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Abortion rights in the Black Power and Women's Liberation Movements in the 1960s and 1970s: A Divisive Issue

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Abstract: The demand for abortion rights, which was made within the Black Power and Women's Liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, led to a debate among white and Black activists. Thus, the feminist activists within the National Organization for Women disagreed notably on whether to demand the reform or the repeal of abortion laws. If the repeal of abortion laws was considered as being too radical by some liberal feminists, radical feminists embraced it because they believed that due to the legalization of abortion, women would (re)gain control over their bodies and would thus be able to dismantle the patriarchal system, which had its roots in the structure of the nuclear family. But many activists in the Black Power movement, particularly male ones, equated abortion rights with genocide and racial suicide in the light of the coerced sterilizations and abortions that Black women had had to endure in the past. While some Black female activists agreed with this position, others supported the repeal of abortion laws but criticized white feminists and Black male activists for disregarding the specific needs of Black women and of women of color. They campaigned for a broader abortion rights agenda, which would include the right to have an abortion, but also the right to adequate housing, health care, and economic means to raise their children safely and securely. Their vision of abortion rights was an intersectional one as their demand for such rights highlighted not only how "race," class, and gender had interacted to maintain Black women into a subordinate position, but also how they could interact to emancipate themselves by helping themselves to regain control over their bodies.

Keywords: abortion, reproductive rights movement, Black Power, feminism, intersectionality

Introduction

One of the demands made within the Women's Liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s was the legalization of abortion.[1] Part of the wider goal of obtaining equal rights for women, whatever their "race," ethnicity, or social class, the issue of abortion rights was controversial within the liberal feminist National Organization for Women (NOW), which was created in 1966 and campaigned for equal rights with men. After heavy debates, NOW's second

[1] The term "Women's Liberation" became the tag line of the first issue of the feminist movement's national newsletter issued by Jo Freeman. I will use the term to refer to the two branches of feminism of the 1960s, liberal feminism and radical feminism (see Freeman, "On the Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement").

national conference in 1967 included the legalization of abortion in the feminist organization's Bill of Rights, making it the first national organization to officially demand the repeal of laws restricting access to abortion (National Organization for Women n. pag.). Thus, whereas some women's rights activists feared it would alienate potential supporters of women's rights, others opposed it for religious reasons (Rosen 83). Abortion was also a sensitive issue within the Black Power movement, as many Black men opposed it, viewing it as a form of genocide (Chisholm 604) in light of the program of forced sterilizations, which had started in the early twentieth century and had notably targeted Black women (Reagan 353).

Bearing in mind these debates, this article endeavors to analyze the ambivalent attitude toward abortion rights within the Black Power and Women's Liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s. This will be done by using an intersectional approach. The term "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in an article published in 1989. However, this approach, which Black feminist scholars are credited with having contributed to developing (Hine, "The Black Studies Movement" 15), has its origins "in earlier Afro-Diasporic political organizations such as the Combahee River Collective, the Black Panther Party, the Pan-African Association, and the National Association of Colored Women" (Hine, "A Black Studies Manifesto" 13). It emerged as a response to what Black feminists considered to be a white feminism. A major source of discontent of Black feminists (which still holds true today) was that feminist theory did not acknowledge and consider the situation of Black women and that it did not address the ways in which "race" and gender interacted to create and maintain systems of oppression and discrimination. Crenshaw thus argued that "[b]ecause the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (140). This initial focus on how "race" and gender interact to reinforce systems of oppression was later extended to include social class. Even though the addition of this category led to debates (Collins 229), its use alongside "race" and gender is particularly relevant regarding the

analysis of the resistance to or support for abortion rights especially among Black Power activists.[2] Indeed, such a framework of analysis contributes to explaining why the demand for abortion rights was a divisive one not only in the Black Power movement, but also in the Women's Liberation movement that made the legalization of abortion one of its main priorities. More precisely, it helps to understand how a person's "race," class, and gender affected their position on abortion rights. Based on this theoretical approach, in this article I will thus argue that the intersection of "race," class, and gender explains the ambivalence toward abortion, as contrary to Black Power male activists most Black female activists supported the repeal of abortion laws. This research will also highlight the reason why, contrary to most white liberal feminists, Black women called for a broader abortion rights agenda, which would recognize the specific needs of poor Black women (and of poor women of color in general) by including, besides the right to have an abortion, the right to adequate housing, health care, and economic means to raise their children safely and securely. Their vision of abortion rights was thus an intersectional one as their demand for such rights highlighted not only how "race," class, and gender had interacted to maintain Black women into a subordinate position, but also how they could interact to emancipate themselves by helping themselves to regain control over their bodies. This will lead me to first retrace the roots of the ambivalence toward abortion in the Black community, to then assess its impact on the Black Power and Women's Liberation movements and on the interactions among the activists.

Controlling Women's Bodies on the Basis of "Race" and Class

The reason that has underscored the ambivalence toward abortion within the Black community, and more broadly birth control, can notably be traced back to the way enslaved Black women's bodies were controlled by their white masters.[3] According to Dorothy

[2] The purpose of this article is not to dwell on these debates. For more, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, 229-32.

[3] As underlined by Robert G. Weisbord, Black enslaved men's sexual autonomy was also restricted as they were to father children who would in turn add to the number of slaves a master had. Moreover, Black enslaved men could be castrated as a punishment for having escaped a few times (572).

