century.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, beginning in the early 21st century, teen pregnancy birthrates are rising in only one American population, white teens. Seemingly contradictory policies can best be explained through a reproductive justice lens based on the inherent intersectionality of the human rights framework.<sup>31</sup>

External control over other peoples’ reproduction is a tool of domination and oppression, as described by the United Nations’ Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide because it can be characterized as “imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly



transferring children of the group to another group.”<sup>32</sup> Reproductive oppression is genocide, or “reproicide,” as I prefer to name it. The universality of reproductive justice compels examinations of all social practices and individual and group experiences to examine contradictory power differentials contoured by race, gender, citizenship, ethnicity, ability, and class. It offers easily understood concepts for activists as well as tantalizing complexities for academics that interrogate relationships and the tangled problems associated with such relations examining subtleties, elaborations, and omissions.

One of the features of oppression is not only the loss of voice, but the tools to find it, as disability rights activist Irving Kenneth Zola described.<sup>33</sup> Reproductive justice activists sought an interconnected and universal thesis that incorporates difference and intersectionality far beyond the U.S. Constitution. At the September 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development, we fortified our initial analysis developed three months earlier by heeding women of the Global South who used the human rights framework to make stronger claims for sexual and reproductive autonomy, emphasizing the dialectic between individual and group rights.<sup>34</sup>

The foundation of reproductive justice rests on the eight primary categories of human rights: (1) Civil; (2) Political; (3) Economic; (4) Social; (5) Cultural; (6) Environmental; (7) Developmental; and (8) Sexual.<sup>35</sup> The human rights framework exposes the “immorality and barbarism of the modern face of power” in the words of Upendra Baxi, because it accounts for globalization, neo-liberalism, and neo-fascism while explaining how categories of difference relate to power differentials.<sup>36</sup>

The universality of the reproductive justice framework means that everyone has the same human rights. Applying the theory of intersectionality accounts for what every person needs—based on individual and group identities—to have their human rights protected and respected. In other words, intersectionality is the process; human rights are the goal.

### **The Politics of Knowledge Production**

Reproductive justice became an intellectual and spiritual home for me since I was present at its birth, and co-mothered its evolution through my organizing and writing. In the early 1970s, I knew very little about reproductive politics, although I was sterilized in 1976 at age 23. Like many Black women I was a personal, not a professional, feminist. I read *The Black Woman* by Toni Cade (Bambara) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley in 1970 as a first-year college student at Howard University, and through it first learned about Black feminist praxis while satisfying my left-brain orientation as a chemistry and physics major.<sup>37</sup> As a teenager, I engaged with the Black nationalist movement in Washington, DC working in anti-gentrification and anti-apartheid movements using a Marxist-Leninist analysis. I belonged to a D.C. Study Group through which we learned about class struggle, international solidarity, and dialectical materialism to study economics, history, and social sciences. Yet I was not drawn to predominantly white radical organizations, mostly because they did not prioritize fighting white supremacy and were too sectarian.

Instead, I developed my radical feminism within Black, nationalist spaces because of my work on ending sexual violence in the African American community at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center in the 1970s. I was also a member of the National Black United Front Women's Committee, working with experienced sisters like Safiya Bandele, Nkenge Toure, Andrée Nicola McLaughlin, Jamala Rogers, and Barbara Omolade. Nkenge, a former member of the Black Panther Party, recruited me to the Rape Crisis Center, demonstrating her intersectional experiences combining the struggles against white supremacy and sexual violence.

Black nationalist spaces presented little support for addressing intra-racial sexual violence. Often, we were shouted down by men and women for confronting the masculinist ideologies and behaviors of Black nationalists. Other times we were patronizingly ignored, at least until we revealed patterns of misogyny and sexual abuse within Black nationalist formations. Many of the male activists and scholars within these formations scoffed at the idea that there was anything problematic about a Black patriarchy. As Black women developing our feminist consciousness, we argued that one of the keys to defeating white supremacy was dismantling patriarchy, not Black masculinity, to no avail. The “brothas” could not explain how a Black revolution could be successful when one half of the revolutionary forces was unaccountably brutalizing the other half through rape, battering, and childhood sexual abuse.

Michele Wallace emphasized this contradiction in her controversial 1978 book, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, that critiqued the misogyny of Black nationalist movements.<sup>38</sup> Even Black women critics of feminism challenged misogyny within Black nationalist movements. Linda LaRue, while bitterly caustic about the white liberalist wing of the women's liberation movement, nevertheless accurately analyzed that Black male expressions of territoriality over Black women's bodies was scarcely separable from the same patriarchal claims by white conservatives of the day.<sup>39</sup>

The Black feminists I knew of in the 1970s were working in isolated pockets around the country in New York, Boston, Chicago, Washington DC, St. Louis, San Francisco, Gainesville (FL), and Atlanta. I first heard about Black women fighting sterilization abuse and for abortion rights, such as the 1971 Mt. Vernon, NY group.<sup>40</sup> Fran Beal's “Double Jeopardy” writings in the Third World Women's Alliance newsletter alerted me to previous work she had written in the 1970s about abortion rights activism by Black women.<sup>41</sup> We celebrated when New York Congresswoman Shirley Chisolm became honorary chairperson of the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (now NARAL Pro-Choice America).<sup>42</sup> Florynce Kennedy, a lawyer and early National Organization for Women (NOW) member, also fought for abortion rights in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>43</sup> In 1973, the National Council of Negro Women issued a cautionary statement warning of premature celebrations of *Roe v. Wade*, the decision legalizing abortion:

