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What is Reproductive Justice? How Women of Color Activists Are Redefining the Pro-Choice Paradigm

Abstract

Frustrated by the individualist approach of the “choice” paradigm used by the mainstream reproductive rights movement in the U.S., a growing coalition of women of color organizations and their allies have sought to redefine and broaden the scope of reproductive rights by using a human rights framework. Dubbing itself “the movement for reproductive justice,” this coalition connects reproductive rights to other social justice issues such as economic justice, education, immigrant rights, environmental justice, sexual right, and globalization, and believes that this new framework will encourage more women of color and other marginalized groups to become more involved in the political movement for reproductive freedom. Using narrative analysis, this essay explores what reproductive justice means to this movement, while placing it within the political, social, and cultural context from which it emerged.

Frustrated by the individualist approach of the pro-choice framework, a growing movement created and led by women of color has emerged to broaden the scope of reproductive rights. Calling itself the reproductive justice movement, this coalition of women of color activists and their allies are using a human rights and social justice framework to redefine choice. Focus group research has shown that women of color and low-income women do not identify with the pro-choice message; in fact, the choice

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rhetoric is almost meaningless (PEP 1997; 2004). Reproductive justice activists believe that this new framework will encourage more women of color and other marginalized groups to become more involved in the political movement for reproductive freedom.

The main goal of the reproductive justice movement is to move beyond the pro-choice movement's singular focus on abortion. The Oakland-based advocacy group Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) defines reproductive justice as:

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. (ACRJ 2005, 1)

As the above definition suggests, the reproductive justice framework recognizes the importance of linking reproductive health and rights to other social justice issues such as poverty, economic injustice, welfare reform, housing, prisoners' rights, environmental justice, immigration policy, drug policies, and violence. The movement's three core values are: the right to have an abortion, the right to have children, and the right to parent those children. Women must be able to freely exercise these rights without coercion. Although reproductive justice activists acknowledge that an emphasis on gaining legal rights, lobbying, and electoral politics is not necessarily a bad thing, they argue that there has to be an intersectional analysis and the acknowledgment of oppression in order for women to truly gain freedom.

Using narrative analysis, I will discuss this emerging movement and the concept of reproductive justice: What is reproductive justice? How does it differ from "choice"? What is the political, social, and cultural context from which this "reproductive justice" framework emerged? In order to address the questions posed, I gathered and analyzed the stories of the individuals and organizations who are actively involved in building the reproductive justice movement; specifically, I focus on the activities of SisterSong and many of its member organizations. I will show how reproductive justice activists have rhetorically created space for women of color, low-income women, women with disabilities, and other women who

have been marginalized not only within the mainstream reproductive rights movement, but also in society at large. This particular project is well-suited for narrative analysis, as reproductive justice activists have consciously used storytelling as an organizing tool; that is, storytelling is used as a pedagogical tool for consciousness-raising within their respective communities. Although we normally associate storytelling with the telling of *personal* stories, this essay focuses on the collective *public* stories that activists and advocacy groups tell about reproductive justice organizing and the histories of women of color and their communities. In other words, this essay is not grounded in the personal stories of *individuals*, but in the collective stories of *communities*.

Reproductive Justice in Context

A rich legacy in reproductive activism within communities of color is increasingly being documented by feminist scholars and the activists themselves. From Jennifer Nelson, we have learned how women of color in the black and Puerto Rican Nationalist movements worked to get feminist issues, particularly abortion and reproductive rights, onto their respective movements' agendas (Nelson 2003). Jael Silliman and her co-authors have documented the history of women of color creating their own reproductive health organizations in the 1980s and 1990s; some of the groups profiled include the National Black Women's Health Project (now known as the Black Women's Health Imperative) in 1984, the National Latina Health Organization in 1986, Asians and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health (now known as Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice) in 1989, and the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center in 1988 (Silliman et al. 2004).

Loretta Ross has shown how African American women were actively involved in the birth control movement in the early part of the twentieth century (Ross 1992). College-educated, middle-class African American women were actively involved in their communities with the sole purpose of racial uplift. They felt that it was their duty to help their impoverished brethren and believed that access to birth control was the key to the economic and social mobility and self-determination of the African American community as a whole (Davis 1983; Ross 1992). Moreover, African American women established abortion clinics, such as the

Gainesville Women's Health Center in Florida, which was founded in 1974 by Byllye Avery and four of her colleagues.

