

BOOK REVIEWS

ARE ABORTION POLITICS RELEVANT TO WOMEN OF COLOR?

by Sherri L. Barnes

Jennifer Nelson, *WOMEN OF COLOR AND THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS MOVEMENT*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. 224p. notes. index. pap., \$21.00, ISBN 0814758274.

Jael Sillimen, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, & Elena R. Gutierrez, *UNDIVIDED RIGHTS: WOMEN OF COLOR ORGANIZE FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE*. Boston: South End Press, 2004. 300p. \$20.00, ISBN 0896087298.

Dorothy Roberts, *KILLING THE BLACK BODY: RACE, REPRODUCTION, AND THE MEANING OF LIBERTY*. New York: Pantheon, 1997 (hardcover); Vintage, 1998 (paper). 373p. notes. index. pap., \$14.95, ISBN 0679758690.

“You could abort every black baby in this country and your crime rate would go down.”¹ This vile statement from influential political analyst and former White House appointee William J. Bennett not only is an assault on black women’s reproductive freedoms, but also illustrates that the powerful still think seriously about solving social problems by regulating black women’s fertility. This is not news to women of color who have been organizing against such attacks. The abortion rights movement and the rest of society are still lagging in their response to and/or awareness of the race and class injustices that limit the reproductive choices of women of color.

The role of women of color in the abortion rights movement has always been of concern within and outside the movement. Their lack of visibility within the abortion rights movement is not an indicator of the relevance of feminism and abortion rights to women of color. As in other segments of the women’s movement, women of color have had to define and address what abortion rights mean in relation to their experiences and communities, and on their terms. From their experi-

ences with the health/medical care system, women of color discovered that the powers that be preferred them not to have children. Thus, women of color have had to fight racism *and* sexism for the right to bear children, while white women were fighting sexism for the right to choose not to. As victims of coerced and forced sterilizations, as the subjects of population-control initiatives aimed at solving social problems, and as the subjects of risky drug trials, women of color understand that the system sees their babies as less valuable than white women’s. Historically, while the government limited their reproductive choices to unsafe abortions from low-quality health care providers, sterilization, and long-acting hormonal contraceptives, it has provided limited physical or economic access to basic services like prenatal care, neighborhood clinics, responsible contraceptive education and services, drug treatment programs, and culturally sensitive health care. For women of color, the above conditions are the biggest barriers to their ability to control what happens to their bodies and make informed reproductive choices for complete reproductive freedom.

What followed was the establishment of the “reproductive rights movement,” a movement and history many feminists and women’s studies librarians do not differentiate from the anti-abortion movement that evolved out of the mainstream women’s movement. Three books are excellent resources for students, faculty, life-long learners, and activists wishing to increase their knowledge of the origins, ideologies, politics, people and organizations behind the reproductive rights movement.

Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement, by feminist historian Jennifer Nelson (former Director of the Sarah Isom Center for Women at the University of Mississippi), is a well-researched and -documented history of the development of the reproductive rights movement in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. Using archival records, interviews, audiotapes, legal documents, organizational records, and historical periodicals, Nelson demonstrates how women of color transformed the movement to legalize abortion into a reproductive rights movement for the right of all

women, regardless of economic status, race, and sexuality, to have complete decision-making control over issues related to their bodies — including the right to bear children.

Nelson's study begins with a history of the early abortion rights movement and the role of radical feminists in Redstockings, a New York organization, founded in 1976. According to Nelson, Redstockings was important because it was a single-issue organization that believed the right to safe and legal abortions was the key to women's liberation. More interestingly, although abortion rights had been a major political issue for most of the sixties, it wasn't considered a women's issue. Nelson documents how the Redstockings wrestled the public debate on abortion out of the hands of male doctors, policymakers, and the courts and into the hands of women, successfully transforming abortion rights into a women's issue.

Nelson recounts the players and organizations involved in legalizing abortion in New York. She covers both the long legal processes and how the Redstockings' community-based work and grassroots activism helped empower women through consciousness raising, education, and civil disobedience. The Redstockings dramatically changed the political and cultural landscape around abortion and women's sexuality by getting women to talk publicly, in consciousness raising groups, "speakouts," and courtrooms, about their experiences with illegal abortions and unwanted pregnancies. Although the ultimate goal of the complete repeal of all restrictions to abortion was never obtained, the Redstock-

ings were integral to the legalization of abortion in New York (July 1970), which was a significant precursor to the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion nationwide.