The key words are “if she chooses.” Bitter experience has taught the black woman that the administration of justice in this country is not colorblind. Black women on

welfare have been forced to accept sterilization in exchange for a continuation of relief benefits and others have been sterilized without their knowledge or consent. A young pregnant woman recently arrested in North Carolina was convicted and told that her punishment would be to have a forced abortion. We must be ever vigilant that what appears on the surface to be a step forward, does not in fact become yet another fetter or method of enslavement.”<sup>44</sup>

As I later learned, it was not that Black women were not doing the work. They influenced the reproductive rights movement, but did not determine its trajectory. We lacked the national capacity to share news about our organizing. It was not until Black women writers mostly—but not exclusively—in the academy began covering and recovering Black women’s activist histories in the late 1970s and early 1980s that the threads of these reproductive rights activists began weaving into a visible movement.

While working at NOW, I was tasked with mobilizing women of color for the first national march for abortion rights in 1986. I encountered a deafening silence from many of the leading Black women’s organizations, particularly the sororities, religious organizations, and professional associations. The lack of response was probably due to many factors, not the least of which was distaste for working with white feminists.<sup>45</sup> The only Black women’s organizations who understood their history of reproductive rights activism and openly supported abortion rights were the National Council of Negro Women, the Coalition of 100 Black Women, the National Black Women’s Health Project (NBWHP), and the National Political Congress of Black Women.<sup>46</sup>

After leaving NOW, I moved to Atlanta to work at NBWHP. My next job was monitoring hate groups, organizing anti-fascist events, and investigating the links between racist and anti-abortion violence in the 1990s. I founded the National Center for Human Rights Education in 1996. My professional journey circulated from women’s rights, to civil rights, to human rights, and arrived home as a co-founder of the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective in 1997.

As an organizer, I needed to know our history of reproductive resistance. As Hazel Carby has analyzed, “The Black women’s critique of history has not only involved us in coming to terms with ‘absences’; we have also been outraged by the ways it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us.”<sup>47</sup> Up until the 1970s, Black women’s reproductive health and rights issues beyond sterilization abuse were largely neglected. When race was studied, the subject was men; when gender was studied, the subject was white women. When Black women historians, literary critics, and sociologists began to fill these gaps, the subject of reproductive agency was also under-studied. I needed information on the links between historical practices and patterns of resistance to organize against contemporary reproductive abuses.

Providentially, in the late 1980s, a Ph.D. candidate named Jessie Rodrique sent me a draft of her essay on Black women and the 1920s early birth control movement for feedback.<sup>48</sup> I was excited to learn how she read between the lines in women’s and African American historical reclamations to find evidence of Black women’s birth control activism. I only wished her research further extended to abortion—an even more disguised history—to form a more comprehensive picture of the range of

measures Black women used, including infanticide. I began feverishly interrogating every source I could locate, searching for abortion evidence by re-interpreting previous histories and literature, and delving into archives. Without any formal training as a historian, I began my own untutored expedition of archival recovery to develop a narrative of Black women and abortion, wanting to trace practices from our pre-enslavement history to the modern context.

Some limited information was available. A 1991 study by the National Council of Negro Women revealed that 58 percent of Black women beyond the age of 18 *never* used birth control, but only 1 percent of those studied said they wanted to get pregnant, and only 2 percent said they did not know how to use birth control.<sup>49</sup> This disconnect produces the disproportionately high unintended pregnancy and abortion rates in the African American community. Black women obtain one third of the abortions in the United States and this proportion has remained consistent over time.<sup>50</sup> The same study revealed that 80 percent of African American women believe that a woman should make her own decision about abortion, and 76 percent rejected the false belief that abortion is a white-engineered genocidal plot.<sup>51</sup>

I learned that the reproductive labor of Black women was extensively covered in other books that described the forced genetic and legal reproduction of enslaved people, but these accounts most often portrayed Black women as victims, not agents. Black women's post-slavery reproductive experiences were generally omitted, but Black women cut their birthrate in half after slavery. Few historians attributed this sociological and demographic evidence to Black women's agency.<sup>52</sup> I sought to explain changes in Black birth rates sociologists documented by making correlations between their organizing strategies, such as through the Colored Women's Club movement, and produced my first essay, "African Women and Abortion" in 1992.<sup>53</sup> Since then, I have been criticized by Black anti-abortion zealots for defending our reproductive autonomy from those who perceive us as mere breeders for the race, such as the sponsors of the national anti-abortion billboard campaign claiming that "the most dangerous place for a black child is in the womb" launched in 2010.<sup>54</sup>

### **Challenging Black Masculinist Projections onto the Bodies of Black Women**

One of the reasons I felt compelled to combine work against sterilization abuse and for abortion rights simultaneously was the response to Black feminism from Black men in the nationalist movement that introduced me to liberatory struggle, and the resistance of the feminist movement to challenging white supremacy. I felt poised between two competing movements, and needed to organize intersectionally from the standpoint of a radical African American feminist, addressing racism, sexism, and capitalism.

