

Taking Reproductive Justice Seriously: Special Cluster Editor's Introduction

Allison B. Wolf

In 1997, Dorothy Roberts published her groundbreaking book, *Killing the Black Body*.¹ There, she showed that the mainstream reproductive rights movement was too narrowly focused on the ability to access safe and legal abortion. Such a limited focus, argued Roberts, ignores the experiences of women of color who struggle both to access safe and legal abortion and to *have* children when they choose to do so (for example, by avoiding forced sterilization programs or coercive welfare policies that require birth control). Put differently, the narrow vision of reproductive freedom proffered by pro-choice activists as revolving around the right to terminate pregnancy has prevented us from understanding that reproductive liberty goes beyond this. “It must [also] encompass the full range of procreative activities, including the ability to bear a child, and it must acknowledge that we make reproductive decisions within a social context, including inequalities of wealth and power.”² Focusing so narrowly on access to abortion, in other words, has impeded us from going beyond reproductive rights to fighting for reproductive justice.

Kimala Price proffers that the primary goal of the reproductive justice movement is to move beyond the pro-choice movement's singular focus on abortion toward broader control over one's reproductive life. Given this, SisterSong: The Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, defines reproductive justice as: “the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic, and social well-being of women and girls.”³ As such, it includes:

(1) the right to have a child;

¹ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, (NY: Pantheon Books), 1997

² *Ibid*, p. 6.

³ SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective. http://sistersong.net/reproductive_justice.html, accessed Jan. 18, 2013.

- (2) the right not to have a child;
- (3) the right to parent our children;
- (4) the right to control our birthing options;
- (5) the commitment to fight for the conditions needed to realize these rights.⁴

All four of the essays in this issue's special cluster attempt to advance these goals.

Sonya Charles's essay, "Whose Ethics? Making Reproductive Ethics More Inclusive and Just," leads off the cluster by interrogating issues in the creation of life and our obligations to fetuses. While many bioethicists are increasingly advocating that parents are *morally* (though not legally) obligated to use prenatal genetic diagnosis to ensure that their babies are born healthy, Charles points out how these discussions ignore what is already happening to women of color throughout the United States in the name of "protecting babies," such as incarcerating women "for fetal health." More broadly, these discussions within bioethics seem to take white, upper-middle class, Christian morality as universal, ignoring the myriad of ways that other ethnicities and cultures relate to the idea of disability or procreation. In doing so, Charles highlights why the reproductive justice literature must be taken more seriously by mainstream bioethics.

Gabriela Arguedas Ramírez continues interrogating the ways that the reproductive lives of women of color are continually under the regulation and supervision of the State. More specifically, in her essay, "Abortion and Human Rights in Central America," she explores the many challenges Central American women face in their quest to obtain access to safe and legal abortion throughout the region. Her work goes beyond the traditional debates on abortion typically found in the North American literature (which focus on individual choice) by framing the issue as a social, structural, institutional, matter that is inextricably linked to the norms and ideals of

⁴ Ibid, 14.

Western, liberal, democratic political thought. More specifically, she presents a detailed legal and philosophical case that guaranteeing access to safe, legal, abortion is required for the nations of Central America to be legitimate democracies. In doing so, she follows Dorothy Roberts dictate to “link reproductive health and rights to other social justice issues.”⁵ In the process, she shows that ensuring access to safe and legal abortion is inherent to a society’s ability to be a mature democracy.

While Arguedas expands on a more traditional reproductive justice approach to abortion,

While Arguedas and Charles focus on issues before birth, the next two essays forming the cluster focus on the ability to procreate. Allison B. Wolf’s “Birth without Violence” focuses on the causes and responses to what she terms “metaphysical violence” in labor and delivery (as distinguished from the also all-too-common physical and emotional violence and coercion used in birth settings that has come to be known as obstetric violence). Wolf begins with the disturbing trend that post-partum women are increasingly being diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of their birth experiences. After detailing and condemning the existence of this distinct type of obstetrical violence, Wolf turns to María Lugones’s work to suggest how this violence can be resisted. The clear implication of her piece is that reproductive justice requires that women be able to give birth in non-violent *and* non-traumatic settings.

Finally, Barry DeCoster’s “Ethical Complications of Birth Plans” explores one form of resistance that women have been employing for decades to avoid the kind of violence Wolf discusses – birth plans. Despite the ubiquitous nature of such documents, however, DeCoster points out that their ethical implications remain undertheorized. Even more concerning, he says, is that birth plans often fail to achieve both their ethical and practical goals. For those of us

⁵ Price, *op cit.* 43.

committed to reproductive justice, which includes the right to control one's birthing options, DeCoster is putting an important item on our agenda while also raising additional questions like: Who has access to making birth plans? And, which women's birth plans are and are not taken seriously?

As all of the essays in this volume illustrate, we still have a long way to go to achieve reproductive justice. And, this is wrong -- all women deserve reproductive justice, not simply reproductive freedom. We hope that the discussion in this issue of *Janus Head* will lead to even more positive work to further the cause.