

The Color of Choice: White Supremacy and Reproductive Justice

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“[T]he regulation of reproduction and the exploitation of women’s bodies and labor is both a tool and a result of systems of oppression based on race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age and immigration status.”² -- Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice

It is impossible to understand the resistance of women of color to the reproductive politics of both the right and the left without first comprehending how the system of white supremacy constructs different destinies for each ethnic population of the United States through targeted, yet diffuse, policies of population control. Even a cursory examination of the reproductive politics dominating today’s headlines – such as debates on abortion and welfare -- reveals that some women are encouraged to have more children while others are discouraged. Why are some women glorified as mothers while others have their motherhood rights contested? Why are there obstacles for women who seek abortions while our society neglects mothers and children already here? As we move toward “designer babies” made possible by advances in assisted reproductive technologies, does anyone truly believe that all women will have an equal right to benefit from these “new reproductive choices,” that children of all races will be promoted, or that vulnerable women will not be exploited?

Women of color reproductive justice activists oppose all political rationales, social theories, and genetic justifications for reproductive oppression against communities of color, whether through blatant policies of sterilization abuse or through coercive use of dangerous contraceptives. Instead, women of color activists demand “reproductive justice,” which requires the protection of women’s human rights to achieve the physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic and social well-being of women and girls.³ Reproductive justice goes far beyond the demand to eliminate racial disparities in reproductive health services, and beyond the right-to-privacy-based claims to legal abortion made by the pro-choice movement and dictated and limited by the US Supreme Court. A reproductive justice analysis addresses the fact that progressive issues are divided, isolating advocacy for abortion from other social justice issues relevant to the lives of every woman. In the words of SisterSong president Toni Bond, “We have to reconnect women’s health and bodies with the rest of their lives.”⁴ In short, reproductive justice can be described as reproductive rights embedded in a human rights and social justice framework used to counter all forms of population control that denies women’s human rights.

White Supremacy and Population Control From Right to the Left

“Population control is necessary to maintain the normal operation of U.S. commercial interests around the world. Without our trying to help these countries with their economic and social development, the world would rebel against the strong U.S. commercial presence.”⁵

-- R.T. Ravenholt, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID),
1977

Although the United States does not currently have an explicit population control policy, population control ideologies march from the margins to the mainstream of reproductive politics and inform policies promoted by both the right and the left. Fears of being numerically and politically overwhelmed by people of color bleed meaning from any alternative interpretations of the constellation of population control policies that restricts immigration by people of color, encourages sterilization and contraceptive abuse of people of color, and incarcerates upwards of two million people, the vast majority of whom are people of color.

The expanded definition of white supremacy as I use it in this essay is an interlocking system of racism, patriarchy, homophobia, ultra-nationalism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and religious fundamentalism that creates a complex matrix of oppressions faced by people of color in the U.S. As a tenacious ideology in practice, it is evidenced on both the right and the left -- in the far right, the religious right, paleo-conservatives, neo-conservatives, neo-liberals and liberals. Abby Ferber, a researcher on the intersection of race, gender and white supremacy, writes that “defining white supremacy as extremist in its racism often has the result of absolving the mainstream population of its racism, portraying white supremacists as the racist fringe in contrast to some non-racist majority.”⁶

White supremacy not only defines the character of debates on reproductive politics but it also explains and predicts the borders of the debate. In other words, what Americans think as a society about women of color and population control is determined and informed by their relationship to white supremacy as an ideology, and these beliefs affect the country’s reproductive politics. Both conservatives and liberals enforce a reproductive hierarchy of privatization and punishment that targets the fertility, motherhood, and liberty of women of color.

Population control policies are externally imposed by governments, corporations or private agencies to control -- by increasing or limiting -- population growth and behavior, usually by controlling women’s reproduction and fertility. All national population policies, even those developed for purportedly benign reasons, put women's empowerment at risk. Forms of population control include immigration restrictions, selective population movement or dispersal, incarceration, and various forms of discrimination, as well as more blatant manifestations, such as cases in which pregnant illegal immigrants and incarcerated women are forced to have abortions. According to a 1996 study by Human Rights Watch, abuses of incarcerated women not only include denial of adequate health care, but pressure to seek an abortion, particularly if the woman is impregnated by a prison guard.⁷

Meanwhile, impediments are placed in the way of women who voluntarily choose to terminate their pregnancies. The only logic that explains this apparent moral inconsistency is one that examines precisely who is subjected to which treatment and who is affected by which reproductive policy at which time in history. Women of color have little trouble distinguishing between those encouraged to have more children and those who are not, and understanding which social, political and economic forces influence these determinations.