As said previously by many writers, such as bell hooks, Black masculinity is not the problem; Black patriarchy is.<sup>55</sup> Black feminists frequently contest declarations of ownership of our bodies by men who assume that heterosexuality is the innate norm, and seek to enforce strict gender boundaries between men and women. Black misogynists reinforce the patriarchal concept that cultures, institutions, religions, and economic systems were crafted only by men to serve the interests of only

men. Like their white counterparts, they perceive reproduction as the province of men, and understand that controlling reproduction shapes African American communities. Yet Black men do so from standpoints as failed patriarchs, disempowered by white supremacy. By focusing primarily on the power differentials between men, masculinist anti-racist discourses invisibilize the experiences of Black women except as objects of sexual and reproductive subordination. As Paula Giddings observed during the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation controversy, “More than ever before it is essential that we advance a discourse on sexuality that is liberating for those who engage in it and truncating to the souls of those who don’t” to challenge manipulation of Black women’s sexuality.<sup>56</sup>

Many iterations of these masculinist territorial claims over Black women’s bodies exist through history promoted by those who believe one of the ways to defeat white supremacy is to promote a form of “cradle competition,” to use Margaret Sanger’s phrase.<sup>57</sup> In other words, Black women must outbreed white women to defeat white supremacy. Black nationalists have expressed such “power through population” sentiments since the days of the Marcus Garvey movement that associated security against racist oppression with growing population numbers.<sup>58</sup> The 1934 seventh annual convention of Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association unanimously passed a resolution condemning birth control.<sup>59</sup> Black male opposition against family planning may also be expressed violently: a clinic was burned down in Cleveland in the 1970s by suspects convinced that birth control was genocide.<sup>60</sup> The previously mentioned anti-abortion billboards recycled the abortion-as-genocide arguments of the misogynist wing of the Black Power movement.<sup>61</sup> Patriarchs on the right and left seek to control women’s fertility.

Paradoxically, racialized genocide arguments against birth control and abortion go both ways, predicting either the end of the Black race or the end of the white one. White nationalists circulate a film, *Demographic Winter: The Decline of the Human Family*, created to look like a documentary in 2008, that combines right-wing Christian morality and ultra-conservative ideology to argue that the sexual revolution, gay marriage, and declining white fertility rates constitute a set of sins that will collapse Western civilization.<sup>62</sup> Another white anti-abortion group, Life Dynamics, produced a film in 2009 called *Maafa 21* that distorted Black history and claimed that abortion is a Planned Parenthood-inspired genocidal plot.<sup>63</sup> To counter these claims, SisterSong produced *We Always Resist: Trust Black Women* in 2011 to affirm Black women’s reproductive justice activism.<sup>64</sup>

Instead of shying away from motherhood, there is, instead, a perception of a cult of motherhood in the Black community. When journalist Leon Dash wrote in 1988 that nearly a fourth of all unmarried teenage mothers intentionally became pregnant, he invited a Black feminist interrogation of why.<sup>65</sup> Is early motherhood a self-emancipatory project for young Black women? Does the ability to exercise maternal authority in lieu of other avenues of empowerment and self-esteem hold particular meanings for young Black women? Has other data on teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, incarceration rates, and school dropout patterns been intersected with the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse among Black girls? What are the

results of cultural pressures by religious leaders and family members not to use birth control or seek abortions? How are we positively expressing our sexual human rights? How does gender fluidity affect reproductive options? These are the questions reproductive justice theory and activism seek to answer.

Some Black men have challenged these masculinist presumptions. Reproductive justice proponents like Dr. Willie Parker, an abortion provider in Alabama and Mississippi, follow in the footsteps of others like Dr. Kenneth Edelin who was convicted in 1975 for providing abortions even after *Roe* decriminalized the practice in 1973.<sup>66</sup> In rejecting arguments that claim abortion is Black genocide, Parker analyzes that “They [the anti-abortionists] understand that by curtailing abortion for black women they curtail it for white women, too. ...The attack on abortion rights is nothing less than an effort to put all women in their place.”<sup>67</sup> Dr. T.R.M. Howard provided abortion services in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s as a civil rights leader.<sup>68</sup> Dr. Edgar Keemer, an African American physician based in Detroit, was another well-known and medically respected provider who was convicted and jailed for a brief period in the 1950s for performing illegal abortions. Many Black women were also helped by a white minister, Rev. Howard Moody, who established the Center for Reproductive and Sexual Help in New York City and the Clergy Consultation Service in 1967, a network of 1,400 members of the clergy who provided abortion referral services. They helped more than 450,000 women in the years before *Roe*.<sup>69</sup> Keemer resumed his abortion work after his release and ultimately became a major referral point for the Clergy Consultation Service.<sup>70</sup> Faith Evans became the first African American male president of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights in the mid-1980s, organizing people of faith to support reproductive freedom.<sup>71</sup>

### **Organizing a Reproductive Justice Movement**

The first national organization to specifically address Black women’s reproductive health issues was the NBWHP (now the Black Women’s Health Imperative) founded by Byllye Avery in 1984 after the widely successful conference on Black Women’s Health Issues at Spelman College in 1983 that attracted nearly 2,000 attendees.<sup>72</sup> Avery, after co-founding both an abortion clinic and a birthing center, launched a movement that answered the demand by Angela Davis: “What is urgently required is a broad campaign to defend the reproductive rights of all women—and especially those women whose economic circumstances often compel them to relinquish the right to reproduction itself.”<sup>73</sup> A decade later, the concept of reproductive justice was born and the leaders of NBWHP were among its founding mothers.