Prominent African American women such as politician Shirley Chisholm and feminist lawyer and advocate Florynce "Flo" Kennedy were involved in abortion politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Chisholm was the first president of NARAL (then known as the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws), and in 1969 Kennedy was one of the lawyers representing the Women's Health Collective and 350 plaintiffs in a lawsuit challenging New York State's law prohibiting abortion (Davis 1983; Ross 1992; Nelson 2003; Silliman et al. 2004).

In the 1970s, advocacy groups founded and led by women of color, such as the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), the Third World Women's Alliance, and the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA), included abortion and reproductive rights and sterilization abuse on their political agendas (Davis 1983; Ross 1992; Springer 1999; Nelson 2003; Silliman et al. 2004). Specifically, these groups exposed federal government-sanctioned sterilization campaigns targeting African American, Puerto Rican, Mexican American, and Native American women in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Davis 1983; Roberts 1997; Silliman and Bhattacharjee 2002; Smith 2005b). In the words of Silliman et al.:

CARASA saw the mainstream pro-choice organizations as narrow at best and, at worst, as taking positions that undermined the reproductive freedom of many women. In this regard, they specifically cited hostility [from the mainstream pro-choice movement] to regulations regarding sterilization abuse and the use of population control arguments for abortion rights. Following the lead of women of color, CARASA placed opposition to sterilization abuse on par with support for abortion rights. (Silliman et al. 2004, 33)

Women of color have been active as members and staffers in traditional reproductive rights organizations, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and NARAL. In fact, many of the mainstream groups developed programs that specifically targeted women of color, such as NOW's Women of Color Program and the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights' (RCAR; now known as the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice) Women of Color Partnership Program. In 1987, NOW hosted the first national conference on women of color and reproductive rights; it

coincided with the 1987 March for Women's Lives. Some smaller pro-choice organization such as the Reproductive Rights National Network (R2R2) placed race, class, and LGBT issues at the center of their mission (Fried 2007).

Nevertheless, many women of color activists have expressed their frustrations with working within majority-white, pro-choice organizations. In her book of essays, long-time African American activist Marcella Howell writes:

During my 30 years in the women's movement, I have watched young black women come into women's and reproductive rights organizations with idealistic hopes of what they could achieve. By the time they leave, usually within a few years, they are disillusioned with these organizations in particular and with the women's movement in general. In many cases, these young women found themselves in inhospitable and often hostile environments. (Howell 2007, 7)

The disillusionment stemmed from the perceived lack of attention to issues that were of concern for many women of color, such as the repeal of the Hyde Amendment, which prevented federal monies (for example, Medicaid) and facilities (for example, military hospitals) from being used for abortions (NAPAWF 2008). This frustration also partly stems from the "choice" rhetoric of the movement, which is problematic because it is based on a set of assumptions that applies only to a small group of women who are privileged enough to have multiple choices. Although the "choice" message tactic may have worked in the short run in response to the actions of the conservative anti-abortion countermovement, many reproductive rights activists, especially women of color, believe that choice should not be the long-term or sole goal of the reproductive rights movement.

Early reproductive justice activists were strongly influenced by international human rights discourse. Beginning in the early 1970s, a global, transnational women's movement that placed human rights at the core of its organizing activities emerged. Many U.S. feminists were arguing that women should be involved in the international human rights scene (Silliman et al. 2004). As Charlotte Bunch argued, "The separation of women's rights from human rights has perpetuated the secondary status of women" (Bunch 1995). This transnational movement was centered on several of the international women's and human rights conferences held by

the United Nations. There were the two decades of women's conferences: Mexico City, Mexico (1975), Nairobi, Kenya (1985), Copenhagen, Denmark (1980), and Beijing, China (1995). There were also other UN conferences such as the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979; the World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna, Austria in 1993; and the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, Egypt in 1994. Many women of color activists were involved in these international conferences and were radically influenced and inspired by the human rights framework employed at these conferences:

[T]he term Reproductive Justice was coined in 1994 by women of color shortly after [the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt]. We were envisioning from the perspectives of women of color engaged in both domestic and international activism, and attempting to create a lens applicable to the United States with which to interpret and apply the normative (but not universally agreed) understandings reached at Cairo. . . . As activists in the U.S., 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. (Ross 2006, 6)

Reproductive justice activists were particularly inspired by how the United Nations conceptualizes human rights, as simply stated in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person" (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights* 1948). The UN delineates three broad categories of human rights: 1) civil and political rights; 2) economic, social, and cultural rights; and 3) sexual, environmental, and developmental rights (OHCHR 1996). The first category includes rights that provide for liberty and equality, freedom from discrimination, and the right to participate in the political life of our communities, whereas the second category provides for the material well being of individuals, the right to live and participate in communities, and the preservation of one's cultural identity. The last category refers to bodily integrity, community self-determination, and rights to land and other natural resources. Human rights doctrine has taken center stage in the reproductive justice framework.