Roberts, this "long history of regulation of black women's bodies […] was crucial to reproductive and racial politics in America" (*Killing the Black Body* xi). As she points out, under the system of slavery, Black women were denied reproductive freedom: their fertility was controlled by their masters so as to increase their workforce and thus their potential profits (4, 55),[4] which was fully exploited by the eighteenth century (cf. White 67). In the nineteenth century, as the importation of slaves had become illegal, slave owners used enslaved women's reproductive capacity to ensure that the institution of slavery would endure (White 79-80). Because of slave owners' reliance on Black enslaved women to increase their slave population, some enslaved women managed to remain childless (Jones 33) because they found ways of aborting the fetuses "to resist coerced reproduction and slavery itself, employing the knowledge of African-based midwifery culture and folk medicine" (Solinger 4). Thus, the recourse to abortion not only symbolized their resistance to the institution of slavery but also demonstrated their will and ability to exercise some control over their reproduction.

The end of slavery, with the adoption of the 13th Amendment in 1865, did not mean that Black women were free to control their reproduction. If their fertility had been an asset under the institution of slavery, it came to be viewed as a threat to the maintenance of white supremacy as well as an economic burden for the taxpayer. Therefore, their reproductive rights were restricted because of their "race" and their social class if they were poor and therefore depended on public welfare. Hence, if women's reproduction was controlled after the criminalization of abortion in the mid-nineteenth century following a crusade led by the medical profession, it was more so the case of women of color because "race" and class were used as factors by local and state authorities to limit or determine their reproductive choices.[5]

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[4] See also Frederick Bancroft, *Slave-Trading in the Old South*.

[5] This crusade, which started in 1857 under the lead of Horatio Robinson Storer, a physician from Boston, took place within the framework of the American Medical Association created in 1847. It was part of its goal to control the practice of medicine. For more, see James Mohr, *Abortion in America*.

When the birth control movement emerged in the early twentieth century, initially it aimed at fighting "for the interests of the least privileged women," as "birth controllers […] believed that lack of control over reproduction helped to perpetuate an undemocratic distribution of power" (Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* 204).[6] Indeed, Margaret Sanger (1879-1966), an Irish American nurse who came to be associated with the birth control movement, published a booklet entitled *Family Limitation* in 1914, in which she provided advice on contraceptive methods to working-class women, thus linking class struggle to birth control.[7] She also presented birth control as "the only cure for abortion," pointing out that "there are times where an abortion is justifiable but they will become *unnecessary when care is taken to prevent conception*" (Sanger 5; emphasis in original).

However, as highlighted by Dorothy Roberts in *Killing the Black Body*, after World War I, Sanger, whose "original defense of birth control was vehemently feminist" (57), started linking "birth control less with feminism and more with eugenics" (72). In line with the American eugenics movement, which developed in the early twentieth century under the influence of English scientist Francis Galton (1822-1911) and aimed at ensuring the improvement of the American people notably by encouraging native-born Americans to have more children, Sanger advocated birth control not only as a way to promote "women's health and freedom" but also as "an essential element of America's quest for racial betterment" (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 72).[8] Thus, according to Roberts, this shift enabled Sanger to "demonstrate that birth control served the nation's interests" (72). As Sanger's grandson Alexander Sanger argues, at the time eugenics was considered as being scientific and more respectable than birth control. By resorting to some of the rhetoric of the

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[6] This article will only focus on the aspects of the birth control movement which can explain the ambivalent attitude toward reproductive rights, particularly within the Black Power movement. For a detailed account, see Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*.

[7] Sanger, who started her career as a nurse in the Lower East Side of New York City caring for poor immigrant mothers, is credited with having coined the term "birth control" and starting the birth control movement.

[8] Galton, a half-cousin of the English naturalist Charles Darwin, whose book *The Origin of Species* (1859) triggered his interest in heredity, coined the term "eugenics" in 1883. He defined eugenics "as the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the upmost advantage [,]" adding that "eugenics co-operate with the workings of nature by securing that humanity shall be represented by the fittest races" (1, 5).

eugenics movement, she hoped to win the support of the eugenicists who opposed birth control (213).[9] However, although she (like eugenicists) believed that the unfit should be eliminated, she (as a feminist) disagreed with them regarding childbearing and advocated voluntary motherhood for those women she considered fit:

> The eugenicist […] believes that a woman should bear as many healthy children as a duty to the state. […] [W]e contend that her duty to herself is her first duty to the state. We maintain that a woman possessing an adequate knowledge of her reproductive functions is the best judge of the time and conditions under which her child should be brought into the world. We further maintain that it is her right […] to determine whether she should bear children, or not, and how many children she shall bear if she chooses to become a mother. ("Birth Control and Racial Betterment" 11-12)

Despite this divergence, under the leadership of Sanger the birth control movement received the support of the eugenics movement and it also professionalized by creating birth control clinics[10] under the aegis of the American Birth Control League.[11] The eugenicists saw these clinics "as a means of reaching groups whose high fertility rates were thought to threaten the nation's racial stock and culture" (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 75). But in the early 1920s most doctors still opposed birth control for medical, social, and moral reasons, as they believed that "there were no safe and effective birth-control methods" (Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* 255), that birth control represented social degeneration (255-56) and would have a negative impact "on the morals of young people" (George Kosmak qtd. in Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* 256). However, by the mid-1920s the tide seemed to have begun to turn.[12]

According to Linda Gordon, "Sanger's support for a 'doctors only' type of birth control legislation," contributed to drawing doctors to the birth control movement, as with this type of legislation they could prescribe contraception (*Woman's Body, Woman's Right* 261). But

[9] Alexander Sanger, a reproductive rights activist, was the president of Planned Parenthood of New York City from 1991 to 2000.

