

Utrum Paper

Utrum

Whether abortion harms African-American women and therefore the African-American Community.

Videtur

It seems that abortion, like all methods of birth control, benefits African-American women because it allows them to exercise their right of autonomy over their own bodies. The fight for legalized abortion as a means of birth control entered the scene later in the fight for women to control their reproductive rights, but abortion itself has always been a “necessary evil”¹ lurking in the background of women’s lives. The issue of reproductive rights has had long lasting roots among African-American women since the era of chattel slavery in this nation. The history of slavery and racism in American culture are crucial to any discussion about black women and choice. As Kathleen Neal Cleaver states in her review of Dorothy Roberts’ book, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the meaning of Liberty*, “Roberts learned the significance of reproductive autonomy not from the contemporary abortion movement but from studying the histories of slave women who fought to gain control over their lives.”² Any treatise that discusses black women and their reproductive freedoms must take into account the impact of these

¹ Cyndia C. Garris “Abortion: A Necessary Evil?” Pregnant Pause, <http://www.pregnantpause.org/about/necessary.htm> (accessed October 24, 2012).

² Kathleen Neal Cleaver, “Life, Liberty and Babies,” *The Women's Review of Books* 15, no. 9 (June, 1998): 20.

freedoms on the black community as a whole. Thus, any issue germane to African-American women is also crucial to the welfare of the African-American family and by extension, the African-American community.

Abortion benefits African-American women because it allows them to exercise control over their reproductive destinies. Francis M. Beal states,

“Black women have the right and the responsibility to determine when it is in the interest of the struggle to have children or not to have them and this right must not be relinquished to anyone. It is also her right and responsibility to determine when it is in Her own best interests to have children, how many she will have and how far apart.”³

Slave women in America did not have the right to self-determination, and they had no autonomy over their bodies in any way. The profit driven slave economy benefitted tremendously from their toil and their procreative abilities. The slave woman’s children were not her own, and by the whim of her master, they could be sold away from her, never to be seen again. In post Civil War America, there was no further need for black women to procreate. In fact, her ability to procreate no longer served the greater good. The “Negro Problem,” as coined by W.E.B. DuBois, was a utilitarian problem. What must be done with the Negro, who will now no longer labor for free? What will be done with the masses that heretofore were bred for economic ends? There was no concept of justice for American blacks, because they were deemed to be inferior to whites. They were a people who were ascribed no

³ Frances M. Beal, “Double Jeopardy,” *Meridians* 8, no. 2 (2008): 173.

sense of value, thus, their “greatest good” became their desire to develop their own sense of self worth.

The black woman’s fight for justice continues today. She finds herself in the “group where the triple jeopardy of oppression by race, class, and gender converge.”⁴ As Rosemary Radford Ruether continues to say, “To be black, poor and female is a concrete condition in which sexual violence, racial violence, and economic exploitation are united.”⁵ But who is her God? James H. Cone answers this question by saying, “The God of the oppressed is a God of revolution who breaks the chains of slavery.”⁶ The God of the African-American woman, who is still struggling from the legacy of slavery, “does not place divine approval on human suffering.”⁷ Cone goes on to state, “The suffering which is inseparable from the gospel is that style of existence that arises from a decision *to be* in spite of nonbeing.”⁸ The “good” for the black woman, has to supersede the good of society, a good she has really never had the privilege to pursue. This is an individual good, one that prevents her annihilation. This good must be pursued, at times for her very survival, even at the expense of her own progeny. Haunted by the memories of chattel slavery, black women cannot again become slaves of anything, even “slaves of pregnancy.”⁹

⁴ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 175.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁸ Ibid., 81

⁹ Loretta J. Ross, “African American Women and Abortion,” Trust Black Women.Org, <http://www.trustblackwomen.org/2011-05-10-03-28-12> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Sed Contra

On the other hand, abortion is a social justice issue for African-Americans, and therefore it benefits them. Poverty, single parenthood, educational inequities, unemployment and poor access to quality healthcare have been longstanding issues that still impact the black community even today. The system of chattel slavery in America was a deliberate attempt to shatter the family bonds of the people oppressed by it. Despite slavery, the black family emerged mostly intact, but wounded. The lack of education and employment opportunities for the newly freed slaves struck another blow to the family. Men often had to travel far from their families in search of employment, and in many cases, no jobs were to be found. Women, working as domestics, became the primary breadwinners for their families. Thus, when birth control programs offered black women solutions to the problem of unwanted pregnancies, they eagerly embraced them. A quote from the book, *Quicksand*, by Nella Larsen, sums it up in this way, "Marriage, that would mean children to me. And why would I add more suffering to the world? Why add any more unwanted, tortured, Negroes to America?"¹⁰ Birth control programs offered blacks, the majority of whom were uneducated and struggling with abject poverty, a way forward. They promised uplift and a bright hope for the future.