There have been several attempts to create a national reproductive rights coalition for women of color, such as the Women of Color Coalition for Reproductive Rights, which was launched in 1992 by six organizations (Silliman et al. 2004). The SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective (known simply as SisterSong) is the latest attempt to create a national network. Comprised of over eighty national and local women of color and allied organizations, boasting hundreds of individual members, and headquartered in Atlanta, SisterSong was formed in 1997 by sixteen organizations with funding from the Ford Foundation.

In 1997 and 1998 under the leadership of Luz Rodriguez, director of the Latina Roundtable for Health and Reproductive Rights (New York), the Ford Foundation hosted a series of meetings. Although the original purpose of these gatherings was to focus on reproductive-tract infections among women of color, the participants shared the belief that women of color have the right and responsibility to represent themselves and their communities (Ross et al. 2001). As a result, the group developed a plan to create a collective vision and coordinated effort among women of color groups. The Ford Foundation would eventually provide the seed money SisterSong needed to launch itself as a viable advocacy organization. In fact, the initial support from Ford was channeled through an unprecedented funding model; not only did SisterSong receive funding, but several of the founding organizations also received funding for their individual projects and programs. Loretta Ross, a veteran women's rights, civil rights, and human rights activist, would become SisterSong's national coordinator, a position comparable to being an executive director.

In keeping with its mission of creating and maintaining a multicultural movement that acknowledges, respects, and supports a diversity of voices and perspectives, the collective is organized into five principal caucuses representing ethnic and indigenous groups in the United States: 1) African American/Caribbean/African, 2) Arab American/Middle Eastern/North African, 3) Asian/Pacific Islander, 4) Latina, and 5) Native American/Indigenous. Over the years, other caucuses have formed, including ones for the LGBTI/queer community, young women under the age of twenty-four, and women of color who work in majority-white, reproductive rights organizations. Last, the member organizations also represent specific issue niches. Besides representing specific racial and ethnic communities, SisterSong organizations work on a range of issues, including, but not

limited to, HIV/AIDS, anti-poverty policy, violence against women, disability rights, gay and lesbian rights, environmental rights, biotechnology, and immigration rights. It has also incorporated human rights principles in its organizing educational efforts, especially in its national and regional trainings and workshops. In fact, the organization often distributes free copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to its grassroots constituency.

Many social movement theorists have typically focused on resource mobilization and participation in the political process in their evaluations of the impact and effectiveness of social movements (Staggenborg 1991). However, Francesca Polletta and James Jasper argue that the construction of a collective identity is just as important for assessing the impact of movements as well as understanding what mobilizes people to participate in movements and accounts for the tactical choices that activists make (Polletta and Jasper 2001). In its attempts to map out space for itself within the social and political landscape, part of SisterSong's strategy is to develop a strong collective identity, which is important for recruiting individual and organizational members, especially women of color, economically disadvantaged women, and other women who have felt marginalized by the pro-choice movement. Doing so is also part of its political vision and mission. Moreover, collective identity-formation is important for distinguishing the movement from other social movements, mainly the pro-choice movement. Is the reproductive justice movement merely an outgrowth of the pro-choice movement? Is it a countermovement? Or is it a parallel movement in its own right that is distinctive from the pro-choice movement? Storytelling aids in this process of collective identity-formation.

SisterSong and Narrative Analysis

This essay is based on a narrative analysis of a range of written and oral texts. I specifically focus on the activities of and documents produced by SisterSong and its member and allied organizations. Stories serve multiple purposes. They can be documentary in nature; they can provide information about a person, project, situation, event, or any other set of circumstances. Second, stories construct reality, or at least provide a glimpse into the storyteller's version of reality. We cognitively make sense of the world

around us by telling stories; storytelling is how we give meaning to our experiences and convey those interpretations to others (Stone 1989; Czarniawska-Joerges 1998; Feldman and Skoldberg 2002; Czarniawska-Joerges 2004; Feldman et al. 2004). Third, stories can create space; that is, storytelling can be a means by which those who are marginalized within society or in a specific community can create a reality that includes and addresses their experiences, perspectives, and concerns, that is, their reality. Last, stories can serve as consciousness-raising tools for grassroots, political organizing. Reproductive justice activists consciously use storytelling as a form of activism to document the experiences, history, thoughts, and emotions of women of color and other marginalized groups before these stories are lost or erased from official, public memory.