Nelson attributes the redefinition of abortion politics to the organizing efforts of black feminists from the 1970s. Readers learn that some black feminists worked for reproductive rights from within male-dominated nationalist organizations. Others organized for reproductive rights from within feminist organizations they founded. The organizations that Nelson examines from the early seventies that contributed to the abortion rights debate, but are rarely given credit or studied, include the Black Women's Group of Mount Vernon, the Black Women's Liberation Committee (a division of SNCC), the Third World Women's Alliance and the National

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Welfare Rights Organization. Chronicled are their political and intellectual development, efforts that evolved out of a need to add their voices and struggles to a movement that was being defined by white women based on white women's experiences. In particular, Nelson features the activities and analysis of activists Elaine Brown, Toni

Cade Bambara, Shirley Chisolm, Fannie Lou Hamer, Linda LaRue, and Frances Beal.

Black feminists demanded that white women expand their abortion rights campaigns to include the issues that limited black women's control over their reproductive health. Poverty, welfare rights, access to basic health care, and elimination of population control schemes and sterilization abuse were issues that most affected women's control over their reproductive health. Nelson demonstrates how black feminists brought national attention to the ways poverty, sexism, and racism prevented them from having and raising the children they wanted. She also explores the dynamics and gender politics between black women and men surrounding abortion and birth control.

A considerable amount of the book is dedicated to explaining the social and political significance of black nationalist anti-abortion rhetoric to the development of the reproductive rights movement — in particular, the beliefs of the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam that abortion and contraception constituted black genocide and that black women's primary role should be to produce black revolutionary warriors. Nelson shows how black feminists denounced this sexism with their own developing feminism. She also reveals, in turn, how black feminists worked both from within and outside these nationalist organizations to move them to alter their sexist rhetoric and follow the lead of black feminists organizing against population control abuses, such as the forced and coerced sterilization of black and Latina women, and for improved health care in poor communities. Nelson's comprehensive coverage of black nationalists' complete history pertaining

to black women and abortion — not just their early opposition — demonstrates why black feminists insist on promoting a multiple-issue, community-based feminist agenda: it can be transformative.

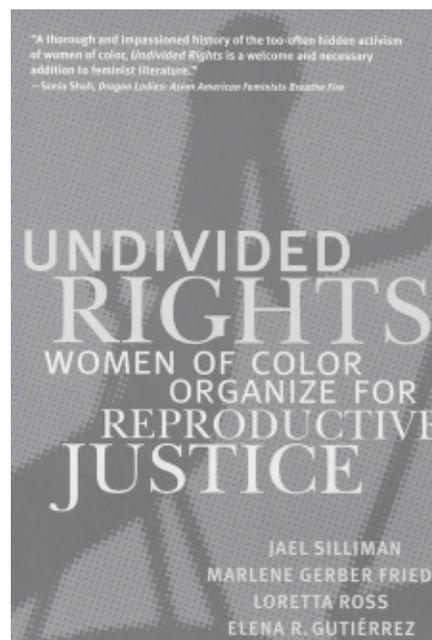
Nelson's interest in 1970s nationalist politics and feminism continues in a chapter on women in the Young Lords Party (YLP), a New York City-based Puerto Rican nationalist organization. Focusing on the activism of Denise Oliver and Iris Morales, she examines how the development of these women's feminist politics led the YLP to develop a gender- and race-based reproductive rights agenda that required community-based voluntary fertility control, with women of color — not racist institutions, birth controllers, or male partners — having complete control over decisions related to their reproductive health.

Nelson attributes the YLP's relatively early realization of a feminist reproductive rights position to a timely confluence of events — the simultaneous emergence of Latina feminism, Puerto Rican nationalism, and abortion politics. Nelson contends that black feminist struggles with sexist black nationalists were more complex because the nationalism of the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam, as well as negative black female stereotypes, predated black feminism and was more entrenched in black American culture.

The last organization Nelson credits with reshaping the feminist definition of abortion rights is the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA), founded in 1976. CARASA emphasized the economic aspects of abortion by bringing attention to the fact that poor women and women of color had less control over their reproduction than white women did.

