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HISTORY MATTERS: MISSISSIPPI THEN AND NOW

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Published in *Collective Voices*, Vol. 2 Issue 5, Summer 2006

Uses and Abuses of the Past

The race is on to become the first abortion-free state in the country, and Mississippi is definitely in the running. The state legislature has imposed numerous restrictions that undermine *Roe v. Wade*, and in the last session, lawmakers nearly passed a bill that would ban almost all abortions. The bill died in March after House and Senate leaders failed to reach a compromise on specific provisions, but reproductive rights advocates consider this a temporary reprieve and are gearing up for the same fight next year.

For now, the immediate struggle is taking place outside the legislative chambers. It centers on the Jackson Women's Health Organization, run by Susan Hill, the last remaining facility in the state to openly provide abortion. Pro-Life Mississippi, an influential group that has helped close five other clinics, is pressuring the Jackson clinic to shut its doors. Operation Save America (formerly Operation Rescue) is directing national attention to Jackson by holding its week-long annual meeting in the city in July.

The racial undercurrent in this confrontation is strong. Clinic staff and the 3000 women who rely on the Jackson clinic each year for health care are predominantly African American, as are Michelle Colon and most leaders of the community coalition defending the clinic.

Anti-abortion activists, on the other hand, are predominantly white, and they presume to speak for the staff and clientele. Playing to longstanding fears that associate abortion with genocidal intent, they wrap themselves in the mantle of the civil rights movement to claim the moral high ground of protecting endangered black lives. On Martin Luther King Day in 2004, anti-choice Mississippians installed 2000 crosses on the grounds of the state capitol as "a memorial to the unborn." Terri Herring, the lobbyist and spokeswoman who serves as president of Pro-Life Mississippi, routinely invokes Martin Luther King's "dream" of a thriving African American community. By presenting herself as the keeper of King's dream, Herring in effect accuses African Americans of betraying it when they support women's exercise of control over their own fertility.

Dreams are all to the good, Michelle Colon readily agrees, but the reality is that 49% of women in Mississippi live in poverty. Mississippi has the second-highest rate of child poverty, the third-highest rate of infant mortality, and one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the country. Colon observes that anti-abortion activists turn little of their political passion into efforts to address the systemic conditions in which women make their reproductive decisions.

Colon is president of Jackson NOW and member of a progressive coalition that stands for "social justice, moral agency, and the ability of a woman to make educated, compassionate decisions regarding

birth control, pregnancy, and abortion.” The coalition is fighting for women’s health, comprehensive sex education, and access to birth control, as well as for access to abortion. In May, progressives helped defeat the Health Insurance Marketplace Modernization and Affordability Act, which would have allowed insurance companies to disregard state laws requiring coverage of contraception. Today, progressives are up against a petition drive calling for a statewide vote on a human life amendment to the Mississippi constitution, and they are holding clinic defense trainings in preparation for the July arrival of Operation Save America.

However, the media are not giving progressive voices the attention Herring and anti-abortion leaders command. To a certain extent this bias is merely an expression of Mississippi’s racial politics. But it is also true that there is widespread neglect of the long tradition of African American women’s reproductive health activism in Mississippi, and that neglect is not benign. The ignorance creates a vacuum that conservatives can fill with distortions, and leaves progressives without an empowering counter-narrative woven out of the actual truths of women’s lives.

A Century of Health Activism

As Susan Smith, Jennifer Nelson and other historians have documented, African American women have organized continually for more than a century to provide and demand health education and medical services, including birth control and abortion. In the early years of the twentieth century, club women in the National Association of Colored Women — which was larger than the NAACP or the Urban League — countered official neglect of black communities by creating hospitals and mobile clinics and petitioning for public health services. During National Negro Health Week, which ran from 1915 to 1930, local women in Mississippi and around the country organized lectures and health screenings for millions of people. In the 1940s, Negro Home Demonstration Clubs distributed birth control information through the rural South as one component of a general program of health, education, and economic development. In these same years, six itinerant black public health nurses, working out of headquarters in Jackson, were traveling around Mississippi and forming popular local women’s health clubs, conducting clinics, collecting data on the incidence of disease, and working with thousands of midwives.