Narrative analysis is most often associated with the analysis of data collected from oral interviews; however, stories can be collected from a variety of primary and secondary documentary sources. Stories can be collected from media sources such as newspaper articles, magazines, and blogs, especially if one is interested in analyzing the public discourse on a particular social or political issue. Social movement organizations produce a variety of materials, including pamphlets, brochures, reports, press releases, flyers, and congressional testimony, all of which are rich sources for gathering narratives.

For this project, I gathered narrative data using several strategies. First, I gathered information from my participation and observation in several reproductive justice movement activities, such as meetings and conferences. These included four annual meetings of the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective (2004–2006, 2009), the national conferences held by SisterSong in 2003 and 2007, and a national policy conference (entitled “Reproductive Justice for All”) convened by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and Smith College in 2005. Participant observation provided a great deal of context that aided in the interpretation of the documents that I collected.

I collected and analyzed documents produced by reproductive justice organizations, including websites, reports, mission statements, fact sheets, newsletters, and meeting transcripts. Ultimately, I collected stories from over 100 documents and seventeen websites. The following groups are represented in this project: SisterSong; Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice; Center for Genetics & Society; California Latinas for

Reproductive Justice; National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health; National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF); African American Women for Reproductive Freedom; California Black Women's Health Project; Black Women's Health Imperative (formerly NBWHP); African American Women Evolving (AAWE); Wise Women Gathering Place; Justice Now; Committee on Women, Population, and the Environment (CWPE); Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA); Mothers Movement Online; Population and Development Program (Hampshire College); and Advocates for Youth. I collected many of these documents from archival organizational records at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College.

Last, I collected interview transcripts from the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, which is housed at the Sophia Smith Collection. Many of the feminist activists interviewed are the "founding mothers" of the reproductive justice movement, including Byllye Avery, Loretta J. Ross, Luz Martinez, Luz Rodriguez, Marlene Fried, Katsi Cook, Nkenge Toure, and Carmen Vazquez.

I coded the texts for specific narrative themes. From the analysis, three categories of stories emerged: origin stories, opposition stories, and cautionary tales. For the rest of this essay, I will discuss these different categories of stories and how they contribute to the construction of the reproductive justice framework.

Origin Stories: Establishing a Movement

In the early stages of an emerging social movement, it is crucial to gain as much momentum as possible at the grassroots; a movement must construct an identity that not only reflects what it stands for, but also establishes it as a viable and effective political contender. The process of constructing a social movement identity includes the repeated telling of origin stories. Origin stories are the collective narratives that a culture uses to explain how other things came into being, such as the beginning of the world or the creation of the human race. Emerging social movements often tell stories about their founding and purpose in their grassroots organizing activities, such as membership meetings, conferences, training workshops, and other related events. The following is an example of an origin story about SisterSong:

Throughout our herstory in the United States, women of color have been engaged in individual and collective struggles to save our lives. Our reproductive and sexual rights have always been an integral part of this movement. Now, newer generations of women are continuing this legacy. Its [sic] important for them to understand “herstory” and on whose shoulders they [stand]. Despite evidence of our resistance, women of color in the United States remain disproportionately affected by reproductive health concerns and related human rights violations. The SisterSong Collective emerged at a crucial time in this herstory, a time when the women’s and civil rights movements were both experiencing critical backlash. SisterSong is the fifth and longest-lived attempt to organize a national coalition of women of color health organizations. The previous efforts were in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but did not last due to lack of funding to build the capacity of women of color organizations to support a national collaboration. (SisterSong 2003, 8)

For reproductive justice activists, the purpose of continually retelling this and similar stories is not only to relate the founding of the collective, but also to remember and honor the “herstory” of the foremothers of the movement. These stories dispel the misconception that reproductive rights is a white women’s issue and that women of color have not been involved in this type of activism at all. Examples of past achievements and struggles are meant to educate young women of color and to *inspire* them to become the future leaders of reproductive justice activism.