Population control policies are by no means exclusively a twentieth century phenomenon. During the Roman Empire, the state was concerned with a falling birthrate among married upper-class couples. As has been the case for elite classes throughout history, procreation was seen as a duty to society. Emperor Augustus consequently enacted laws containing positive and negative incentives to reproduction, promoting at least three children per couple and discouraging childlessness.⁸ Augustus probably knew that the falling birthrate was not a result of

abstention among Roman men and women, but rather of contraceptive and abortifacient use by Roman women to control their fertility. Through legislation, he asserted the state's interest in compelling its citizens to having more children for the good of the society.⁹ Because no ancient Roman texts offer the perspectives of women on this issue, it is difficult to ascertain what women thought of this territorial assertion of male privilege over their private lives. However, the Roman birthrate continued to decline despite the Emperor's orders, suggesting that Roman women probably did what most women have done throughout the ages: made the decisions that made sense for them and refused to allow men to control their fertility. As historian Rickie Solinger points out, "The history of reproductive politics will always be in part a record of women controlling their reproductive capacity, no matter what the law says, and by those acts reshaping the law."¹⁰

Despite the notable Roman failure to impose the state's will on individual human reproductive behavior, most governments today have yet to recognize the virtual impossibility of successfully regulating human reproductive behavior through national population policies. Those that have tried it, such as China and Romania, have done so with catastrophic results. Even governments seeking to achieve their population objectives through more benign policies, such as offering financial incentives for women to have children, or more punitive welfare restrictions to prevent the same, can only report negligible results. Human beings in general, and women in particular, have the tendency to decide these things for themselves, using whatever means and technology are available in their environment. Despite government and moralistic pronouncements, women perceive their reproductive decisions as private as their periods. Even when the law, the church, or their partners oppose their decisions, they tend to make the decision about whether or not to use birth control or abortion, or to parent, for themselves.

This lived reality has not stopped lawmakers from trying to assert control over women's reproduction. Modern efforts to increase the fertility rate for some women underlie attacks on abortion and contraceptive use, while efforts to decrease the fertility rate of other women elicit the spread of dangerous contraceptives and forced abortions. Who gets targeted for positive, pro-natalist policies encouraging childbirth versus negative, anti-natalist policies that discourage childbirth is determined by powerful elites, informed by prejudices based on race, class, sexual identity, and immigration status. Policies that restrict abortion access, distort sex and sexuality education, impose parental notification requirements for minors, allow husband-veto options for abortion, and limit use of emergency and regular contraception all conspire to ensure that access to fertility control is constricted for white women, especially young white women.

On the other hand, women of color face intimidating obstacles to having children such as forced contraception, sterilization abuse, and, in the case of poor women and women of color on social assistance, welfare family caps. To the extent that access to abortion, contraceptives and sex education is restricted for women of color, it is simply collateral damage in the struggle to force white women to have more children. These population control policies have both domestic and international dimensions, which are rarely linked in the minds of those who believe that the struggle is principally about abortion.

Internationally, the fertility rate of women of color is the primary preoccupation of those determined to impose population controls on developing countries. According to the United Nations, in 2000 more than 100 countries worldwide had large "youth bulges"—a situation where people aged 15 to 29 account for more than 40 percent of all adults. All of these extremely youthful countries are in the developing world, where fertility rates are highest, and most are in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Many of the young people who make up these "youth

bulges” face dismal prospects because of deliberate underdevelopment. Over the past decade, youth unemployment rates have risen to more than double the overall global unemployment rate. In the absence of a secure livelihood, many experts believe that discontented youth may resort to violence or turn to insurgent organizations as sources of social mobility and self-esteem. Recent studies show that countries with large youth bulges were roughly two-and-a-half times more likely to experience an outbreak of civil conflict than countries below this benchmark.¹¹

To respond to these alarming trends, many on the right and the left want to restrict the growth of these populations in the developing world. Family planning in this context becomes a tool to fight terrorism and civil unrest. Those on the left want to increase access to family planning, economic development, and education as a way to curb population growth, even if achieved through the coercive use of contraceptives and sterilization. Those on the right prefer to use military interventions and economic domination to achieve population control.

The Bush Administration’s family planning and HIV/AIDS policies are also having the impact of serving as tools of population control in the Global South. The US government’s ABC - A for abstinence, B for being faithful, and C for condom use – program is purportedly designed to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS. Critics of the policy point out that the ABC approach offers no option for girls or women coerced into sex, for married women who are trying to get pregnant yet have unfaithful husbands, or for victims of rape and incest who have no control over when and under what conditions they will be forced to engage in sexual activity. As a result, instead of decreasing the spread of HIV/AIDS, the ABC policy is suspected of actually increasing the ravages of the disease. In combination with the US government’s failure to provide funding for and access to vital medications for individuals infected with HIV, the effects are deadly. US governmental policies overseas which have the effect of increasing the death toll from AIDS in precisely those countries in which it is seeking to control the population also reflect white supremacist ideologies of population control on the right.

Meanwhile, right wing policies that appear to be pro-natalist, such as the Global Gag Rule, which prohibits clinics in developing countries that receive USAID funds from discussing abortion, even if a woman would die from not having one, among others limiting access to abortions and contraceptives for women in developing world, are in fact, achieving the opposite result. Catering to its radical anti-abortion base, the Bush Administration has withdrawn funds from programs for family planning for women around the world, withholding \$136 million in funding for the United Nations Fund for Population (UNFPA) since 2002. The millions withheld would have prevented at least 1.5 million induced abortions, 9,400 maternal deaths and 154,000 infant and child deaths.¹² In September 2005, the U.S. State Department announced that it was denying funding to UNFPA for the fourth year.

One might ask why staunch conservatives are opposed to family planning in developing countries when family planning so clearly limits population growth and reduces the need for abortions? One of the leading causes of death for women in developing countries is maternal mortality, death from childbirth. The UN estimated a world-wide total of 529,000 maternal deaths in the year 2000, with less than one percent of deaths occurring in developed nations.¹³ Women of color cannot help but observe that family planning is not nearly as mercilessly efficient in reducing populations of color as maternal mortality, infant mortality and letting diseases like AIDS run rampant. We are also not oblivious to the wealth of natural resources like oil, gold and diamonds in many of the lands in which these populations die – after all, a de-populated land cannot protect itself. Ultimately, the Bush Administration’s policies do achieve their goals – just not the ones we are led to believe.