Until the mid-twentieth century, midwives were the primary reproductive health providers. In Mississippi, most were African American. There were some 4000 registered black midwives in the state and no telling how many unregistered lay “granny” midwives, whose traditional knowledge extended back to slavery. They delivered the vast majority of black babies. Community members themselves, midwives practiced in homes, conducted birthing demonstration projects, offered mothers’ clinics for pre-natal and post-natal care, and negotiated poor families’ links with the larger medical system. Registered midwives risked losing their permits to practice if they performed abortions, and official records are silent on the subject, but unofficial accounts leave little doubt that abortion was part of midwifery practice and understood as an essential element of personal, family and community strategies.

Also in the 1930s and 1940s, Dr. Dorothy Ferebee, who taught obstetrics at Howard University, directed the Mississippi Health Project of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. As sorority president, Ferebee led teams of medical volunteers and AKA members to the Delta each summer to deliver basic health services to sharecroppers. Wording her reports carefully to avoid jeopardizing the program by targeting “white power” as the root of the problem, Ferebee nonetheless made it clear that general conditions undermined community wellbeing. “The standard of health is indissolubly linked to all the socio-economic factors of living,” she reported. There was national awareness of a health crisis in black communities at the time — *Time* magazine identified “Negro Health” as the “No. 1 public health problem” in 1940, and the AKA project received considerable national press. Eleanor Roosevelt expressed interest and met with Ferebee. Ferebee lobbied Roosevelt to encourage the federal government to adopt the AKA project as a model for a comprehensive public health program.

Black women were disappointed in their efforts to win government support for their health needs. At the same time, the number of registered midwives was decreasing rapidly; there were only 600 left in

Mississippi by 1966. This reduction in providers may have contributed to the prevalence of sterilization abuses that civil rights workers observed in the 1960s. Beginning in 1958, the state legislature considered punitive sterilization measures aimed at reducing “illegitimate” births. In 1964, SNCC produced a pamphlet entitled “Genocide in Mississippi” that reported on proposed legislation that would force women who gave birth to more than one “illegitimate” child to choose between sterilization and prison. Describing her own 1961 experience of being sterilized without her knowledge, Delta sharecropper and civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer claimed that 60% of black women who entered her local hospital for medical care came out sterilized, many involuntarily. The procedure was so common it was known in medical circles as a “Mississippi appendectomy.”

With racial tensions running high in the mid-1960s, women from Jackson appealed to Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), to bring northern women to Mississippi to serve as “a ministry of presence among us” simply by bearing witness. Height launched *Wednesdays in Mississippi*, a plan that dispatched interracial teams each week to transport resources, stand alongside civil rights workers in Freedom Schools and voter registration projects, and take home word of the daily realities and explosive conditions in Mississippi. The NCNW later established the Fannie Lou Hamer Day Care Center in Ruleville, and Height brought a delegation of South American, African, and Caribbean women to Mississippi to meet with rural women.

Height’s experience in Mississippi no doubt informed her response to *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. She maintained that legalization of abortion is necessary but insufficient. Height was one of six prominent black women leaders who issued a statement endorsing Medicaid coverage for abortion, contending that women of color were disproportionately poor and that “the vast majority” of women “who died at the hands of incompetent practitioners in the days before abortion was legal were Black and Brown.” At the same time, Height pointed to the “bitter experience” of sterilization abuse as proof that “choice” is a feeble foundation for women’s empowerment as long as class and race inequities persist.