[10] On October 16, 1916, Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in Brownsville, a poor neighborhood of Brooklyn where Jewish and Italian immigrants lived (Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* 227-228).

[11] The American Birth Control League was founded by Sanger in 1921.

[12] By this, Kosmak, an obstetrician, meant that since birth control would remove the fear of being pregnant, young women might no longer practice sexual abstinence before marriage.

what motivated Sanger was her desire to ensure the legal status and the invulnerability of birth control clinics by obtaining a license, and for that she needed the support of the medical profession (Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* 268).[13] But, as pointed out by Gordon, Sanger disagreed with doctors over the prescription of contraceptives only for medical reasons, as she wanted healthy women to have access to contraception ("The Politics of Birth Control" 264).

However, after the American Medical Association made contraception part of medical practice in 1937 (Benjamin 58), doctors provided it for medical reasons only (Ray and Gosling 406). Consequently, this limited the access of poor women to birth control for non-medical reasons, as they could not afford to see a doctor in a private practice where they might be prescribed contraception without evidence of medical need (403).

The endorsement of both the American Medical Association and the eugenics movement had broad implications for the birth control movement. First, it increased its control by professionals. Second, it had an adverse impact on women who were defined by their skin color and/or their social class. Thus, starting in the late 1930s, two beliefs led eugenicists to promote restricting their reproduction to hinder "biological degeneracy" and "improve society" (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 59): the idea that "intelligence and other personality traits are genetically determined and therefore inherited," and the notion that poor people and people of color were more likely to transmit inferior genes and be responsible for the social problems plaguing American society.

Thus, eugenicists supported birth control to ensure racial betterment. Paradoxically, it was also in the name of the advancement of the Black "race," that African American intellectuals, such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), advocated birth control among what Du Bois called "ignorant Negroes" (166). In his article "Black Folk and Birth Control" published in 1932, he pointed out the consequence of the "clash of ideals between those Negroes who

[13] The goal of the "doctors only" bills was to amend the Federal obscenity statutes "by exempting from their application members of the medical profession in their private practice and their organized activities" (Benjamin 52). However, none of those introduced in several state legislatures were adopted.

were striving to improve their economic position and those whose religious faith made the limitation of children a sin" (166). Thus, according to him,

> The result, among the more intelligent class, was a postponement of marriage which greatly decreased the number of children. […] On the other hand, the mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes […] is from that part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly. (166)

His views regarding racial uplift and birth control were in line with his concept of the Talented Tenth, i.e., the Black elite who had received a higher education and could therefore contribute to uplifting the Black "race." His defense of birth control included his belief in "women's independence from their traditional childbearing role" (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 84), but he also made an economic argument: those who had the most children were not only the "least intelligent" (Du Bois 166), but also those who could not provide for large families. Moreover, resorting to birth control would help reduce high maternal and infant mortality rates in poor Black communities (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 85).

This economic argument would then also be used alongside the racial one within the birth control movement. If coercive sterilization programs for women supported by eugenicists initially targeted the "feeble-minded" regardless of their "race," in the 1930s, in the context of the Great Depression, the eugenics movement "turned its attention […] to the Black population in the South" (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 70).[14] Thus, the fear that the supremacy and the purity of the white "race" were threatened led to the sterilization of Black women mainly in the South, and to the adoption of laws against interracial marriages (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 71). Racial and class origins were intertwined in the sterilization campaign targeting Black women, as there was also a desire to decrease the birth of children needing the state financial support, and Black women were disproportionately represented among those on public assistance.

[14] Eugenicists first targeted immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, whom they considered to be undesirable. Indeed, they feared that the lower birth rate of native-born Americans compared to the one of these immigrants would lead to "race" suicide. The same fear led members of the Black community, notably men, to oppose birth control and abortion.

Even though eugenics was discredited after World War II, the coercive sterilization of poor women, especially Black women, continued.[15] Indeed, despite the repeal of sterilization laws throughout the United States, "Black women fell victim to widespread sterilization abuse at the hands of government-paid doctors" (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 89). And it was not only those considered to be "feeble-minded" who were sterilized, but also women who were deemed to be sexually promiscuous, depended on welfare, and had had a child out of wedlock.[16] As documented by Jennifer Nelson,

> [d]uring the 1960s and 1970s, to reduce the numbers of illegitimate and poor children, punitive sterilization laws were proposed in California, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. (68-69)

Thus, Black women and other women of color who had experienced this type of abuse, as was the case of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977),[17] were highly critical of the abortion rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Abortion Rights: A White and Middle-Class Issue?

The demand for abortion rights made within the Women's Liberation movement which started in the mid-1960s was a controversial one.[18] Thus, at the second annual conference of NOW held in Washington, D.C., on November 18 and 19 1967, its president Betty Friedan (1921-2006) presented a resolution on abortion rights. This resolution which "endors[ed] the principle that it is a basic right of every woman to control her reproductive life, and that those laws preventing abortion should be repealed" (Minutes from the Second National

[15] Native American and Puerto Rican women were also subjected to coerced sterilizations.

[16] This belief was fueled by the Jezebel stereotype, according to which a Black woman "not only was [...] governed by her erotic desires, but her sexual prowess led men to wanton passion" (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 10-11).