In establishing the identity of the movement, reproductive justice activists tell origin stories explaining the meaning behind the name “SisterSong.” According to SisterSong lore, the organization’s name is attributed to Juanita Williams, a founding member of the collective who serves on the management circle (that is, the collective’s board of directors). The collective wanted a name that reflected the commonality in struggle of all racial and ethnic groups and recognized the specific needs of each community.

SisterSong and the reproductive justice movement were formed at a time when a lot of women of color organizations were struggling to stay afloat, and many of the women of color projects that had been established within the mainstream pro-choice groups were also struggling. Many of these

organizations had limited funding, small staffs, no computers, and no non-profit, tax-exempt status, and as a result, they felt isolated from one another and ineffective. One woman of color activist lamented:

Resources and efforts on reproductive health ceased in communities of color. In the late 80s, it was in vogue to fund women of color projects within white women's organizations. In the early [1990s], because of the lack of cultural competency within those white organizations and tokenism, the trend was to fund women of color organizations. Now they have gone back to funding women of color projects in white organizations, because many of these organizations are not in existence or no longer addressing those issues. . . . The [1980s] was when these organizations flourished, but there [were] no cultural competencies. These organizations—NBWHP, NLRH, and NAWHO—were doing the organizing in their communities. There was a lack of presence of communities of color in public events. So some people began to question their effectiveness and began to ask, "Why are we funding you?" We are still seeing the same issue, but when we had our meetings, people were showing up. (NLRH 2001)

According to Juanita Williams at the 2007 SisterSong conference in Chicago, "we're singing the same song, but we are not singing in harmony." Along with the name came the tagline, "doing collectively what we cannot not do individually" (SisterSong 2007). The founding of SisterSong was a move for survival as well as unity, as these organizations were about to pool their energy and resources to support one another. The collective's name reflects the unity of the many voices of the groups.

Opposition Stories: Moving beyond Choice

In the creation of its own identity, a movement not only defines itself by what it is, but also by what it is not. That is, it defines itself by its opposition. I call these sets of narratives opposition stories. Borrowed from semiotics, the term "opposition" refers to the meaning-making process. An object or entity (that is, a sign) derives its meaning not solely by what it is, but also by what it is not (that is, its signifier) (Feldman and Skoldberg 2002). In other words, an object has meaning because of another object that is its opposite.

In early 2003, the “big four” reproductive rights groups in the country—Planned Parenthood, NOW, the Feminist Majority Foundation, and NARAL Pro-Choice America—met to discuss the current state of affairs. They ultimately decided to hold a march to call attention to the endangerment of reproductive rights, deciding to call it the “March for Freedom of Choice.” Little did they know that getting people at the grassroots level revved up and excited to participate was going to be a challenge. Loretta Ross, the national coordinator of SisterSong and a former organizer for national NOW, recalls:

But we women of color felt that the abortion framework, the choice framework, was just too narrow a vessel to talk about the threat to women’s lives. We’re dealing with the Bush administration, an immoral and illegal war in Iraq, the Patriot Act, poverty—I mean, all these things would not be challenged by just talking about freedom of choice. I mean, if we made abortion totally available, totally accessible, totally legal, totally affordable, women would still have other problems. And so reducing women’s lives down to just whether or not choice is available, we felt was inadequate. . . . It was really about choice and abortion. Not the right to have a child, but the right to terminate a pregnancy. That’s all they wanted to talk about. And so, we had dissatisfaction with the name of the march. We had dissatisfaction with the fact that there were no women of color involved in the decision-making about the march. And then, if they wanted women of color to significantly participate in the march, then they had to build our capacity to do so. We’re representing organizations that have one, two, three staff people, so which one of our projects are we going to drop so that we could participate in their agenda? That was not a tenable solution for us. And so, we had the plenary and then the march organizers sponsored a post-plenary discussion caucus dinner where we sat around, about twenty of us sat around, and hashed it out with them. (Ross 2005)

As Ross’s story suggests, the march was not gaining any momentum among grassroots constituencies in the early stages of the planning. Many activists were resentful that the “big four” had decided to plan a march without any significant input from them and were dissatisfied that the march would address only abortion rights. Eventually, SisterSong, the Black Women’s Health Imperative, and the National Latina Institute for

Reproductive Health would join the planning team of the 2004 march. These three groups are credited with broadening the march's message beyond abortion and having it renamed the March for Women's Lives. Not only did the revamped march draw more than one million participants, it was endorsed by over 140 women of color and people of color organizations out of a total 1,400 organizations; only twenty women of color groups had endorsed the march at the beginning (Cassie 2004; Otis 2004; Kashef 2005). Significantly, the NAACP publicly endorsed the reproductive rights march, which was the first time ever for the ninety-five-year-old civil rights organization. Its endorsement resolution simply stated, "A woman denied the right to control her own body is denied equal protection under the law" (Cassie 2004).