The Hyde Amendment, which in 1976 eliminated medical payments for abortion, was the catalyst to CARASA's development and entrance into the abortion rights movement. Federal funding was still available for sterilization, which CARASA saw as government promotion of permanent methods of population control while reducing access to non-permanent fertility control methods for poor women. CARASA demanded that women should have the means to bear as many children as they wanted and that that right should be supported with affordable and legal abortion and contraception, an end to sterilization abuse (forced and coerced), workplace safety, rights to child care, and access to affordable health care for women and children. Nelson explores the triumphs and struggles, internally and externally, that CARASA faced in attempting to achieve its lofty mission. To Nelson, the Committee was significant because it sought to guarantee even the poorest women reproductive autonomy. She neglects to add that it is also significant because these former civil rights and anti-war activists recognized the connection between sterilization abuse and abortion rights as an important civil and human rights issue — one that had to be a priority if all women were to experience complete reproductive and sexual freedom.

Nelson's objective is to provide an early history of the abortion rights movement and of the ways the feminist politics of women of color transformed the movement. Her history also highlights feminist differences and how those differences have strengthened feminist discourse, made feminism relevant to more women, and contributed to political and legal victories that have improved the lives of



many women. With Nelson's focus on the influential black and Puerto Rican communities of New York, one can't help wondering how other communities of color were responding to these social movements that were changing the cultural landscape. Overall, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* is a valuable contribution to U.S. historiography that will be of interest to anyone with an interest in social and women's movements and reproductive rights.

Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice, while not a history of the movement, picks up historically and politically where Nelson left off. Silliman and her co-authors provide a broader, more contemporary view of women of color and the reproductive rights movement. It is an inspiring text that provides a record of a previously undocumented, unanalyzed, and generally unacknowledged

edged grassroots movement that is still active today. This book documents the origins, philosophies, and activities of eight women-of-color organizations that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in response to the narrow focus of the abortion rights movement. More importantly, women of color founded their own reproductive rights organizations to protect themselves and combat the anti-abortion movement and the rise of the New Right in the 1980s. As contributing author and SisterSong National Coordinator Loretta Ross said at the October 2005 SisterSong Second National Membership Meeting, it's not about us versus them, but about saving our lives.²

The project profiles two organizations, a mature national one and a younger and/or grassroots one, from each of the following racial and ethnic groups: African American, Asian Pacific Islander, Latina, and Native American/Indigenous. The organizations featured include the National Black Women's Health Project, African American Women Evolving, the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center, the Mother's Milk Project, Asians and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health, the National Asian Women's Health organization, and the Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights.

The first three chapters describe the socio-political framework that led women of color to take the lead in fighting for control of their bodies and creating a reproductive justice agenda that prioritized race, ethnicity, class, and gender. The authors discuss visions of reproductive justice; perspectives on identity-based organizing, population control, and women of color's relationship to the anti-abortion movement; the pro-choice movement; the women's health movement; and social justice

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organizations. The remaining fifteen chapters consist of organizational case studies, introductory chapters that provide background information about the communities and their activism, and a concluding chapter that assesses what it all means and what has been learned. The case studies show how the organizations began and evolved, as well as their challenges, successes, guiding philosophies, and significance. Although certain issues overlap across multiple groups, each organization's reproductive rights agendas originated from real, culturally driven and community-defined needs. While various strategies and approaches have been adopted, most impressive is how the organizations grew organically out of the "freedom dreams" of feminist activists with the courage and imagination to remake the world.³

The organizations are likeminded in that they have all adopted a holistic vision of reproductive rights that addresses inseparable race, class, and gender needs that are culturally specific and often require addressing issues such as housing, jobs, and education. The concluding chapter explains why identity-based organizing has worked for these organizations while other social justice organizations have rejected the approach and theorists have criticized it. Overall, this is a phenomenal text that should be considered core to any collection on women's history and social movements in the United States. It should also be required reading for activists and staff members of social justice organizations.