[17] She had a hysterectomy in 1961 without knowing about it or giving her consent, after a white doctor removed a uterine fibroid.

[18] The two branches, the liberal feminist one associated with the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the radical branch represented by a variety of female-only small groups, such as Redstockings, did not follow identical goals. NOW comprised mainly women professionals and a few male feminists. Redstockings was formed in New York City in 1969. Its name referred both to bluestockings, a derogatory term used for brainy women, and to Marxism with the substitution of red for blue.

Conference n. pag.) led to a heated debate. During the discussion on the floor, some voiced concern about membership: Paige Palmer, NOW's director of women's activities, argued that this resolution would deter people from joining NOW; another member countered that if a strong stand was not taken on the issue, there would be a loss in the membership of young women in their twenties; finally, a male member, Kevin Sweeney, pointed out that people would not join NOW as "the American Law Institute's bills were sufficient" (Minutes from the Second National Conference n. pag.). Indeed, in reaction to complaints by physicians about "the lack of clear legal guidelines" regarding therapeutic abortion, the American Law Institute (ALI) "proposed a model abortion law in 1959 that would clarify the legal exception for therapeutic abortion and enshrine it in law along more liberal lines" (Schoen 179-80).[19] This type of law would authorize abortion "to save the life of the woman but also to preserve her mental and physical health, in cases of rape and incest, and to avoid the birth of defective offspring" (Pilpel 114).[20] However, this meant that women whose circumstances did not meet those characteristics would be denied an abortion. Moreover, it fell short of the goal of making abortion not only legal for all women, but also women's decision only, as medical approval would still be needed.

This explains in part why going along or not with the ALI-type laws, instead of the resolution asking for an amendment to the constitution, also led to a debate.[21] According to Alice Rossi (1922-2009), one of the sixteen founding members of NOW, under such laws, "[t]he abortions may be okayed only by a panel of five—this committee may stall around if they want to—by then it is too late to obtain an abortion or take your case to another panel." She also stressed the conundrum faced by pregnant Black women on welfare, who had to

[19] The medical profession, responsible for the criminalization of abortion in the mid-nineteenth century, was paradoxically behind the move to reform abortion laws in the 1950s. Indeed, doctors had become concerned about the effect of illegal abortions on women's health. Alongside psychiatrists and Family Planning professionals, they campaigned for the legalization of "therapeutic abortions" (Stansell 315).

[20] Colorado was the first state to adopt an ALI-type law in 1967.

[21] The proposed amendment stated that "[t]he right of a woman to prevent conception with proper medical safeguards to terminate her pregnancy shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state" (Minutes from the Second National Conference n. pag.).

undergo an abortion, and thus break the law, if they wanted to continue to receive welfare checks (Minutes from the Second National Conference n. pag.).

The issue of abortion was a difficult one for Black women, and women of color in general, and all the more so if they were poor, as they were denied reproductive rights, either by not being allowed to have an elective or a therapeutic abortion when they became pregnant and could not afford to feed and take care of another child, or by being refused the sterilization procedure to avoid other pregnancies.[22] Paradoxically, these two procedures were imposed on them by health and welfare officials when they did not want them. Thus, "[w]omen lost reproductive autonomy when social workers threatened pregnant women on welfare with sterilization and attempted to tie offers of financial help to the use of contraceptives" (Schoen 3). As the percentage of Black and Hispanic women receiving financial help under the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program increased in the 1960s, leading to "a nonwhite majority among welfare recipients" (109), these women of color came to be associated with the growing expenditure related to this program.[23] Consequently, Black women were coerced into being sterilized just after giving birth when it was their third or fourth pregnancy. If they refused, they risked losing their welfare benefits. In fact, forced sterilization was a means not only of reducing their financial cost for the state, but also of ensuring that they would not give birth to children "who were likely to perpetuate social problems and become public charges" (143).

This explains why women of color, and Black women in particular, viewed the demand for reproductive rights differently from white female activists, as white middle-class women had not been forcibly sterilized. On the contrary, white women wishing to get sterilized "found it nearly impossible to find a doctor who would sterilize them" (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 95). Thus, for Black women, besides access to safe abortions and birth control, the call for reproductive rights should include a denunciation of the sterilization abuses they

[22] Indeed, abortion committees set up by hospitals determined whether women seeking a therapeutic abortion met the criteria.

[23] The Aid to Dependent Children program was created under the Social Security Act of 1935 to provide financial aid to "children who lack adequate support though living with one parent or relative" (Plano and Greenberg 545).

had undergone.[24] This is why Black feminist activists associated a demand limited to legal abortion and access to birth control with a white feminist issue, thereby reinforcing their belief that the feminist movement was dominated by white middle-class women and failed to take into account women of color's as well as poor women's specific needs and priorities.[25] As pointed out by Nelson, Black feminist activists believed that legal abortion would not guarantee every woman's reproductive freedom, which they understood to also encompass "the right to bear healthy children and to raise them out of poverty" (2). This meant that white feminist activists would have to broaden their call for abortion rights to include "'bread and butter' issues such as health care for the poor, child-care, and welfare rights in addition to anti-sterilization efforts" (2). However, as white women considered sterilization as another form of birth control, they did not want it to be restricted.