This story echoes similar stories that emerged from previous reproductive rights marches hosted by NOW in the 1980s and 1990s. In previous marches, women of color were not only concerned that their perspectives would not be included; they also expressed fears that the mainstream pro-choice groups would co-opt their political perspectives once they were included in the organizing for these marches (Martinez 2004). The story reflects the precarious nature of the relationship between women of color activists and the mainstream, pro-choice groups.

Ross's story also alludes to the ambivalence that many women of color activists have felt toward the pro-choice framework. As Andrea Smith argues, the pro-choice/pro-life framework marginalizes many groups of women, including women of color, poor women, and women with disabilities, as it is not an accurate reflection of the experiences of these communities (Smith 2005a). For example, Native American women are not just concerned about the criminalization or decriminalization of abortion, but also about fighting for the life and self-determination of their communities, including the issues of sovereignty rights and the increased incarceration of people of color. The focus on life should not be concerned just with the birth of children, but also about the quality of life for those who already exist. The "right to life" is an empty rhetorical phrase if it is not also focused on addressing social issues such as poverty and drugs that contribute to poor living conditions and crime-related activity—which have a significant impact on reproductive freedom.

When I use the term "opposition stories," I do not mean to imply that the reproductive justice movement is a countermovement to the pro-choice

movement, that is, a movement created to directly oppose the political agenda of the pro-choice movement. After all, many pro-choice groups, such as the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and Choice USA, are affiliated (allied) groups of Sister-Song. Moreover, the reproductive justice movement supports keeping abortion legal and advocates for women's right not to have children, but also for women's right to to have children and to parent the children that they have, which have not traditionally been a central component of the pro-choice agenda. On the other hand, it would be a misstatement to say that the reproductive justice movement is a subset of the pro-choice movement, even though many reproductive justice activists have been involved in pro-choice groups as members, staff, and board members. It is a movement in its own right; the difference is that intersectional politics are at the center of its political mission and vision. Intersectional politics informs its political agenda. These sets of stories are the means through which the movement establishes its political territory.

The reproductive justice movement forms its identity partially by setting itself apart from the mainstream pro-choice movement; we make sense of the identity and the goals of reproductive justice because of its difference from the mainstream pro-choice movement. Part of this process includes critiquing the concept of choice and arguing why it is problematic, while also presenting an alternative framework. It is through the telling of opposition stories that reproductive justice activists reveal how the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and other markers of difference affect reproductive freedom not only for individuals but also for entire communities; that is, "choice" does not exist in a vacuum. There are systemic, structural obstacles that can limit the options that exist for individuals and communities.

Cautionary Tales: The Specter of Eugenics

In addition to telling stories about the origins of the movement and the limitations of the concept of "choice," reproductive justice activists also tell cautionary tales in their consciousness-raising activities. Cautionary tales are stories that have a moral message and often warn the audience of the negative consequences of a particular transgression, character flaw, or objectionable situation. Reproductive justice activists are particularly

cautious when new reproductive and genetic technologies are approved the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and introduced into the consumer market.

In an interview, a Latina reproductive justice activist explained her organization's stance on controversial contraceptive drugs and devices:

We did need more options for women. There was the boom and bust of Norplant—which was promoted as a miracle contraceptive technology, the way it was utilized, forced on disenfranchised communities—dispensed to poor women, African American women, and Latina women. The government would pay for the implant, but only for a percentage of the removal—so there was a coercive mechanism in place through policy in the public health system. Women get it in, but the side effects were not good, but then they couldn't get it out because they did not have the money for that and the federal government would not pay for it. Physicians were eager to implant these devices, but were not well-trained to remove them. These are two separate [issues]. Yes, it was a good thing to have more technologies available. However, we need to give some thought to the different possible scenarios where policy makers may react or overreact in the utilization of those technologies. (NLIRH 2001)