Reproductive justice resists white ethnocentric feminist histories, theories, and practices that claim to represent “all” women.<sup>74</sup> As Black feminist experts on reproductive politics, we built on the emerging fields of Critical Race Theory and Critical Feminist Theory that challenged essentialist analyses that posit that one authentic female or black “voice” exists that can be generalized to speak for all women or Black people.<sup>75</sup>

We examined all histories and policies designed to control Black women’s reproductive and parenting practices to develop our unique theory. From medical



experimentation to draconian policies of incarceration and punishment, coercive reproductive policies signal the government's transition from overt sterilization before the 1980s into covert and coercive policies to "actively coerce Black women into voluntarily sterilizing themselves, either through permanent surgery or through long-acting barrier and chemical sterilization procedures, such as the copper IUD, Norplant, and Depo-Provera."<sup>76</sup>

After the initial conceptualization by Black feminists in 1994, the first organization actively promoting reproductive justice was the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, founded in 1997 by Luz Rodriguez, then director of the Latina Roundtable on Health and Reproductive Rights.<sup>77</sup> At its first national conference in 2003 at Spelman College, SisterSong invited women of color to consider whether reproductive justice could be used as an organizing strategy to build a new movement of women of color to exert power in the reproductive health and rights movements. Other pre-existing organizations, such as Asian and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health (now Forward Together), the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center, and SisterLove (an HIV/AIDs organization), quickly incorporated the framework. Over the next decade, women of color developed or reformulated new formations like California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!, Black Women for Reproductive Justice, the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, New Voices Pittsburgh for Reproductive Justice, and the Milwaukee Reproductive Justice Collective, among others.<sup>78</sup>

Through building collectives, organizations, and alliances, women of color activists successfully, if inadvertently, overwhelmed the pro-choice framework through political synergy by radical women of color and white women in activist and academic arenas who insisted on anti-imperialist and anti-racist analyses of reproductive politics. By including but not relying solely on social media strategies, campaigns by women of color changed policies, defeated legislation, and re-centered critical battles, such as eliminating the Hyde Amendment.<sup>79</sup>

The year 1994 was a significant conceptual moment for launching generic leadership in reproductive politics, described by Barbara Ransby as a "'A process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task'—and a confidence in the wisdom of ordinary people to define their problems and imagine solution[s]."<sup>80</sup> In analyzing SNCC organizer Ella Baker's leadership style, Ransby quotes Antonio Gramsci who said, "The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in elegance, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader' not just a simple orator."<sup>81</sup> The collective birthing and propagating of the reproductive justice framework demonstrated that a powerful social justice movement could organize around an idea, not only a charismatic individual.

We understood that we could not build a movement only within the pro-choice/pro-life binary frame, and only based on stories of individual women's experiences. We needed an intersectional episteme for valuing our bodies based on a sustained



analysis of white supremacy that often describes Black women as sexually irresponsible, promiscuous Jezebels, or as combative, perpetually angry Sapphires, as Patricia Hill Collins explains.<sup>82</sup> Under the masculinist gaze of white supremacy, our bodies are imagined as reproductively unmanageable, unrapeable, and unrestrained in our passions. We instead reimagined our bodies as sites of pleasure, struggle, resistance, oppression, and fugitivity to reconfigure ourselves as subjects not objects of reproductive control.

Instead of inscribing our blackness as a negative location and our bodies as human and financial capital for others to exploit, reproductive justice emerged from Black women's experiences based on subjugated knowledges, the kinds of knowledge excluded by the dominant pro-choice movement because of our subordinated status. Our social location became a site of power rather than simply a statement of identity, as we composed our new framework from the margins. As Collins said, "Black women intellectuals who articulate an autonomous, self-defined standpoint are in a position to examine the usefulness of coalitions with other groups, both scholarly and activist, in order to develop new models for social change."<sup>83</sup>

Because reproductive justice praxis and theory accounts for diversity and differences among people and avoids essentialism, it examines multiple experiences of injustice and subordination. Its ambiguity, flexibility, and open-endedness provides a heuristic and evolving approach revealing insights about multiple and intersecting individual and group experiences by examining the webs of social structures that affect reproductive decision making. As a conceptual framework, it appeals to many audiences by employing multiple lenses through which many scholars and activists can adapt the framework for particularizing and generalizing interpretations.<sup>84</sup>