As pointed out by Angela Davis, women of color had a different approach to abortion: "They were in favor of *abortion rights*, which did not mean that they were proponents of abortion" (184; emphasis in original). Furthermore, she stressed that,

> [d]uring the early abortion rights campaign it was too frequently assumed that legal abortions provided a viable alternative to the myriad problems posed by poverty. […] This assumption reflected the tendency to blur the distinction between *abortion rights* and the general advocacy of *abortions.* The campaign often failed to provide a voice for women who wanted the right to legal abortions while deploring the social conditions that prohibited them from bearing more children. (185; emphases in original)

Religion also had a deep impact on the activists' position on abortion. During NOW's second conference, Elizabeth Farians (1923-2013), a feminist theologian, warned that the adoption of the resolution on abortion would lead the Catholic members to leave even though "some avant-garde theologians are already debating the question of abortion." Some of those present associated abortion with murder (Minutes from the Second National Conference n.

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[24] Like women of color, some poor women were forcibly sterilized after having an illegal abortion or a legal one in a hospital.

[25] This divergence between white feminists and women of color on the issue of sterilization would lead a group of female activists of color to set up the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse (CESA) in 1974 in New York City. In 1976, it was renamed the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA) to include abortion rights.

pag.).[26] In line with the fear of alienating members and would-be members, some, like Wilma Reido, felt that the issue of abortion was too radical, as, for her, it went beyond the organization's goal of social change and represented institutional change (Minutes from the Second National Conference n. pag.). Indeed, according to Jo Freeman, "several women viewed NOW "as an NAACP type organization" and thought it should stick to economic and legal issues. […] Some NOW members thought that abortion was not a women's rights issue" ("Women on the Move" 10).

Moreover, if some were for reforming abortion laws, others wanted their repeal. This led to a debate as well, as "repeal" had broader implications. As Lucinda Cisler, the national co-chair of NOW's Task Force on Abortion, would explain in an article in 1969,

> [p]roposals for "reform" are based on the notion that abortions must be regulated, meted out to deserving women under an elaborate set of rules designed to provide "safeguards against abuse." […] Repeal is based on the quaint idea of *justice*: that abortion is a woman's right and that no one can veto her decision and compel her to bear a child against her will. (309; emphasis in original)

The disagreement on the issue was such that Rossi presented a substitute resolution: "NOW endorses the basic policy of women to control their own reproduction. We therefore encourage sex education, distribution of contraceptives, and the reappraisal of existing abortion laws" (Minutes from the Second National Conference n. pag.). However, if the first part of the resolution satisfied most of the members, the use of the term "reappraisal" was criticized notably by Ti-Grace Atkinson, who would leave NOW in 1968 in order to set up the radical group The Feminist. Alongside other members, she believed that this substitute resolution was a watered-down version of what NOW should have advocated. When the resolution was finally put to a vote, the phrase "and all laws penalizing abortion shall be repealed" had replaced the end of the resolution. It was adopted by 57 votes versus 14 (Minutes from the Second National Conference n. pag.).

Following this vote, the conservative members left NOW and founded the Women's Equity Action League in 1968, which campaigned for equal opportunities for women in

[26] She was responsible for the creation of NOW's Ecumenical Task Force on Women and Religion.

education and employment. The debate over "reform or repeal" continued during the "First National Conference on Abortion Laws: Modification or Repeal?" organized in Chicago on February 14-16, 1969, and attended by representatives from twenty-one organizations including NOW.[27] It is during this conference that the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws was created.

In contrast to debates within the liberal branch, the issue of abortion did not seem to have been such a divisive one within radical feminist groups.[28] They had a different approach, viewing abortion not simply as a matter of choice, but as being "very much about women's sexual freedom" (Echols 285) and in line with their feminist ideology, which focused on women's experience of discrimination and subordination in their personal lives. The liberal feminists analyzed how this contributed to maintaining their subordinate status within American society. The slogan "the personal is political," which was made popular by Carol Hanisch in a memo entitled "The Personal is Political" written in February 1969, meant that "there were political dimensions to private life, that power relations shaped life in marriage, in the kitchen, the bedroom, the nursery, and at work" (Rosen 196).[29] It is through consciousness-raising, a term coined by Kathie Sarachild, a member of New York Radical Women and the Redstockings, that women explored in small groups "the political aspects of personal life" (Rosen 196-97).[30] Thus, contrary to liberal feminists, radical feminists did not consider the issue of abortion as a private or individual choice (Bryson 181). It was part of a collective struggle as "reproduction is a key site of patriarchy, where control over women's bodies is exercised but where it can also be resisted" (Bryson 181). In other words, regaining control over their bodies through access to reproductive rights, and notably abortion on

[27] Friedan was one of the representatives of NOW. She gave a speech entitled "Abortion: A Woman's Civil Right" on February 16.

[28] The only exception would be lesbian feminists. For instance, for The Furies Collective, a lesbian feminist group formed in 1971 in Washington, D.C., abortion was a "'straight women's' issue" (Echols 241).

[29] As pointed out by Hanisch, the original title of her memo was "Some Thoughts in Response to Dottie's Thoughts on a Women's Liberation Movement." It was thus Shulamith Firestone, a co-founder of Redstockings, and Anne Koedt, a co-founder of the New York Radical Feminists (1969), who published it under the title "The Personal is Political" in the *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* in 1970.

[30] The New York Radical Women, the first radical feminist group, was set up by Shulamith Firestone and Pam Allen in 1967 and disbanded at the end of 1969.

demand (and not by medical prescription), was a means of starting to dismantle the patriarchal system by getting at the heart of women's oppression in their personal life.