Both overt and covert population control policies are also at play on the domestic front. Recent comments by former Secretary of Education William Bennett on his radio talk show in October 2005, during which he declared that if "you wanted to reduce crime...if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down," underscore this point. While Bennett conceded that aborting all African-American babies "would be an impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible thing to do," he then added again, "but the crime rate would go down."

Bennett is merely echoing widespread perceptions by many radical and moderate conservatives in the US who directly link social ills with the fertility of women of color. The Heritage Foundation, a right-wing think tank influential in the national debates on reproductive politics, offers the following analysis: "Far more important than residual material hardship is behavioral poverty: a breakdown in the values and conduct that lead to the formation of healthy families, stable personalities, and self-sufficiency. This includes eroded work ethic and dependency, lack of educational aspiration and achievement, inability or unwillingness to control one's children, *increased single parenthood and illegitimacy* [emphasis added], criminal activity, and drug and alcohol abuse."¹⁴

This mainstream white supremacist worldview is based on the notion that people are poor not because they are born into poverty – notwithstanding the fact that this is indeed the principal cause of poverty, just as people are rich who are born into wealth. This racist analysis dressed up in economic rags fails to reflect the fact that our economic system forcibly maintains the inequalities between the rich and poor, through such things as tax breaks for the wealthy underwritten by slashing social programs such as Medicare and Social Security. According to this tortured right wing logic, people are poor because of their individual values, choices and behavior. Furthermore, the structural injustices of our society have nothing to do with their poverty. In other words, if poor women were not having so many children, their problems would largely solve themselves without any government intervention. The solution they propose: Let's not get rid of poverty – let's get rid of poor people!

In reality, according to Zillah Eisenstein, "poverty is tied to family structures in crisis. Poverty is tied to the unavailability of contraceptives and reproductive rights. Poverty is tied to teenage pregnancy. Poverty is tied to women's wages that are always statistically lower than men's. Poverty is tied to the lack of day care for women who must work. Poverty is tied to insufficient health care for women. Poverty is tied to the lack of access to job training and education."¹⁵

It would be logical to assume that people who claim to value all human life from the moment of conception would fiercely support programs that help disadvantaged children and parents to provide them with better opportunities in life and reduce their need for public assistance in the future. Sadly, this is not the case. Surveys show that, on average, people who are strongly opposed to abortion are also more likely to define themselves as political conservatives who do not support domestic programs for poor families, single mothers, people of color, and immigrants.¹⁶ They are also opposed to overseas development assistance in general, and to specific programs for improving women's and children's health, reducing domestic violence, helping women become more economically self-sufficient and lowering infant mortality.¹⁷

Perspectives from the left are hardly more reassuring to women of color. Is Bennett, a member of the Heritage Foundation, any worse than an environmentalist who claims that the world is over-populated and drastic measures must be taken to address this catastrophe? Betsy

Hartmann writes about the greening of hate – blaming environmental degradation, urban sprawl and diminishing natural resources on poor populations of color – is a widely accepted set of racist myths promoted by many in the environmental movement, which is moving rather alarmingly to the right as it absorbs ideas and personnel from the white supremacist movement, including organizations such as the Aryan Women’s League.¹⁸

The reality is that 20% of the world's population controls 80% of the global wealth. In other words, it is not the population growth of the developing world that is depleting the world’s resources, but the over-consumption of these resources by the richest countries in the world. The real fear of many in the population control movement is that the developing world will become true competitors for earth’s resources and demand local control over their natural wealth of oil and minerals. Rather than more accurately blame over-consumption by Americans, agricultural mismanagement, and the military industrial complex as the main sources of environmental degradation, many environmentalists in the US point the finger at the fertility of poor women as the fundamental root of environmental evil, casting women of color, immigrant women, and women of the Global South as the perpetrators, rather than the victims, of environmental degradation.¹⁹ This myth promotes alarmist fears about over-population, and leads to genocidal conclusions such as those reached by writers in *Earth First!* journals who said, “the AIDS virus may be Gaia’s tailor-made answer to human overpopulation,” and that famine should take its natural course to stem overpopulation.²⁰

Population control groups on the left often will claim that they are concerned with eliminating gender and economic inequalities, racism and colonialism, but since these organizations address these issues through a problematic over-population paradigm, inevitably their efforts are directed toward reducing population growth of all peoples in theory and of people of color in reality.²¹ In fact, these efforts are embedded within the context of the dominant neo-liberal agenda which effectively trumps women’s health and empowerment, rather than assist in these projects. Some pro-choice feminists have supported the very neo-liberal projects of “privatization, commodification, and deregulation of public health services that...have led to diminished access and increasing mortality and morbidity of women who constitute the most vulnerable groups in both developing and developed countries.”²²