The specter of eugenics looms in the backdrop of reproductive justice discourse. Popular in the early half of the twentieth century and based on social Darwinism, eugenics is a pseudoscientific theory that promotes the improvement of the human species by encouraging or permitting reproduction among individuals who are deemed to have the desirable genetic profile for breeding. Under the eugenics framework, only the fit shall reproduce. Those who were considered unfit to reproduce or parent have included the poor, the disabled, the mentally ill, criminals, gay men, and lesbians. Federal and state laws, policies, and court cases promoted, supported, and upheld eugenics practices. State institutions routinely sterilized “feebleminded” individuals on the premise that mental health and low IQs were inherited traits and should not be transmitted to future generations; these practices were upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, particularly in *Buck v. Bell* (1927) in which the court ruled that the forced sterilization of a woman in a mental hospital was constitutional (Roberts 1997; Cushman 2001; Baer 2002).

Some reproductive justice activists would also argue that seemingly beneficial family planning programs may not be as innocuous as they may appear to be. Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice argues:

Though highly problematic from an anti-racist and anti-imperialist perspective, population control discourse was politically successful in increasing the visibility and acceptance of birth control in the first half of the 20th century. At the same time, African American women who made connections between race, class, and gender joined the fight for birth control in the 1920s as much from Black women's experience as enslaved breeders for the accumulation of wealth of White slave-owners as for realization of gender empowerment. In the 1960s, the federal government began funding family planning both in the United States and internationally as part of a strategy for population control, rather than women's empowerment. Population control has been defined as externally imposed efforts by governments, corporations or private agencies to control (by increasing or limiting) population growth, usually by controlling women's reproduction and fertility. Other forms of population control include immigration restrictions, selective population movement or dispersal, incarceration, and various forms of discrimination. (ACRJ 2005, 3)

Given the troubling history of sterilization abuse and eugenics practices, many reproductive justice advocates are cautious not to rush into embracing newer reproductive and genetic technologies, including Norplant and Depo Provera, without examining the potential consequences to their communities. Judges around the country began using the devices in sentencing not long after their approval by the FDA. Norplant and Depo Provera were often offered as alternatives to prison for women of child-bearing age who were convicted of felony possession or distribution of cocaine, crack, or heroin as well as pregnant women with a history of drug use. In many states legislation had been proposed that would make the device a condition for continuation of welfare payments to beneficiaries (Rees 1991; Samuels and Smith 1992; Arras and Bluestein 1995; Chavkin and Breitbart 1996; Roberts 1997; Campbell 2000; Paltrow 2002; Roberts 2006). For instance, some states, such as Kansas, Louisiana, and North Carolina, have proposed legislation in which financial incentives would be given to welfare recipients to obtain Norplant. This was usually in the form

of a “bonus” of up to \$500. There have been reports of the systematic implantation of Norplant in Native American women through the Indian Health Services (Smith 2005b).

These policies were modeled after a program implemented by C.R.A.C.K. (Children Requiring a Caring Community), a private organization founded by homemaker Barbara Harris in Anaheim, CA in 1994. The organization offers poor women with substance addictions \$200 to undergo surgical sterilization or use a long-acting contraceptive such as Norplant or Depo Provera, which essentially are temporary sterilization. The program has expanded to Chicago, Florida, New Hampshire, and Washington State (BWHI 2001; CWPE 2006). The Committee on Women, Population, and the Environment (CWPE) has been diligent in monitoring and counteracting the activities of C.R.A.C.K.

Concern about reproductive technologies has informed the political agenda of several reproductive justice organizations. To address the legacy of involuntary sterilization, for example, the CWPE has begun a campaign to get state legislatures to pass resolutions to publicly apologize for those and other eugenics campaigns. They were successful in getting the Georgia state legislature to introduce and pass a resolution in 2007. The resolution states:

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE that the members of this body express their profound regret for Georgia’s participation in the eugenics movement and the injustices done under eugenics laws, including the forced sterilization of Georgia citizens. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the members of this body hereby support the full education of Georgia citizens about the eugenics movement in order to foster a respect for the fundamental dignity of human life and the God given rights recognized by our Founding Fathers. (Georgia General Assembly 2007, 2)