### **Feminist Activism and Theory and Reproductive Justice**

Like intersectionality, reproductive justice has become somewhat of a buzzword by those in the feminist movement who undervalue and overvalue its promise. In offering a seemingly infinite number of categories of reproductive oppression, it is concerned with which transversal categories make the most material differences in peoples' lives. Which are most salient within the construct of white supremacy? This is a question of performance of identities rather than the rigidity of classifications. For example, for transgender people, how a person sees their own gender identity is often different than how society perceives them. Yet that dissonance has deadly consequences, proven by the numbingly frequent murders of trans people, particularly those of color.<sup>85</sup>

Reproductive justice theory, strategy, and practices emerge out of the distinct historical realities of diverse communities. Because of the increasing popularity of the reproductive justice analysis, leading many to adopt and/or co-opt the framework, in 2006 a group of women of color defined our own standards and a methodology to establish parameters for how it is applied, while also offering tremendous scope for invention and intervention. There is no "correct" way to apply reproductive

justice; the criteria delineate the most common incorrect ways to under-realize its dynamic potential:

- Intersectionality—issues must be inter-connected
- Connects the local to the global
- Based on the human rights framework
- Makes the link between the individual and community
- Addresses government and corporate responsibility
- Fights all forms of population control (eugenics)
- Commits to individual/community leadership development that results in power shifts
- Puts marginalized communities at the center of the analysis
- Understands that political power, participation of those impacted, and policy changes are necessary to achieve reproductive justice
- Has its own intersectionality of involving theory, strategy, and practice, and,
- Applies to everyone.

By using these criteria, any organization may reformulate its mission and work to embrace the reproductive justice framework. However, it would be hubristic to co-opt the work of the reproductive justice movement if the organization is not in integrity with the above-named criteria. This distinction has created some confusion in the pro-choice movement because some reproductive justice advocates assert that organizations not led by women of color should not use the term. This is a limited, essentialist analysis. Just because Black women created the framework, it does not only apply to the African American community. That overly simplistic critique contains at least two faulty presumptions. First, that Black women cannot create universal praxis and theory applicable beyond our social location. This has been disproven by previous broadly popular and salient theories of identity politics and intersectionality. Second, this faulty assumption claims we only focused on problematizing the pro-choice framework and our relations with the predominantly white movement. Factually, we placed ourselves as Black women in the center of our lens, not the problems of and with white women.

Within the realm of reproductive politics, abortion is the focus of a large portion of the feminist movement, dominated by liberal feminists foregrounded in the media and large organizations. This singular approach is both appropriate and insufficient. It is appropriate because 47,000 women die each year from unsafe abortions worldwide, about eight per hour.<sup>86</sup> Beyond the significance of claims for women's bodily autonomy, a preventable health crisis with that many casualties is a cause for worldwide alarm. The role of abortion in mobilizing those opposed to women's human rights worldwide is clear with the thousands of restrictions promulgated to build the political power of conservatives and religious fundamentalists.<sup>87</sup> Regulatory and punitive laws, packaged as consumer protection for women, are coupled with direct action, arson, and homicide to decrease access to abortion when strategies to legally outlaw it stumble.

Feminist arguments for abortion rights became less radical over the years. The first wave of activism was, interestingly, not expressed as support for abortion

legalization, but for voluntary motherhood to prevent the high mortality rates of illegal and unsafe abortions. Anarchist feminist Emma Goldman, who declared that women had a right to avoid sex to avoid pregnancy, started her birth control campaign in the 1890s. She was arrested twice for distributing birth control information, and actually recruited Margaret Sanger into the movement. The two parted ways when Sanger became singularly focused on birth control for women's empowerment, while Goldman confronted broader economic, social and political injustices.

This activism resonated with African American women who endorsed the campaign for birth control. They talked about voluntary motherhood through abstinence and the right of women to say no to sex, which challenged Victorian anxieties and changed American norms. Feminist-thinking Black women promoted self-determination, respectability, and racial uplift to contest white supremacist stereotypes of sexual licentiousness and depravity. In 1894, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin wrote in *The Women's Era*, "Not all women are intended for mothers. Some of us have not the temperament for family life," echoing Goldman's stance.<sup>88</sup>

The abortion rights activism of the second wave of feminism followed more in Sanger's footsteps than Goldman's. Most activists demanded repeal of anti-abortion laws. Privacy became the central platform after *Roe* in 1973 and formed the basis of the pro-choice framework. A few more radical voices, like those in the Combahee River Collective, demanded that abortion rights be contextualized within the struggle against white supremacy, homophobia, and capitalism.

The insufficiency of the pro-choice framework became clearer with the 1976 Hyde prohibition denying government funding for abortion. A restriction that started out targeting poor women on Medicaid now affects people of all classes, including people incarcerated in federal prisons, people in the military, and on Indian Reservations. This broadening of Hyde's impact through the Affordable Care Act finally alerted the mainstream pro-choice movement to the existential dangers of ignoring reproductive injustices experienced by vulnerable people. This type of failure allows abortion opponents to equate abortion with forced sterilization, and allows abortion proponents to be accused of racism, population control, and neglect. These weaknesses in the feminist movement became successful anti-abortion strategies.