Similarly, the pro-choice movement, largely directed by middle-class white women, is oblivious to the role of white supremacy in restricting reproductive options for all women, and as a result, often inadvertently colludes with it. For instance, a study was published in 2001 in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* by John J. Donohue III, a professor of law at Stanford University and Steven D. Levitt, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, claiming that the 1973 legalization of abortion permitted poor women of color to terminate their pregnancies, thereby preventing the birth of their unwanted children who were likely to have become criminals. The authors disingenuously and incorrectly asserted that “women who have abortions are those most at risk to give birth to children who would engage in criminal activity.”²³ They concluded that the drop in crime rates which took place approximately eighteen years after the *Roe v. Wade* decision was the result of the availability of legal abortion. Despite the quickly-revealed flaws in the research, some pro-choice advocates continue to tout the research as a justification for keeping abortion legal, thereby adopting a position not at all dissimilar to Mr. Bennett’s.²⁴

Indeed, the pro-choice movement’s failure to understand the intersection between race, class and gender in limiting reproductive rights led leaders of the movement to try their own “Southern Strategy” in the 1980s in an effort to protect the legal right to abortion from

assaults by the far right. Central to this strategy was an appeal to conservative voters who did not share their concerns about women's rights, but who were hostile to the federal government and its public encroachment on matters of individual choice and privacy. Pro-choice leaders were temporarily successful at broadening their base using these methods, but at the price of narrowing their agenda. Some voters with conservative sympathies were pruned from the anti-abortion movement for a while, uneasily joining the ranks of the pro-choice movement in an admittedly unstable alliance based on "states' rights" segregationist tendencies.²⁵ What these pro-choice leaders failed to understand was that conservative Southerners who opposed federal government intervention did not also care about women's rights or reducing poverty. They were suffering from a social hangover from the Civil Rights movement and forced federal desegregation. On questions of abortion policy – whether the government should spend tax money on abortions for poor women or whether teenagers should have to obtain parental consent for abortions – the alliance fell apart. The ultimate consequence was that the attempt to appeal to conservative, libertarian Southern voters drove an even deeper wedge in the pro-choice movement, divorcing it from its progressive base of white women and alienating women of color who felt they had been abandoned because of an ill-fated union with Southern racists.

Meanwhile, the right pursued its population control policies targeting communities of color both overtly and indirectly. Family planning initiatives in the Deep South in the 1950s encouraged women of color (predominantly African American women) to use contraceptives and sterilizations to reduce the growth of our populations, while simultaneously obstacles were placed in the paths of white women seeking access to these same services. A Louisiana judge, Leander Perez, was quoted as saying, "The best way to hate a nigger is to hate him before he is born."²⁶ This astonishingly frank outburst represented the sentiments of many racists during this period, although the more temperate ones disavowed gutter epithets.

Conservative politicians like George H. Bush and Strom Thurmond initially supported family planning in the 1960s when it was used as a racially directed form of population control, aimed at limiting black voter strength and tensions in African American communities.²⁷ North Carolina and South Carolina became the first states to include family planning in their state budgets in the 1950s when it was presented as a race-directed strategy to reduce their black populations. Leaders in these Southern states then pressured many white women not to go to newly established family-planning clinics. One center in Louisiana reported that in its first year of operation, 96 percent of its clients were Black. The proportion of white clients never rose above 15 percent.²⁸ Generally speaking, family planning associated with women of color was most frequently supported; associated with white women, this support quickly evaporated.

Increased federal spending on contraception coincided with the urban unrest and rise of a militant Civil Rights movement in the late 1960s. In 1969 President Nixon asked Congress to establish a five-year plan for providing family planning services to "all those who want them but cannot afford them."²⁹ However, Nixon was not responding to the desire of women to control their fertility. Rather, the rationale for the proposed policy was that population increases among blacks would make governance of the world in general, and inner cities in particular, difficult. Reflecting concerns strikingly similar to those driving US population policies overseas, Nixon pointed to statistics that showed a "bulge" in the number of black Americans between the ages of five and nine. This group of youngsters who would soon enter their teens – "an age group with problems that can create social turbulence" – was twenty-five percent larger than ten years before.³⁰ This scarcely disguised race- and class-based appeal for population control persuaded many Republicans to support family planning. Even Republicans who oppose family planning

and abortion today supported it when curtailing the growth of Third World populations both at home and abroad was a more overt goal.

The US government's less evident, but no less effective, approach of promoting policies overseas that contribute to high maternal mortality rates and devastation as a result of HIV/AIDS, was also recently revealed to have a counterpart on the domestic front. Images of chaos and death as Katrina's flood waters engulfed black neighborhoods shocked many Americans. Pictures of poor New Orleans residents, many of them black women and their children, begging for rescue; desperate for food and water, and at risk of violence and death from disease and neglect confirmed that this is the case. According to Jean Hardisty, a researcher on white supremacy in America:

Much of the White public will never understand that those images were more than the result of neglected enforcement of civil rights laws, or the "failure" of the poor to rise above race and class. They were images of structural racism. In one of the poorest cities in the country (with 28% of New Orleanians living in poverty - over two times the national poverty rate), the poor were White as well as African American. But, the vast majority (84%) of the poor were Black. This is not an accident. It is the result of white supremacy that is so imbedded in U.S. society that it has become part of the social structure. Structural racism is not only a failure to serve people equally across race, culture and ethnic origin within private and government entities (as well as "third sector" institutions, such as the print, radio and TV media and Hollywood). It is also the predictable consequence of legislation at the federal, state, and local level.³¹

This racial illiteracy on the part of white people is part of the hegemonic power of whiteness. Through a historical mythology, white supremacy has a vested interest in denying what is most obvious: the privileged position of whiteness. For most people who are described as white, since race is believed to be "something" that shapes the lives of people of color, they often fail to recognize the ways in which their own lives and our public policies are shaped by race. Structural or institutionalized racism is not merely a matter of individual attitudes, but the result of centuries of subordination and objectification that reinforce population control policies.