It is acknowledged in both of the books reviewed above that black women were the first to challenge the normativity of popular notions of the abortion rights movement. The groundbreaking *Killing the Black Body: Race Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty*, by Rutgers University Professor of Law Dorothy Roberts, provides scholarly evidence to support the lived experiences of the black women who had the courage to act on those experiences and "seed a movement"⁴ that would affect the lives of many women of color and change the abortion debate. Like Sillimen et al. and Nelson, Roberts believes that "reproductive liberty" is not only about the right of women to end pregnancies, but also about their right to bear the children they want, free of government interventions and controls. Furthermore, because such decisions are made in a social context that is influenced by economic and political inequalities that affect *groups*, the fight for reproductive social justice — unlike the abortion rights movement — cannot be fought solely on the basis of protecting the constitutional rights and liberties of *individuals*.

Throughout *Killing the Black Body*, Roberts dissects the policies, practices, and attitudes that have been used both to control black women's reproduction and to oppress black people. She successfully argues that reproductive justice cannot occur without addressing racial oppression, and that racial injustices cannot be remedied

without confronting the dehumanizing and institutionalized assaults on black women's reproductive freedoms. While Roberts focuses mostly on the punitive sterilization abuse of the 1970s and 1980s and the more recent punitive and coerced implantation of long-acting hormonal contraceptives in black women, she makes it clear that these practices stem from a history of regulating black women's fertility — a history that originated in slavery and continued during the birth control movement of the early twentieth century. The birth control movement was reluctantly intertwined with the eugenics movement, whose mission was to sterilize and control the population of those considered socially undesirable, including black and Latina women.

The social history, public policies, case studies, and legislation that Roberts uses to make her point are convincing and overwhelming. Roberts and women of color who support complete reproductive freedom for all women demand that as much effort be invested in high-quality and accessible health care, prenatal care, child care, drug treatment programs, and health education, for all communities, as in making sterilization and long-acting contraceptives accessible in poor communities. Although *Killing the Black Body* deals with complex social, legal and public policy issues, it is presented in a way that is readable by and accessible to general and academic audiences. Although many of the issues covered are very controversial, Roberts handles them with great compassion and sensitivity, presenting multiple perspectives. One can expect this influential and core text to have a permanent place on the syllabi of courses in reproductive rights, women and public policy, black feminism, and feminist legal theory.

Reproductive social justice organizing is part of the contemporary grassroots reproductive rights movement and, to a lesser extent, of academic discourse. On a national scale, among the general public, "abortion rights" is still the dominant discourse that fuels public debate, legislation, public policy, Supreme Court nominations, and electoral politics. Nationally, abortion rights are still viewed through a white, middle-class lens, devoid of a race, class, and gender analysis. At the March 2004 March for Women's Lives, the literature and signs of mainstream national women's organizations like NOW and NARAL all used the popular — and exclusive — abortion rights language ("who decides," "pro-choice," and "abortion on demand"), rather than the more inclusive language ("reproductive social justice for all women") of the women-of-color organizations participating.

These three books acknowledge that *all* reproductive rights work, both within and outside mainstream organizations, is important and necessary. Many women of color work within mainstream organizations, and many mainstream organizations have supported and fostered the development of identity-based reproductive rights organizations. However, for many feminists of color, it is understood that an abortion rights movement relevant to their lives includes a holistic agenda that caters to the weakest and least powerful women, because such an agenda will ensure the health and safety of all women. Thus, if public policies are designed to guarantee the health and survival of the most underprivileged members of society, then everyone's health and survival will be ensured.

Notes

1. "Bennett's Take on Blacks, Abortion Draws Fire," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 30, 2005, p. A29.
2. SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Rights Collective is an umbrella group for seventy-two women-of-color reproductive rights organizations nationwide. The membership meeting noted here was held October 15-16, 2005, in Emeryville, CA. Ross's comments came in response to a question about whether SisterSong had received attacks from other reproductive rights groups for creating women-of-color organizations separate from mainstream or white women's groups.
3. See Robin D.G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p.2. Kelley believes that the map to a new world is in the imagination. Like Kelley, these feminist activists are interested in envisioning the type of world they want to struggle for. They understand that focusing on only one issue will not move them closer to that world.
4. This phrase is taken from a chapter title (see page 49) in *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice*.

[*Sherri L. Barnes is the librarian for women's studies, U.S. history, and writing studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She created and maintains the website "Black American Feminism: A Multidisciplinary Bibliography," at <http://www.library.ucsb.edu/subjects/blackfeminism/>.*]