In the 21st century, most anti-abortionists seek to criminalize women and physicians, as they did under the 1873 Comstock Law prohibiting the distribution of information on abortion and contraception. Now they have added racialized pseudo-civil rights rhetoric to their arsenal. Prosecutions of those attempting self-abortion proliferate, and miscarriages are deemed suspect and investigated. The increasing prosecution of pregnant people and physicians occurs in the context of a bloated and racist prison industrial complex eagerly gorging on people ensnared in its traps, producing more wealth for economic elites. Fetuses are privileged over women's rights, and they try to use human rights language to claim that abortions are "crimes against humanity" with no sense of irony. Apparently, women lose their human rights when pregnant. A singular focus on abortion is patently inadequate to respond to these innumerable intersections of race, class, gender, and the state.

Connecting these developments in the activist community strengthened our reproductive justice analysis, shifted the terms of the debate, and increased the power of women of color. Intersectional theories interrogated social construction theories that understated the importance and consequences of specific embodiments. The question remains what impact will reproductive justice theory and praxis have in academic spaces with their fine-shaved and overlapped discourses on post-modernism and post-structuralism? Knowledge is never innocent of the context and the subjectivities with which it was produced. Privileged academic, institutionalized feminist discourses require deciphering and offer little access for non-academic political analyses to be valued socially and politically. One wonders if some proponents of such disembodied theories are giddily trying to divorce themselves from the toxic legacies of white embodiment, or perhaps deconstruct all forms of identity politics to relativize privileges and disadvantages in their resistance to essentialism by deconstructing the categories altogether.

Yet tribalistic white identity politics produced the chaos of the Trump presidency. We need to analyze the reality of white identity politics, not simply discourse them away. The problem is not the white identity, *per se*. The problem is the uses to which it has been put. White supremacy and its handmaiden white privilege are the concrete from which the social construction of identities is built. Is it possible (or even desirable or necessary) to deconstruct our intersectional individual and group identities to neutralize the deadly vulnerabilities we experience through them? Instead of disavowing identities, identities are how we can determine the differing and varying human rights needs of groups and individuals. Reproductive justice is a sustainable framework in which the reproductive concerns of all people can be mediated to re-allocate social benefits.

Using the concept of multiple lenses to express polyvocal standpoints, reproductive justice allows reframing of values and demands that multiple audiences perceive as vital and fundamental to their human rights. Supporters devote time and energy to understand their experiences through their own lens. Instead of focusing on who is excluded by traditional feminist theories, reproductive justice is a sophisticated methodology ample enough to be universally adaptable, offering little purchase for claims of exclusion.

Post-modernism challenges the binary oppositions of Western philosophical thought while also conceptualizing multiple and shifting identities, for which thinking about intersectionality provided a methodology for analyzing the relationships between gender, race, and class. As Kathy Davis observed, the development of the concept of intersectionality “coincided with Foucauldian perspectives on power that focused on dynamic processes and the deconstruction of normalizing and homogenizing categories. Intersectionality seemed to embody a commitment to the situatedness of all knowledge.”<sup>89</sup> By providing a flexible framework that allows theorists to incorporate their own social location, intersectionality enhanced the possibilities for examining how categories of race, class, and gender are interdependent and mutually constitutive.

Reproductive justice theory incorporating intersectionality may be extended to address post-modernist and post-structuralist theories, essentialism, and the

materiality of identities. Reproductive justice assesses post-structuralists who appear to neglect how categories of difference affect the reproductive conditions of individuals and groups. This creates discourses on political relativism; however, political relativism becomes moral relativism when white supremacy is ignored and its material impacts on bodies of disadvantaged people are under-theorized or dismissed altogether. For example, Crenshaw analyses how Black women experience much of the sexual aggression and violence that the feminist movement challenges, but Black women's experiences also include their racially subordinated status within a white supremacist construct.<sup>90</sup> Failing to intersect the social construction of race and gender provides an impoverished analysis that denies the material reality of Black women's experiences of gender oppression.

As Judith Butler analyzes in dissecting the famous phrase, “the personal is political,” women have assumed labels we did not create; we are performing gender. I assume since race is also a social construct, she could include it in her analysis of performativity. She says that “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo,” and yet goes on to also say that, “the body...is a materiality that bears meaning.”<sup>91</sup> While biological and gender labels may not be accurate or static, the categories have consequences through their cultural meanings. In fact, we take on and embody the constructs; we endure them because society requires it, and is dangerous not to. As Butler confirms, “as a strategy for survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences...and those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished.”<sup>92</sup>

Flesh, ungendered and unraced, cannot offer a radical practice and theory, and cannot be discoursed away by contemporary critical analyses. Through our Black bodies, our communities are laboratories for social as well as medical experiments, such as testing with long-term contraceptives like Depo-Provera, destruction of the social welfare contract through welfare reform, or the over-institutionalization of Black people through the prison industrial complex, all perceived as solutions to the vexing problem of a Black underclass maintained and re-created by a white supremacist society.<sup>93</sup> According to historian Naomi Murakawa, “The U.S. did not face a crime problem that was racialized. It faced a race problem that was criminalized.”<sup>94</sup> Black female flesh offers a praxis for demonstrating, as Spillers says, that “the captive flesh demarcate[s] a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.”<sup>95</sup>

Linda Alcoff attempts to reconcile the tensions between post-modernism and post-structuralism and lived experiences. In her work on *The Future of Whiteness*, Alcoff analyzes whiteness not only as a social construct, but how it changes over time. She points out that even as the biological categories of humans become more amorphous, the concept of race will survive as probably will gender.<sup>96</sup> She points out that many white theorists long for the days which differences can be ignored, as a dismissal of the importance of identity politics.<sup>97</sup> Alcoff's reconciliation bolsters the intersectionality of reproductive justice theory and praxis.