Politicians have continuously used policies of population control to conquer this land, produce an enslaved workforce, enshrine racial inequities, and preserve traditional power relations. For just as long, women of color have challenged race-based reproductive politics which includes the forced removal of our children, the racialization and destruction of the welfare system, the callousness of the foster care system that breaks up our families, and the use of the state to criminalize our pregnancies and our children. These become an interlocked set of public policies of behavior modification and population control which Dorothy Roberts calls reproductive punishment. "The system's racial disparity also reinforces negative stereotypes about...people's incapacity to govern themselves and need for state supervision."³²

Reproductive politics are the struggles over who decides "whether, when and which woman can reproduce legitimately *and* also the struggles over which women have the right to be mothers of the children they bear."³³ The pro-choice movement fails to understand that fighting for individualized, privacy-based rights to abortion and freedom from government intervention into this most private of decisions is woefully inadequate for women of color. The control of women's bodies, sexuality and reproduction is often connected to the regulation and control of communities of color. Entire communities can be monitored and regulated by

controlling how, when, and how many children a woman can have and keep. This is particularly true for women on Native American reservations, incarcerated women, immigrant women, and poor women across the board, whose reproductive behavior is policed by an adroit series of popular racist myths, fierce state regulation, and eugenical control. The use of the “choice” framework in the arena of abortion, as Rhonda Copelon points out, underwrites “the conservative idea that the personal is separate from the political, and that the larger social structure has no impact on [or responsibility for] private, individual choice.”³⁴

As a direct result of this restrictive framework, the mainstream pro-choice movement has failed to seriously tackle the issue of government funding for abortions for poor women. The 1977 Hyde Amendment prohibited the use of taxpayer funds to pay for abortions for women whose health care is dependent on the federal government. It affects women on Medicaid, women in the military and the Peace Corps, and Indigenous women who primarily rely on the Indian Health Service for their medical care. Despite its obvious targeting of poor women of color, pro-choice groups have not made repealing the Hyde Amendment a priority because their polling data indicates that the majority of Americans do not want taxpayer money used to pay for abortions. For the past 30 years women of color have urged the mainstream movement to understand the role that the Hyde Amendment plays in chipping away at abortion rights, leading to the hundreds of federal and state laws that restrict abortion around the country.

Instead of seeking to consolidate its position with its natural allies among women of color, the mainstream movement instead has chosen to cave in to their polling data. When the Freedom of Choice Act was proposed by pro-choice groups in 1993, it retained the provisions of the Hyde Amendment. According to Andrea Smith, one of NARAL Pro-Choice America’s petitions in favor of the Act stated that, “the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA) will secure the original vision of *Roe v. Wade*, giving *all* women reproductive freedom and securing that right for future generations [emphasis added].³⁵ As Smith wryly points out, apparently poor women and Indigenous women did not qualify as “women” in the eyes of the writers of this petition.

Neglecting to make the link between race, rights and reproduction, the pro-choice movement has always insufficiently analyzed how political activism by communities of color particularly alarms opponents of civil rights, Indigenous rights, women’s rights, gay rights, etc. In a 1973 editorial, the National Council of Negro Women pointed out the link between Civil Rights activism and reproductive oppression that mitigated the concept of choice for oppressed communities:

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 for civil rights activities 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.³⁶

Currently, there is discussion among the hard core right that is beginning to demand the political disenfranchisement of people receiving public assistance. For example, in Georgia during debates on the 2005 Voter ID law that would require voters to have driver’s licenses or other forms of state identification in order to vote, right wing proponents complained that the bill

didn't go far enough by taking away the vote from welfare recipients.³⁷ Linking political enfranchisement to population control is blatantly coercive and anti-democratic, and unfortunately, not unusual in the history of the United States. In 1960, when the city of New Orleans was ordered to de-segregate its schools, local officials responded by criminalizing the second pregnancies of women on public assistance by threatening them with imprisonment and welfare fraud, and promptly removing mostly African American women and children from welfare rolls.³⁸

White supremacist thinking is implicated the perspectives of the right and the left when it comes to women of color and both sides are in denial. The right is often blatant in its determination to restrict the fertility of women of color and thus control our communities. They endlessly proffer an array of schemes and justifications for intruding on the personal decisions of women of color and failing to offer the social supports for our communities necessary to make healthy reproductive decisions.

On the other hand, in its singular focus on maintaining the legal right to abortion, the pro-choice movement often ignores the intersectional matrix of race, gender, sovereignty, class and immigration status that complicates debates on reproductive politics in the U.S. for women of color. The ongoing circumspection and criticism that the pro-choice movement encounters from women of color because of its problematic past discomforts the movement. But without a frank acknowledgement of its history and owning up to its neglect of white supremacy and its racial aspects in the past and the present, it is difficult for this movement to convincingly assert that it is now committed to empowering women of color to not only make decisions about our fertility, but also to providing leadership to re-orient the movement to include the experiences of all women. The movement is not the personal property of middle-class white women who resent having to share spatial, definitional or leadership power with women of color who have a complex set of reactions to abortion politics as they are presently debated by the right and the left.