As Redstocking activists viewed reproductive rights in general, and access to abortion in particular, as a cornerstone of women's emancipation from male subordination, their first action occurred during a public hearing on abortion reform held on February 13, 1969, in the New York State legislature. They were motivated by the fact that the only female expert witness summoned was a nun. What started as a picket, led by members of Redstockings but also of NOW, ended up with a disruption of the hearings by radical feminists. Indeed, "when one expert suggested that abortion should be legal for women who had 'done their social duty' by bearing four children, Kathie Sarachild interjected, 'Alright, now let's hear from some *real* experts—the women!'" (Dicker 85; emphasis in original). A speak-out on abortion was then organized on March 21, 1969, during which a dozen women shared publicly their experience of having had an abortion.

If the voices that were heard about abortion were mostly those of white women, who had divergent views on it, depending on their social class and on whether they were moderate, liberal, or radical feminists, the issue of reproductive rights was particularly divisive within the Black community, as it pitted Black feminist activists against mostly male Black Power activists.

Abortion Rights: "Race" Suicide or Women's Right to Choose?

Both abortion and birth control were thorny issues among people of color, in general, and within the Black community in particular.[31] Thus, within the Black Power movement which developed in the mid-1960s and represented a radicalization of the Civil Rights movement, Black Power activists drew a parallel between the birth control movement, which had negatively affected Black women and their reproductive rights, and the campaign for the legalization of abortion led by the Women's Liberation movement. One revolutionary group

[31] This part focuses primarily on Black activists. The Young Lords Party (YLP), a militant revolutionary group created in 1968 in Chicago and comprising male and female Puerto Ricans, was more consensual on abortion, as its reproductive rights agenda comprised its legalization (Nelson 114).

within the Black Power movement, the Black Panther Party, was especially vocal regarding birth control programs set up by the federal government and state governments, equating them with genocide.[32] The Black Panther male members thus urged Black women to stop taking the pill and to conceive children for the struggle against white America ("In White America Today" 26).

This discourse about genocide echoed the rhetoric of some earlier Black nationalists like Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), who associated birth control with "race suicide" (Roberts, "Black Women and the Pill" 93).[33] In an article entitled "Birth Control," published in February 1970, the Black Panthers declared their opposition to birth control, accusing those they referred to as "the pigs" not only of using the pill as a weapon to prevent Black communities from growing but also of hiding the truth about its danger as some Black women had died after taking it.[34] They also criticized doctors for their complicity in "this underhanded form of genocide against the oppressed people of Amerikkka" (Douglas 7). However, in her article "The Pill: Genocide or Liberation?" Toni Cade Bambara (1939-1995) rejected this association between birth control medication and genocide. She argued that it gave women some power over their body. She also added that taking the pill was viewed by women in the movement as encouraging "whorishness" (383). But, as pointed out by Nelson, the opposition of Black Panthers, and of Black nationalists in general, to birth control and abortion was rather linked to "their concern for black racial survival" (87).[35] Genocide was understood in a broader way by Black Panthers, as it did not just pertain to Black women's reproductive rights being controlled by white structures, but also to the poor living conditions of Black people, the lack

[32] The Black Panther Party was created by two Black college students, Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, in Oakland, California, in October 1966. *The Black Panther*, its official newspaper, started to be published as a four-page newsletter in 1967 ("The Black Panther Party Newspaper" n. pag.).

[33] Garvey, who was born in Jamaica, set up the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1914. It exerted a great influence in the United States. Garvey believed that Black people could only achieve equality in countries where they represented a majority and thus promoted the "back to Africa" movement (Cornelison and Yanak 205).

[34] They used this slur to refer to the police. It thus conveyed a strong anti-police sentiment. However, more generally, it was used to refer to figures of authority.

[35] The Nation of Islam, an Islamic and Black nationalist group founded in 1930 in Detroit by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad aka Elijah Muhammad, was also against abortion and reproductive control in general.

of decent health care, and the addiction to drugs that they accused the government of making available in Black communities ("Genocide" 9).[36]

In order to stop what Black Panthers perceived to be a government-led genocide, not only was children's welfare of paramount importance (thus the need for food, decent housing, and education) for the revolutionary struggle, but these children were to be part and parcel of this struggle, as stated in an article published in 1970: "we're in a long struggle and our wealth and reserves are manifested in our children" ("Towards a Revolutionary Morality" 14).[37] The author also wondered whether having a baby with a person other than one's partner was immoral. Because having babies contributed to increasing the number of future revolutionaries, the author concluded that what "advances the struggle for self-determination and national salvation should be considered moral and anything that holds back the struggle should be considered immoral" (14). It can thus be inferred that both birth control and abortion were immoral, as they contributed to holding back the struggle by not providing Black communities with more babies, thus endangering the survival of the Black population and its fight for self-determination.

The same could be said concerning the forced sterilizations of mothers of color on welfare which continued during the 1960s and 1970s, so that "by the mid-1970s, mothers with three children, receiving welfare benefits were sterilized at a rate 67 percent higher than that of women off public assistance with the same number of children" (Garcha 325). With many members of the Black Panther Party being on welfare, they not only knew about these coerced sterilizations but were also involved, alongside the Welfare Rights movement, in the campaign to end them (325). Actually, the chairperson of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO),[38] Johnnie Tillmon (1926-1995), a Black mother of six children on welfare, testified to the adverse impact welfare had on women themselves:

> Ninety-nine percent of welfare families are headed by women. There is no man around. In half the states, there *can't* be men around because A.F.D.C. (Aid to Families

[36] On this, see "Hands off the People's Medical Care Center."