Reproductive justice activists assert that policies that affect peoples' lived experiences cannot be dismissed by deconstructing the very categories that mark

victims for discrimination and inhumane treatment. Categories and differences are not the problem, but the use to which such distinctions are put. For example, countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Japan, Sweden, and Russia have promoted campaigns to enlarge their white breeding stock, as well as sterilizing disabled people, particularly those from low-income or disadvantaged backgrounds. The disabilities are not the problem; it's the disabling environment in which people are targeted for reproductive management.

Now that these constructs exist, what about the voices of those disadvantaged by the philosophized traditions in speaking to how these constructs affect our lives? If constructed realities are the fundamental problem, what are the solutions for the material world? We cannot ignore the implications of social constructs and impacts on our reproductive choices. What is the voice of the subordinated? What are we saying through our voices, our social, political, and cultural actions?

In her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes about the epistemological violence of imperialism and white supremacy against those she terms "subalterns," people denied political and economic power and social mobility who "can speak and know their conditions."<sup>98</sup> She identifies the historical and ideological factors that obstruct the possibility of being heard from the periphery, and what it means to have political subjectivity. Particularly, reproductive justice activists challenge obstructions that devalue the knowledges emanating from our silenced, de-privileged arenas.

To answer Spivak's question about can the subaltern speak, as a reproductive justice activist I suggest beginning at another place: why remain in the subaltern position in the first place? It is by definition a disempowered place from which to claim voice and knowledge. While not denying the objective forces of subordination, we can choose whether to accept the epistemological limits of a subaltern space. We have options about how to amass and use our power to challenge devaluation and objectification. Instead of holding our hands out like Dickens' Oliver Twist begging for more, we recognize that academics and mainstream organizations need us more than we need them to substantiate their theories and obtain funding for their operations. That is a powerful position reversal from which to insist on elevating the reproductive justice framework and offering a critique of the ideology of population control from the right and the left while challenging hegemonic practices in the academy and mainstream activism.<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusion

It is unlikely that those who have an incomplete and late-developing analysis of white supremacy will be best prepared to respond to this historical moment of triumphalism by this authoritarian regime I call Americanized fascism. We must guard against the surreptitious replacement of radical Black feminists with other voices that have failed to mount protracted and intersectional resistance to racialized reproductive injustices and white supremacy, while at the same time avoiding racial essentialism. Spivak also writes about using the human rights framework for creating space for new knowledge

production that subverts western hegemony by avoiding subaltern essentialism by reminding us of Paulo Freire's astute observation that "during the initial stages of the struggle, the oppressed...tend themselves to become oppressors."<sup>100</sup>

Yet significantly, the 94% of Black women who rejected Trump in 2016 wrote a memo others ignored. This proto-fascist resurgence is a "distinct political movement with comprehensible characteristics and definable strengths and weaknesses," to paraphrase Frederick Clarkson who analyzes the Christian Right.<sup>101</sup> Reproductive justice offers one strategy for building a coherent human rights movement based on an anti-fascist analysis that incorporates race, gender, and class because it is obvious that previous liberal frameworks are inadequate. Without a sturdy intersectional framework for analyzing reproductive politics, we risk underestimating the threat to our existence, and this is not just an academic intellectual exercise. As Ellen Messer-Davidow says, "Social change is not merely work performed in the present; it is the process of crystallizing a future."<sup>102</sup> She also adds, "In times such as these, there are no innocent bystanders. If you're a bystander, you're not innocent."<sup>103</sup>

Reproductive justice thrives in the borderlands of ambiguity, and its incompleteness offers amazing flexibility and adaptability to allow multiple interpretations that invite elaboration and clarification. Reproductive justice is a process of synthesis with which to explore new territory and make new human rights claims. For example, ethicist Grace Kao offers an analysis that links human rights to the concept of ethical realism to express human interdependence and a commitment to the equal moral worth of all human beings.<sup>104</sup> Multiple interpretations of reproductive justice theory defy a hierarchical assumption that privileges one interpretation over another. By opening possibilities for further analyses and discourses, reproductive justice praxis offers a fertile site for imagining creative intersections of power and difference to gain new insights and possibilities. We explore new questions about reproductive politics and activist and scholarly engagement as a fitting tribute to the legacy of the Combahee River Collective.