Mobilizing for Reproductive Justice

Recent events such as the April 25, 2004 March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC, which mobilized 1.15 million participants in the largest demonstration in U.S. history, exposed fissures in the pro-choice movement that have yet to be fully analyzed by writers on the women's movement. The March was originally organized to protest the anti-woman policies by Republican and Democratic conservatives, such as the first federal law restricting abortion, the badly-named Partial Birth Abortion law signed into law by President Bush in November 2003. It was also intended to call attention to the delicate balance of the Supreme Court which has barely maintained the legal right to abortion in a 5-4 split. The original March organizers, the Feminist Majority Foundation, the National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and NARAL Pro-Choice America wanted to demonstrate broad-based support for protecting abortion rights. Eventually, the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, the Black Women's Health Imperative and the American Civil Liberties Union were added to the March steering Committee.

Mobilizing for the March uncovered cleavages on the left voiced by women of color. The event's original title, the "March for Freedom of Choice," reflected a traditional focus on a privacy-based abortion rights framework established by the Supreme Court. At the same time, the dominant issue on the minds of the American left was the illegal war against Iraq, not

abortion politics. Tens of millions of people had marched around the globe to protest Bush's invasion of Iraq in February 2003. As the initial organizing for the March progressed in 2003, it became clear that the target base of supporters would not turn out in sufficient numbers if the March focused solely on the narrow but important issue of the right to legal abortion and defending the Supreme Court. Abortion isolated from other social justice issues would not work.

Ultimately, in order to broaden the appeal of the March and mobilize the entire spectrum of social justice activists in the United States, the March organizers needed and sought a strategic framework that could connect the various sectors of the U.S. social justice movements. They approached SisterSong in the fall of 2003, asking for endorsement of and participation in the March. SisterSong pushed back, expressing problems with the March title and the all-white decision-makers of the March Steering Committee. SisterSong counter-offered with its own framework called "Reproductive Justice" and demanded that women of color organizations be added to the highest decision-making body. Reproductive justice was a viable vehicle to help mobilize for the March by bringing new voices and social movements together to support women's rights. It also had the potential to revitalize an admittedly disheartened pro-choice movement. The central question was: were pro-choice leaders ready and willing to finally respect the leadership and vision of women of color?

Reproductive justice is an intersectional theory created in 1994 emerging from the experiences of women of color whose communities experience reproductive oppression. The concept of Intersectionality has a long history, beginning with the writings of Fran Beale and Toni Cade Bambara in the 1970s, and re-articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw in the 1990s. They argue that the experiences of women of color vis-à-vis race, class and gender are not additive but integrative, producing a different paradigm called Intersectionality. What is fresh about SisterSong's approach is that SisterSong applied theories of Intersectionality to the human rights framework and made a strong connection between individual and group rights. SisterSong is building a growing movement for reproductive justice by bringing in new activists and providing a radical analysis for the movement for those who offer a critique of conservative, liberal and neo-liberal politics. Reproductive justice is a positive approach that links sexuality, health, and human rights to social justice movements by placing abortion and reproductive health issues in the larger context of the well-being and health of women, families and communities.

Prior to the 1980s, women of color reproductive health activists organized primarily against sterilization abuse and teen pregnancy, although many were involved in early activities to legalize abortion because of the disparate impact illegal abortion had in African American, Puerto Rican and Mexican communities. Women of color mostly refrained from joining mainstream pro-choice organizations, but preferred to organize autonomous women of color organizations more directly responsive to the needs of their communities. It was the rapid growth of women of color reproductive health organizations in the 1980s and 1990s that helped build the organizational strength (in relative terms) to generate an analysis and a new movement in the 21st century.

The 1980s and 1990s was a period of explosive autonomous organizing by women of color establishing their own reproductive health organizations.³⁹ Women of color searched for a conceptual framework that would convey our twinned values: the right to have and not to have a child – the myriad of ways our rights to be mothers and parent our children are constantly threatened. We believed these paired values separated us from the liberal pro-choice movement in the U.S. preoccupied with maintaining the legality of abortion and privacy rights. We were also skeptical about the motivations of some forces in the pro-choice movement who seemed to

be more interested in population restrictions rather than women's empowerment. They promoted dangerous contraceptives and coercive sterilizations, and were mostly silent about the economic inequalities and power imbalances between the developed and the developing worlds and communities that constrain women's choices. We certainly did not trust the motives of those on the right who claimed to care about our "pre-born" children while they slash funding for services for our families. Progressive women of color felt closest to the radical wing of the women's movement that did articulate demands for abortion access who shared our class analysis, and even closer to the radical feminists who demanded an end to sterilization and contraceptive abuse who shared our critique of population control. Yet we lacked a framework that aligned reproductive rights with social justice in an intersectional way, bridging the multiple domestic and global movements to which we belonged.

We found an answer in the global women's health movement through the voices of women from the Global South. Women of color from the U.S. participated in all of the international conferences and significant events of the global feminist movement by forming small but significant delegations to these meetings. A significant milestone was the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 in Cairo, Egypt where women of color witnessed how women in other countries were successfully using the human rights framework in their advocacy for women's reproductive health and sexual rights.

Shortly after the Cairo conference, women of color in the US coined the term Reproductive Justice by envisioning from the perspectives of women of color engaged in both domestic and international activism. We created a lens applicable to the United States with which to interpret and apply the understandings on reproductive health and sexual rights reached at Cairo, particularly the link made between poverty and the denial of women's human rights. In particular, we critiqued the way that shared opposition to the fundamentalists and misogynists strengthened the problematic alliance between feminists and the population control establishment. As activists in the US, we needed an analysis to connect our domestic issues to the global struggle for women's human rights that would call attention to our commitment to the link between women, their families, and their communities.