[37] This led them to launch the Free Breakfast for Children Program in January 1969.

[38] The National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) was founded in 1967 in Washington, D. C., and disbanded in 1975. For more, see Felicia Kornbluh, "The Goals of the National Welfare Rights Movement."

> with Dependent Children) says if there is an "able-bodied" man around, then you can't be on welfare. If the kids are going to eat, and the man can't get a job, then he's got to go. (n. pag.; emphasis in original)

She added that "[y]ou give up control of your own body. It's a condition of aid. You may even have to agree to get your tubes tied so you can never have more children just to avoid being cut off welfare" (n. pag.).

Regarding abortion, the Black Panthers were opposed to the reform of abortion laws. Thus, when the State of New York passed the most liberal reform abortion law in the nation in the Spring of 1970, they criticized it vehemently on the front page of their newspaper *The Black Panthers* when it came into effect on July 1, 1970: "Black people know that part of our revolutionary strength lies in the fact that we outnumber the pigs—and the pigs realize this too. This why they are trying to eliminate as many people as possible before they reach their inevitable doom!" (Hyson 1).[39] In the article published on the second page, Black Panther Brenda Hyson argued that the adoption and implementation of this law was perhaps good news for white middle-class women but not for poor Black women, highlighting the class and racial divide on the issue:

> To the Black woman, the welfare mothers, it is an announcement of death before birth. Black women love children, and now to see to it that they do not starve, [...] that they do not have to suffer all the degradation of this racist, capitalist society, they will kill them before they are born. (2)

She further stressed the threat of "racial suicide" and "racial genocide" that such a law represented:

> How long do you think it will take before voluntary abortion to turn into involuntary abortion into compulsory sterilization? Black people are aware that laws made supposedly to ensure our well being are often put into practice in such a way that they ensure our deaths. (2)

While female Black Panthers like Judi Douglas and Brenda Hyson aligned with their male counterparts regarding birth control and abortion, other female Black Panthers, like Angela

[39] This law passed narrowly and did not have any residency requirement for women to get an abortion. It legalized abortion up to 24 weeks of pregnancy. For more, see Richard Perez-Pena, "70's Abortion Law."

Davis, were more nuanced. Thus, she argued that "[b]irth control—individual choice, safe contraceptive methods, as well as abortion when necessary—is a fundamental prerequisite for the emancipation of women" (182). However, she pointed out that Black women's but also Puerto Rican Women's experience with dangerous back-alley abortions had an impact on their position on abortion and the abortion rights movement: "They were in favor of *abortion rights*, which did not mean that they were proponents of abortion (184; emphasis in original). The poor living conditions of women of color explained why they could not bear more children and wanted the right to have a legal abortion if needs be.

Like male Black Panthers, Frances Beal, another prominent female Black Panther, was critical of the campaign for birth control, but she also denounced "[th]e rigid laws concerning abortions," considering them as "another means of subjugation and, indirectly, of outright murder" (392). As she pointed out, "[r]ich white women somehow manage to obtain these operations with little or no difficulty. It is the poor black and Puerto Rican woman who is at the mercy of the local butcher" (392). Moreover, she countered the male revolutionary discourse regarding the duty for Black women to have babies for the struggle by claiming Black women's right to control their bodies and decide when to have children and how many (393).

Beal was not alone in challenging the male discourse on birth control and abortion rights. Indeed, if initially Representative Shirley Chisholm (1924-2005), the first Black woman to be elected to Congress in 1968, "had not been in favor of repealing all abortion laws" and had tried to help pass bills in Albany which "would only have made it somewhat easier for women to get therapeutic abortions in New York State," she changed her position after learning about the botched abortions of young women she knew (603). That was the reason why she accepted to become an honorary president of the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion in 1969, despite being aware that "there is a deep and angry suspicion among many blacks that even birth control clinics are a plot among the white power structure to keep down the numbers, and this opinion is even more strongly held by some in regard to legalizing abortions" (603). Nonetheless, she argued that,

> [t]o label family planning and legal abortion programs "genocide" is male rhetoric […]. Women know, and so do many men, that two or three children who are wanted, prepared for, reared amid love and stability, and educated to the limit of their ability will mean more for the future of the black and brown races from which they come than any number of neglected, hungry, ill-housed and ill-clothed youngsters. (604)

She thus put forward an economic argument in favor of the legalization of abortion, an argument also used by civil rights activist and Black feminist Mary Treadwell (1941-2012) who supported the campaign for abortion rights:

> [i]n both economic and social terms, the black women have much to gain from the laws regarding this most personal of personal freedoms. Black women must consider the larger consequences in a society which is not only unwilling to provide a quality life for black children, but tries to destroy life for all black people. (150)[40]

In line with radical feminism, she also viewed abortion rights as part of Black women's personal freedom "to be able to fulfill themselves sexually without fear of conception" (149).

In a similar vein, the Black Women's Liberation Group, which originated from a network of mostly poor Black women who wanted to make birth control more accessible to Black women, issued a "Statement on Birth Control" in 1968.[41] It was addressed to Black men, blaming them for having to resort to birth control: "Poor black men won't support their families, won't stick by their women—all they think about is the street, dope and liquor, women, a piece of ass, and their cars" (404).

By linking the need for poor Black women to control their reproduction, and thus be the master of their bodies, because of Black men's desertion, to a certain extent, they echoed Daniel Patrick Moynihan who had highlighted the negative impact the disintegration of the family structure among lower class Black Americans had on their children and the future of the community.[42] In his report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action"

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[40] Treadwell joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1966, the year the organization called for Black Power.