## Notes

1. Zakiya Luna, "From Rights to Justice: Women of Color Changing the Face of US Reproductive Rights Organizing," *Societies Without Borders* 4 (2009): 343–65.
2. "A Black Feminist Statement: The Combahee River Collective," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1982), 15.
3. The co-creators of the reproductive justice framework (naming ourselves Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice) published a statement called Black Women on Universal Health Care Reform on August 16, 1994 in the *Washington Post* by 836 Black women critiquing President Clinton's health care strategies, <https://bwrj.wordpress.com/category/wadrj-on-health-care-reform/> (accessed April 16, 2017):

Dear Members of Congress:

Black women have unique problems that must be addressed while you are debating health care reform legislation. Lack of access to treatment for diseases that primarily affect Black women and the inaccessibility of comprehensive preventive health care services are



important issues that must be addressed under reform. We are particularly concerned about coverage for the full range of reproductive services under health care reform legislation.

Reproductive freedom is a life and death issue for many Black women and deserves as much recognition as any other freedom. The right to have an abortion is a personal decision that must be made by a woman in consultation with her physician. Accordingly, unimpeded access to abortion as a part of the full range of reproductive health services offered under health care reform, is essential. Moreover, abortion coverage must be provided for all women under health care reform regardless of ability to pay, with no interference from the government. WE WILL NOT ENDORSE A HEALTH CARE REFORM SYSTEM THAT DOES NOT COVER THE FULL RANGE OF REPRODUCTIVE SERVICES FOR ALL WOMEN INCLUDING ABORTION.

In addition to reproductive health services, health care reform must include:

*Universal coverage and equal access to health services.* Everyone must be covered under health care reform. To be truly universal, benefits must be provided regardless of income, health or employment status, age or location. It must be affordable for individuals and families, without deductibles and copayments. All people must be covered equally.

*Comprehensiveness.* The package must cover all needed health care services, including diagnostic, treatment, preventative, long-term care, mental health services, prescription drugs and pre-existing conditions. All reproductive health services must be covered and treated the same as other health services. This includes pap tests, mammograms, contraceptives methods, prenatal care, delivery, abortion, sterilization, infertility services, STD's and HIV/AIDS screening and treatment. Everyone must also be permitted to choose their own health care providers.

*Protection from discrimination.* The plan must include strong anti-discriminatory provisions to ensure the protection of all women of color, the elderly, the poor and those with disabilities. In addition, the plan must not discriminate since sexual orientation. In order to accomplish this goal, Black women must be represented on national, state and local planning, review, and decision-making bodies.

We, the undersigned, are dedicated to ensuring that these items are covered under health care reform legislation. As your constituents, we believe that you have a responsibility to work for the best interests of those you represent, and we request that you work for passage of a bill that provides coverage for these services.

Sincerely, (836 Black Women).

4. The 12 women and their affiliations at the time who became the founding mothers of the concept of reproductive justice were:

Toni M. Bond	Chicago Abortion Fund
ReverendAlma Crawford	Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
Evelyn S. Field	National Council of Negro Women
Terri James	American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois
Bisola Maringay	National Black Women's Health Project, Chicago Chapter
Cassandra McConnell	Planned Parenthood of Greater Cleveland
Cynthia Newbille	National Black Women's Health Project (now Black Women's Health Imperative)
Loretta J. Ross	Center for Democratic Renewal
Elizabeth Terry	National Abortion Rights Action League of Pennsylvania
"Able" Mabel Thomas	Pro-Choice Resource Center, Inc.
Winnette P. Willis	Chicago Abortion Fund
Kim Youngblood	National Black Women's Health Project

5. Hull, *All the Women*, 16.
6. See Monica Simpson, “Reproductive Justice and ‘Choice’: An Open Letter to Planned Parenthood,” *Rewire*, August 5, 2014, <https://rewire.news/article/2014/08/05/reproductive-justice-choice-open-letter-planned-parenthood/> (accessed March 22, 2017).
7. Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985–2000* Barbara Christian, edited by Gloria Bowles, M. Biulia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 41.
8. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), vii.
9. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Whose Story Is It, Anyway? Feminist and Antiracist Appropriations of Anita Hill,” in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality*, edited by Toni Morrison (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1992), 404.
10. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 18.
11. Crenshaw, “Whose Story Is It, Anyway?,” 404.
12. See Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981), 94. Also, Doris Davenport, “The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimin,” *ibid.*, p. 85. Also, Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Anchor Books, 1981).
13. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 202.
14. Nicole Rousseau, *Black Women’s Burden: Commodifying Black Reproduction* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 13.
15. Evelyn M. Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 94.
16. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York, NY: Pantheon Press, 1997), 3–4.
17. Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2006).
18. Nicole Ivy, “Bodies of Work: A Meditation on Medical Imaginaries and Enslaved Women,” *Souls Journal* 18 (2016): 1, 11.
19. Margaret Charles Smith and Linda Janet Holmes, *Listen to Me Good: The Story of an Alabama Midwife* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996).
20. Groundswell Fund, “which Exclusively Funds Reproductive Justice Organizations, for Example, Was a Subsidiary of the Tides Foundation, and Became Independent in 2010.” See <https://groundswellfund.org/> (accessed March 22, 2017). Other foundations include the Overbrook Foundation, and General Services Foundation. Larger foundations include the Educational Foundation of America and the Ford Foundation.
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Loretta J. Ross started her career in the women's movement in the 1970s, working at the DC Rape Crisis Center, NOW, the National Black Women's Health Project, and SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, among other social justice organizations. She is one of the co-creators of the reproductive justice



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