The first step towards the reproductive justice framework occurred two months after the September Cairo conference. A group of African American women (some of whom became SisterSong co-founders) spontaneously organized an informal Black Women's Caucus at a national pro-choice conference sponsored by the Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance in Chicago in 1994. We were attempting to "Bring Cairo Home" by adapting agreements from the Cairo Programme of Action to a US-specific context. In the immediate future, we were very concerned that the Clinton Administration's health care reform proposals were ominously silent about abortion rights, which appeared to renege on the promises the Administration made at Cairo. Even without a structured organization, we mobilized for a national signature ad in the *Washington Post* to express our concerns. We raised \$27,000 and collected 600 signatures from African American women to place the ad in the *Post*. After debating and rejecting the choice framework in our deliberations, we called ourselves "Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice." Reproductive justice, at that time, was defined as "reproductive health integrated into social justice" bespeaking our perception that reproductive health is a social justice issue for women of color because health care reform without a reproductive health component would do more harm than good for women of color.

Three years later, the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective was formed in 1997 by autonomous women of color organizations, using human rights as a unifying

framework for the Collective and using reproductive justice as its central organizing concept. Thus, when SisterSong was approached to support the March, we countered by encouraging the organizers to explore the potential of the Reproductive Justice framework for mobilizing and uniting the progressive movements. Through the leadership of Alice Cohan, the March Director, the March for Freedom of Choice was renamed the March for Women's Lives in the fall of 2003 and women of color organizations were added to the Steering Committee. Using an intersectional, multi-issue approach mandated by the Reproductive Justice framework, the March organizers reached out to women of color organizations, civil rights groups, labor organizations, youth organizations, anti-war groups, anti-globalization groups, environmental groups, immigrants' rights organizations, and many, many others who ultimately contributed to the largest mobilization for social justice in the history of the United States.

The success of the March was a testament to the power of reproductive justice as a framework to mobilize and unite diverse sectors of the social justice movement to support women's human rights in the United States and abroad. Just as importantly, it also became a metaphor for how women of color have to take on both the right and the left in asserting our demands to control our bodies, our communities and our destinies.

Examining reproductive politics in the United States and their differential impacts compels women of color activists to focus on laws, policies and community attitudes that have constrained or expanded the individual choices of different races and classes of women. We have to dissect strategies of population control, understand the influence of white supremacy on social debates on the right and the left, and analyze our potential to re-vitalize the pro-choice movement with an invigorating new analysis on reproductive justice that helps us understand the anti-abortion sentiments in those communities targeted for population control, the use of abortion as a wedge issue by white supremacists, and how we must build a new future for our movement by helping social justice activists understand reproductive politics.

SisterSong provides trainings to help activists from all social justice movements understand how to apply the human rights-based Reproductive Justice framework because many activists are using the term without embracing the full meaning of what SisterSong means by reproductive justice. The training helps people understand the distinction between old frameworks and Reproductive Justice as well as gain clarity on the concept of an intersectional framework for understanding oppression.

Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (formerly Asian and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health) became the first SisterSong member group to reorganize itself using Reproductive Justice. In 2005, ACRJ strengthened the Reproductive Justice analysis by analyzing the three main frameworks for fighting reproductive oppression: 1) Reproductive Health which deals with service delivery, 2) Reproductive Rights which address the legal regime, and 3) Reproductive Justice which focuses on movement building. Although the frameworks are distinct in their approach, they work in tandem with each other to provide a complementary and comprehensive solution. Ultimately, as in any movement, all three components of service, advocacy and organizing are crucial to advancing the movement because reproductive oppression affects women's lives in multiple ways. Thus, a multi-pronged approach is needed to fight this exploitation and advance the well-being of women and girls.

SisterSong believes that reproductive justice is the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic, and social well-being of women and girls, and will be achieved when women and girls have the economic, social and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, sexuality and reproduction for ourselves, our families and our

communities in all areas of our lives. For this to become a reality, we need to make change on the individual, community, institutional, and societal levels to end all forms of oppression, including forces that deprive us of self-determination and control over our bodies, and limit our reproductive choices to achieve undivided justice.⁴⁰

I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name
My name is my own my own my own
and I can't tell you who in the hell set things up like this
but I can tell you that from now on my resistance
my simple and daily and nightly self-determination
may very well cost you your life.

--June Jordan

ENDNOTES

¹ I write this essay from the perspective of an African American woman sterilized by the Dalkon Shield intrauterine device when I was 23 years old in the 1970s. I have since been active in the movement for reproductive justice trying to ensure that what I experienced would never happen to another woman, even though I am a grandmother now. Rather than perceiving my lived experience as a deficit as a writer or myself as a victim, I prefer to see it as an asset in understanding how the politics of race intertwine with the politics of class and gender in the United States. My body has served as a site of many of the battles over reproductive politics in this country. My passion now is borne of the conviction that population control is not a hysterical conspiracy offered by people of color but a real determinant of many conditions in our lives.

²Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, *Reproductive Justice: A New Vision for Advancing our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice*, http://www.reproductivejustice.org/download/ACRJ_A_New_Vision.pdf, (accessed October 15, 2005), Introduction.