Last, this set of stories allows the reproductive justice movement to deal with political issues in which the pro-choice rhetoric is insufficient and a nuanced understanding of the reproductive experiences of communities of color is needed. In early 2010, members of the Georgia State Assembly introduced a bill, entitled the OB/GYN Criminalization and Racial Discrimination Act, that would categorize abortions performed on fetuses based on race, color, or sex as a form of discrimination, and it would crimi-

nalize medical practitioners who performed such abortions (SisterSong 2010b). This legislation was accompanied by large billboards that proclaimed that “black children are an endangered species,” tapping into long-standing fears of genocide among many African Americans. By fighting the passage of this bill, SisterSong created a coalition of reproductive justice and allied organizations, including SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!, SisterLove, Inc., Feminist Women’s Health Center (GA,) and Planned Parenthood Southeast, and garnered national support from civil rights leaders and clergy. Because of its acumen in understanding the right of all women to have access to abortion and the history of fertility control targeting communities of color, SisterSong was able to counter the genocidal arguments of the bill’s anti-abortion supporters and eventually prevent the passage of the bill (SisterSong 2010b).

Creating Space, Building a Movement

SisterSong is not the entirety of the reproductive justice movement, but it serves as a good stand-in for the movement given the sheer number of organizations involved in it. As a movement organization, SisterSong is continually constructing its collective identity through the process of telling stories. These stories are repeatedly told at membership meetings, conferences, workshops, rallies, and other events as well as in various written materials.

As I have shown in this essay, three types of stories dominate the identity-construction process. Collectively, these stories serve the purpose of not only defining SisterSong, and consequently the movement, but also setting it apart from the mainstream pro-choice movement. This strategy allows the movement to reach out to constituents that traditionally have never felt a part of the pro-choice movement. Indeed, many individual activists involved in the reproductive justice movement, including founding mother Luz Rodriguez, were not previously involved in pro-choice organizations, but were veterans of other social justice activism, such as environmental justice, economic justice, prison reform, and civil rights. Some of these non-traditional reproductive freedom activists have expressed, and continue to express, some ambivalence toward the pro-choice movement.

These stories also create the space that the movement needs in order to advance its more holistic agenda. This was evident at a recent membership

meeting held in Washington, DC in December 2009, when the health-care reform bill was on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives for debate and final vote. Although the planners and participants initially thought that it would be a routine membership meeting, that sentiment quickly changed when it was discovered that several amendments had been introduced that could be detrimental to women of color and immigrant women (SisterSong 2010a). Several amendments proposed to restrict immigrants' access to healthcare. Another, the Stupak-Pitts amendment, would prevent federal funds from being used to pay for abortions, including private plans that cover subsidized customers; the amendment would explicitly codify the 1976 Hyde amendment in the health bill. Drawing upon their narrative threads, SisterSong was able to rally the 400+ participants to action by sending impromptu state delegations of women of color, who visited their respective representatives in their congressional offices, to urge them to vote against these proposals. Although some of these amendments, including the Stupak-Pitts amendment, passed, the lobbying experience energized the participating activists, as many of them had no previous legislative lobbying experience. This moment also marked the political coming of age of the movement; this was the first coordinated congressional lobbying effort of the organization.

The goal of the reproductive justice framework is to transform the way in which we all conceptualize and understand reproductive freedom. Will this new framework catch on? A Google search in June 2007 of the term "reproductive justice" yielded over 1.2 million hits, which suggests that the term is gaining some momentum. In fact, some of the mainstream pro-choice organizations have adopted the term. For example, in 2005 the Planned Parenthood Federation of America hosted a national policy conference entitled "Reproductive Justice for All" at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, and even the national group Choice USA, co-founded by Gloria Steinem, hosts a "Reproductive Justice Organizing Academy" for young activists (PPFA 2005). Although Choice USA uses the term "reproductive justice" in its political and grassroots activities, it has still retained the term "choice" in its name (for examples, visit its website <http://www.choiceusa.org>). Reproductive justice activists warn that the term "reproductive justice" is not meant to be a substitute or interchangeable term for other terms such as abortion rights, family planning, pro-choice, population control, or even reproductive rights. It is a different

way of conceptualizing reproductive freedom that is broader in scope than its predecessors.

The next step in understanding the impact of the reproductive justice movement is to focus on reproductive activism at the grassroots level, especially on how the organizing efforts of reproductive justice activists at this level contribute to the national political and policy agenda. After all, much of the national agenda is based on issues that arise from the community level and depends upon the activities of grassroots activists, especially coalition-building with other social justice movements. For instance, the network of reproductive justice organizations in California have worked successfully with groups representing other social justice movements, such as immigrants' rights and traditional African American civil rights groups, to defeat voter ballot initiatives that could have had a negative impact on women's ability to access reproductive health services in the state. These efforts have served as models for reproductive justice groups in other regions of the country.

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