Civil Rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League joined forces with Margaret Sanger's Birth

¹⁰ Jamie Hart, "Who Should Have Children?: Discussions of Birth Control Among African-American Intellectuals 1920-1939," Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Inc., <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2717668?uid=3739616&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21101195072073> (accessed October 24, 2012)

Control Federation of America to promote the practice of birth Control. Large and prominent African-American churches hosted public lectures on the benefits of birth control. Influential newspapers such as the New Amsterdam News, the Pittsburgh Courier and others, touted birth control as the tool of social advancement for all African-Americans, especially the poor.¹¹ For many blacks in the early decades of the 20th century, there was a great concern for the quality of life. They believed that the birth control movement could offer them a way of improving life for women, men, and their families. The 1960's heralded the transition of abortion from the back alley to the clinic.

Today, the goal is to make abortion as mainstream as other birth control options. The black feminist organization, SisterSong, states, “ The isolation of abortion from other social justice issues that concern us contributes to reproductive oppression.” They go on to say that abortion must be viewed in terms of economic justice, criminal justice, the environment, immigrants’ rights, as well as militarism and racism. These are all issues that impact a woman’s right to exercise her reproductive choices. When abortion and human rights are linked together, they empower women to create healthier families and to promote “sustainable communities.”¹²

¹¹ Muna Abdulahi, “A Short History of African American Women and Abortion,” Trust Black Women.Org, <http://www.trustblackwomen.org/2011-05-10-03-28-12> (accessed October 24, 2012).

¹² Loretta J. Ross, “Understanding Reproductive Justice,” Trust Black Women.Org, <http://www.trustblackwomen.org/2011-05-10-03-28-12> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Birth control, including abortion, from a utilitarian perspective, is for the good of the greater community. From the perspective of virtue theory, social uplift can occur only if black people, especially the poor, exercise prudence, the practical wisdom of limiting the size of their families. Deontologically, poor blacks have a duty to decrease the size of their families, by whatever means necessary. Theologically, the God of blacks in the struggle for reproductive freedom is the God who is both immanent and transcendent. He is the God, as Cone says, "Who is revealed in the concreteness of the world." "The immanence of God forces us to look for God in the world and make decisions about the Ultimate in terms of present historical reality."¹³ Further, Cone states, "When blacks say that 'all is in God's hand,' this should not be equated with... 'We should do nothing.'" "It should be taken to mean that blacks are now free to be for the black community, to make decisions about their existence in the world..."¹⁴ Finally, Cone argues, "If the content of the gospel is liberation, human existence must be explained as 'being in freedom,' which means rebellion from every form of slavery..."

Responsio

I answer that, abortion, the "final solution" for unplanned pregnancies, harms African-American women, thereby harming the African-American community. Abortion is the reenactment of the sexual and other trauma inflicted on African American women during slavery. As the ultimate act of choice, abortion is an act of self-annihilation. Abortion is a social justice issue. It is an issue that has at stake the

¹³ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 77

eudaimonia, the flourishing as opposed to mere survival, of mothers, fathers and children. These children are the hope of future generations.

Ergo

Hence, I believe that abortion is a genocidal tool that has been craftily woven into the “liberation” mindset of African-American women. Feminists use the term maternal-fetal conflict to describe the way the law, social policies and Medicine treat the dilemmas that arise when the interests of the pregnant mother and the unborn child oppose one another.¹⁵ This issue was significantly heightened during slavery, when as Dorothy Roberts has stated, “The slave mother’s act of bearing a child profited the system that subjugated her.”¹⁶ The anguished cry for reproductive rights is in reality a cover up for the ambivalence toward motherhood that was “bred” into the black woman during slavery. What she experienced during slavery, her story of *Beloved*, “was not a story to pass on.”¹⁷

Once the black woman was free from chains, she now faced an oppressive system of extreme poverty. In addition to the overarching system of racism and sexism, she and her family now faced a future that seemed even more ominous than slavery itself. Thus, when eugenicists disguised as heroes, willing to offer help regarding the limitation of family size as a means out of destitution and poverty, they quickly signed on.

Despite all of this, there were always voices in the background crying “caution;” because they were fearful of genocide. “The UN Convention on the

¹⁵ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁷ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (*plume Contemporary Fiction*) (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 274.

Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide specifies five policies, which when implemented with intent to destroy a group are acts of genocide: a) killing members of the group; b) causing bodily or mental harm to members of a group; c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life intended to bring about its physical destruction, in whole or in part; 4) imposing measures to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”¹⁸

It seems quite evident that the conditions under which African-Americans lived in America for decades fulfill the criteria for genocide. Lynching, economic conditions that led to millions living in the nation’s overcrowded cities, the epidemics of substance abuse, black-on-black crime, AIDS and other healthcare issues, and the overwhelming numbers of African-American children in the juvenile justice and foster care systems reveal the genocidal leanings of this nation. Yet, the greatest killer of African-Americans is abortion. Since its legalization in the United States on January 22, 1973, approximately 15 million unborn black children have died in abortion clinics in this country. Black women are almost five times more likely to have abortions than whites.¹⁹ I posit that millions of African-American women have been traumatized by abortion, and that their unacknowledged pain has impacted their families and the black community.