³Ibid.

⁴Founded in 1997, the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective is the only national coalition in the United States of women of color organizations and individuals that unites our collective voices to ensure Reproductive Justice through securing human rights for communities of color. Reproductive Justice is a fresh and exciting human rights-based analysis offered by women of color that is increasingly being used by many organizations to link reproductive health and population concerns to environmental, economic, racial, and other social justice issues. With our national office in Atlanta, Georgia, the SisterSong Collective is now comprised of 76 local, regional and national grassroots organizations representing six populations in the United States: Native American/Indigenous, Black/African American/Caribbean, Latina, Middle Eastern/North African and Asian/Pacific Islander, as well as individual women of color affiliated with mainstream organizations, and White and male allies. The Collective is governed by the Management Circle, a Board of Directors composed of 21 organizational and individual members. Membership in the Collective is open: everyone can be a member of SisterSong. The mission of SisterSong is to amplify and strengthen the collective voices of Indigenous women and women of color to ensure reproductive justice through securing human rights. Our core strategic goals are to: 1) Create opportunities for women of color to build a national movement for reproductive justice in the United States; 2) Strengthen women of color organizations by providing training, information and analyses on reproductive health and organizational development issues; and 3) Build alliances among women of color and between women of color and the mainstream movement through shared advocacy work. SisterSong publishes a national newspaper by and for women of color on reproductive justice issues called *Collective Voices* and can be reached at www.sistersong.net.

⁵Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Boston: South End Press, 2005), 80.

⁶Abby L. Ferber, *White Man Falling: Race, Gender and White Supremacy*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: New York, 1998), 9.

⁷Human Rights Watch, *All Too Familiar: Sexual Abuse of Women in U.S. State Prisons*. <http://hrw.org/reports/1996/us1.htm> (December 1996), Summary and Recommendations. (accessed March 18, 2006).

⁸Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman =s Choice: The State, Sexuality and Reproductive Freedom* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 70.

⁹John T. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 21-22.

¹⁰Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 3.

¹¹World Watch Institute, *State of the World 2005 Trends and Facts – Population and Security* <http://www.worldwatch.org/features/security/tf/2> (accessed July 30, 2005)

¹²Leila Hessini, “Globalizing Radical Agendas,” in *Collective Voices*, SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, Vol. 1, Issue 1, p. 17, at www.sistersong.net (accessed August 8, 2005).

¹³World Health Organization, *World Health Report 2005*, p. xiv, at http://www.who.int/whr/2005/whr2005_en.pdf (accessed September 9, 2005)

¹⁴Heritage Foundation, *Where We Stand: Our Principles On Building on Welfare Reform* <http://www.heritage.org/research/features/mandate/2005/topic.cfm?topic=17> (accessed November 15, 2005)

¹⁵Zillah Eisenstein, *Katrina and her Gendering of Race and Class*, Women’s Human Rights Net, www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-katrina.html. (accessed September 30, 2005).

¹⁶Ruth Dixon-Mueller and Paul K.B. Dagg, *Abortion and Common Sense* (Philadelphia, PA: XLibris Corporation, 2002), 225-226.

¹⁷*Ibid*, 226.

¹⁸James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads, and the Rise of New White Culture* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1990), 174.

¹⁹Betsy Hartmann, “The Greening of Hate at Home and Abroad,” *ZNet Magazine*, December 10, 2003.

²⁰Izaak Walton League of America, <http://www.overpopulation.org/> (2005) (accessed August 8, 2005).

²¹Andrea Smith, p. 78.

²²Rhonda Copelon and Rosalind Petchesky, “Reproductive and Sexual Rights as Human Rights,” in Margaret Shuler, ed., *From Basic Needs to Basic Rights* (Washington, DC: Women, Law and Development International, 1995), p. 355.

²³John J. Donohue III and Steven D. Levitt, “The Impact of Legalized Abortion on Crime,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. CXVI, May 2001, Issue 2, 379.

²⁴Alexander Sanger, *Beyond Choice: Reproductive Freedom in the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2004), 67.

²⁵William Saletan, *Bearing Right: How the Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

²⁶Martha C. Ward, *Poor Women, Powerful Men: America’s Great Experiment in Family Planning* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 31.

²⁷Thomas B. Littlewood, *The Politics of Population Control* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 51 and 139.

²⁸Ward, 59.

²⁹Littlewood, 54.

³⁰*Ibid*, 56.

³¹Jean Hardisty, *Hurricane Katrina and Structural Racism: A Letter to White People*. http://www.jeanhardisty.com/blog_katrina.html, (October 2005) (accessed October 1, 2005).

³²Dorothy Roberts, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 237.

³³Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, p. 38.

³⁴Rhonda Copelon quoted in Rickie Solinger, "Poisonous Choice," in Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, ed., *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 385.

³⁵Smith, p. 96.

³⁶*Black Woman's Voice* 2, No. 2, (Jan/Feb 1973).

³⁷Dan T. Carter, "George Wallace and the Rightward Turn in Today's Politics" in *PublicEye.org* Vol. 19, No. 3.

³⁸Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 137.

³⁹Jael Silliman, et al. *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Boston: South End Press, 2004), 42-43.

⁴⁰Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, *Reproductive Justice: A New Vision for Advancing our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice*, http://www.reproductivejustice.org/download/ACRJ_A_New_Vision.pdf, (October 2005).

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