[41] This network called the Mount Vernon/New Rochelle Group was formed in 1960 by Patricia Murphy Robinson (1926-2013), a Black radical feminist who was a housewife and a psychotherapist. The other members were Patricia Haden and Rita Van Lew, two welfare recipients, Sue Rudolph, a housewife, Joyce Hoyt, a domestic, and Carol Hoyt, a grandmother.

[42] Moynihan (1927-2003) was a democratic senator for the State of New York from 1977 until 2001.

(1965), he stated that 25 percent of Black families were headed by a single mother (9). However, if he blamed the situation on the matriarchal structure of these families, the Black Women's Liberation Group blamed it on poor Black men, thereby antagonizing Black males. Besides, as Cellestine Ware, a Black feminist theorist, pointed out, "[t]he mistake that sociologists are making and that black men seem to be making is the assumption that these women have chosen to be heads of their families. They have become heads of households by default" (10). Moreover, rejecting Moynihan's "theory that we, Black folks, and we, Black women, in particular, constituted 'the problem'" (67), June Jordan (1936-2002) argued that "[t]he Black family persist[ed] despite a terrible state of affairs prevailing in the United States" (70). Thus, not only were Black people not responsible for "the collapse of Black family structure" (69), but this premise was based on a white patriarchal conception of the family structure (71). Jordan also blamed the American economic system which by devaluing the work done by women made it impossible for Black women in particular to raise their children and "secure an adequately paying job" (72).

Conclusion

For Black people involved in the Black Power and Women's Liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, the issue of abortion rights, and of reproductive rights by and large, was a thorny one, as it could not simply be reduced to a woman's right to choose. It had to reckon with the way Black women's bodies had been controlled from the period of slavery onwards, and the economic and social conditions in which they found themselves. It also had to be mindful of the fear of genocide in the hands of white people, or of "racial suicide" because of Black women's recourse to birth control. To a certain extent, this dilemma was faced by other women of color, particularly Native American and Puerto Rican women, as they had also been subjected to coerced sterilization.

For white women, the issue of abortion was also controversial, as conservative women in NOW did not consider it as relevant to women's rights and wanted to focus on economic and social equality. Moreover, they disagreed on whether abortion laws should be

reformed or repealed, the latter being supported by radical feminists. Besides, in the ranks of radical feminists, if abortion rights were fundamental for women's personal freedom and sexual fulfillment, for lesbian radicals it was a straight woman's issue. However, sexual orientation played a limited role in the debate over abortion rights compared to "race," class, and gender. In the end, most white feminists, especially of the radical type, broadened their conception of reproductive freedom, by including alongside abortion rights, the right to bear children thanks to proper health care and better socio-economic resources, thereby bridging somewhat the gap between white feminists and feminists of color. In the same vein, under the influence of Black feminists, the Black Panthers who had been vocal against abortion rights ended up bringing their support, keeping in mind the dire circumstances that poor Black women faced (Schoen 109).

It is by including issues of class and "race" that the reproductive rights movement weighed in to ensure that women could have safe, legal, and affordable abortions. In 1973, the Supreme Court recognized women's constitutional right to abortion in the decision that it issued in *Roe v. Wade*. However, it would not take long for this right to be restricted, notably for poor women, among whom Black women. Indeed, the Hyde Amendment, adopted by Congress on September 30, 1976, and upheld by the Supreme Court on June 28, 1977, forbade the use of federal funds for Medicaid abortions (Nelson 135). Exceptions were later added: abortions were paid by Medicaid if the life of the mother was at risk, or if the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 231). According to the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, Black and Hispanic women were the worst hit, as they represented respectively 30 percent and 24 percent of those enrolled in Medicaid (n.d., n. pag.).

The decision of the Supreme Court in *Dobbs v. Jackson* which overturned *Roe v. Wade* on June 24, 2022, almost 50 years after this historic ruling, also impacts women on the basis of "race" and class. As the right to an abortion is no longer constitutionally protected, it is up to the states to decide to forbid or not abortions (Bartlett 1700). Fifteen states passed legislation criminalizing abortion within the six months which followed the decision. Seven in

ten Black women live in these states which are mostly in the south (Varela, Cohen, Opper, Shiran and Weber 2-4).

The Black community is therefore disproportionality impacted by the 2022 Supreme Court decision, even more so since Black women are more likely to lack the financial means to go to a state where abortion is still legal and protected. This has led Black women to denounce a decision which once more deprives them of control over their bodies. In light of this, Marcela Howell, president of In Our Own Voice: National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda, declared that "[t]oday, the conservative, activist justices of the Supreme Court have turned their backs on justice and reimposed the greatest injustice of my lifetime: the declaration that women's bodies—especially Black women's bodies—are under the complete control of the state" (n. pag.). Along the same lines, the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation stated that *Dobbs* was "designed to limit freedom in service of a white supremacist and patriarchal agenda. As a Black liberation movement organization, the fall of *Roe* will open the door to further criminalization of Black people. As we continue our fight for freedom, we recognize that full access to abortion care is necessary for all Black people" (n. pag.). It also linked abortion access with self-determination, a principle at the core of Black Power, thereby going beyond the resistance to abortion that characterized some members of the Black Power movement, notably male ones, to frame access to legal and safe abortions as part of Black people's continued fight against systemic racism.

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