Terri Herring would probably be surprised to learn that Martin Luther King was not deaf to the message of this long line of club women, physicians, public health nurses, community organizers, midwives, extension agents, and sorority sisters. He wrote in 1966 that family planning was “a special and urgent concern” for African Americans and “a profoundly important ingredient in [our] quest for security and a decent life.” His wife kept up the drumbeat. In her opening remarks to the 20,000 women at the National Women’s Conference in Houston in 1977, Coretta Scott King noted, “Despite some gains made in the past 200 years, . . . man-made barriers, laws, social customs and prejudices continue to keep a majority of women in an inferior position without full control of our lives and our bodies.” She went on to advocate a bold social justice agenda including gay and lesbian rights and universal health care.

Perhaps if Herring understood the history of women’s organizing for health and reproductive rights in Mississippi, she would pause before posing as King and condemning the reproductive decisions of poor and young women and women of color. Perhaps if that history were widely known, she would be less likely to get away with it. It’s worth a try.

Putting History in Action: The Voices of Feminism Project

The conviction that history matters motivates the Voices of Feminism Project at the Sophia Smith Collection (SSC) at Smith College. The SSC is the oldest women’s history archive in the country and already home to major reproductive rights collections, including the archives of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the International Women’s Health Coalition, the Midwives Alliance of North America, the National Women’s Health Network, the YWCA, Catholics for a Free Choice, Choice USA, and anti-sexual violence organizations such as Have Justice Will Travel and Stop It Now! The personal papers of Margaret Sanger, Harriet Pilpel, and other key players in struggles over contraception and family planning are at the SSC, along with an ambitious oral history project documenting the international reproductive health movement.

With support from the Ford Foundation, the Voices of Feminism Project has made a priority of preserving under-documented stories and perspectives. On the topic of sexuality and reproductive health among women of color, the Project has videotaped oral histories and/or saved personal papers and organizational records of Byllye Avery and the National Black Women's Health Project, Luz Alvarez Martinez of the National Latina Health Organization, Charon Asetoyer and the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center, Mohawk midwife Katsi Cook and the Mother's Milk Project, Loretta Ross and the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, Fran Beal, Linda Burnham, Barbara Smith, Cherríe Moraga, Betty Powell, Peggy Saika of Asian and Pacific Islanders for Choice, Marlene Fried and the National Network of Abortion Funds, Graciela Sanchez of Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, Nkenge Toure of the Black Panther Party, Carmen Vazquez of the LGBT Community Center, and many involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Latino communities of western New England. Luz Rodriguez formerly of the Latina Roundtable on Health and Reproductive Rights and Brenda Joyner formerly of the Federation of Feminist Health Centers will be interviewed soon. The purpose of saving these stories is to ensure that lessons learned are not lost to future generations. Materials at the SSC are preserved for the ages, but they don't rest in peace. The SSC is open to the public, publishes a newsletter, holds public programs to showcase new collections, and posts a website: <http://libraries.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc>. Faculty from area colleges build courses around these primary sources, and travel grants make it possible for scholars from around the world to access them. Reference archivists assist visitors to the reading room, field questions by phone and email, and help journalists, activists, filmmakers, and high school students explore women's history and acquire copies of original materials for their own projects.

Many Voices of Feminism oral histories are completed, and the rest will be available by the end of 2006. Some manuscript collections are ready for research. However, sorting, cataloging, and attending to the preservation needs of fragile items is a laborintensive process, so it will be a while before all these records can be opened.

In the meantime, the SSC is working with advisors, including the authors of *Undivided Rights*, to develop a historical documentary that puts history into action by placing women of color at the center of today's volatile confrontations around reproductive and sexual politics. The goal is a film that both educates the general public and functions as a tool organizers can use to strengthen community-based groups. SisterSong members will hear more about the documentary in the months ahead.

For information on the Voices of Feminism Project, contact Joyce Follet at jfollet@email.smith.edu. For information about the Sophia Smith Collection or copies of materials, contact a reference archivist at ssc-wmhist@email.smith.edu or (413)-585-2970.

History does matter – just look at Mississippi.