Joy Degruy coined the phrase, Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome and wrote a book of the same name. In it she described P.T.S.S. as the “trans-generational

¹⁸ James F. Childress and John Macquarrie, eds., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Revised ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986), 248-249.

¹⁹ “Abortion Facts,” Abortion73.com, http://www.abort73.com/abortion_fact/us (accessed October 24, 2012).

adaptations associated with the past traumas of slavery and ongoing oppression.” She states that, “the slave experience was one of continued violent attacks on the slave’s body, mind and spirit.” “In the face of these injuries, those traumatized adapted their attitudes and behaviors to simply survive.”²⁰ The black woman, already generationally traumatized by racism, sexism, and economic oppression, utilizes any means necessary to insure her own survival. She internalizes the hatred projected towards her, thus her choice to abort her child(ren) becomes, in effect, “self-genocide.”²¹

Abortion is a social justice issue. It is a human rights issue. Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt argues that, “One might expect that the shared commitment to human rights would provide common ground” for those who advocate for the woman’s reproductive liberty and those who advocate for the unborn child’s right to life. “Yet,” he says, “what seems like common ground – human beings as possessors of rights, and government as the protector of those rights, yields nothing by way of agreement on the question of abortion.”²² Bauerschmidt goes on to say that virtue ethics is more attractive as a lens with which to view the abortion issue than that which uses “rights” language. He states that moral questions should go beyond what

²⁰ Joy DeGruy Leary, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukie, OR: Uptone Press, 2005), .

²¹ Muna Abdulahi, “A Short History of African American Women and Abortion,” Trust Black Women.Org, <http://www.trustblackwomen.org/2011-05-10-03-28-12> (accessed October 24, 2012).

²² Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics (blackwell Companions to Religion)* (Nashville, TN: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 250.

one should do, asking also who one should be.” He argues that instead of focusing on a liberalistic point of view that identifies “body-space” with “body-right” with its concurrent right to decide what can occupy one’s own space; one should consider the perspective of a “baptismal-body”. The baptismal “body-space” and “body-right” contrasts with the former view in that “its virtues are not powers of self-control and self-containment, but powers of self-donation.”²³

This ethic seems to ring far more true than the “rights” dynamic for African-American women in particular, and the black community in general. The black religious tradition, even from its roots in Africa, recognizes that, as Bauerschmidt states, “our identities are shaped by the various spirits and powers that act upon us.” (p.253) Instead of *eudaimon*, good spirits, it is possible that slavery caused the *kakodaimon* (κακοδαίμων), or evil spirits (in a sense), to act upon black women. Did this cause maternal-fetal conflict to such a degree that abortion and infanticide were not rare during slavery?²⁴ Did this spirit of oppression lay the groundwork for black women accounting for 40% of all abortions today? He goes on to say that social bodies, the black community for example, are also subject to spiritual forces. Bauerschmidt states, “freedom of choice is at the very nerve center of liberal ideology.” “This liberal myth blinds us to the way in which the spiritual forces of

²³ Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (blackwell Companions to Religion) (Nashville, TN: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 252.

²⁴ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't i a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 85-89’.

Church, market, state, media, family, angelic, and demonic powers operate upon our bodies, ourselves.”²⁵

In baptism, the Spirit “invades the candidate’s body through the touch of the celestial community.” “The body of the candidate, whether child or adult, is handled in such a way as to make clear that the candidate has no ‘body-right’” of its own. Despite the forces swirling around it, the body is empowered by the Spirit, entrusted to the community, and subject to God alone.²⁶ Baptism opens us to one another. We are all brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Thus, we are not our own, but the Lord’s. In response to this, Bauerschmidt then challenges us, since we belong to God, “who owes what to whom?” In response to the question, “who is my neighbor?” We realize that the Samaritan is the one who recognizes that (her) body is *already* linked to the body of the needy neighbor.”²⁷

The black woman, in her search for wholeness following two centuries of forced servitude, sought refuge in controlling her sexuality. She refused to be a slave to anyone again, not to the white society that enslaved her, not to her man, who sometimes did not understand and sometimes mistreated her, and not to her children who often represented the very oppression that she was trying to escape. Even to this day as she tries to control her reproductive destiny, she has become so caught up in a maelstrom of destructive forces, that she has turned her back, in

²⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics (blackwell Companions to Religion)* (Nashville, TN: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 254.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 261.

unprecedented numbers, on the future hope of African heritage peoples in America - her children.

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