

Nov 7, 2021
Marked Bodies
Rev. Linda

These days have darkening clouds over them again don't they dear ones? My storm umbrella is up again, even when no rain is falling. Working on this sermon, I realized again that there is still so much I need to learn and do and be. And so, here's my attempt at collapsing my psychological umbrella and taking a deep breath and learning about what is happening in Texas and why it matters and whose bodies it targets. How else can we all go on if not together dear ones? Thank you for accompanying me on this journey. Your presence makes this learning and seeking and justice making possible.

Much of the following is based on an article by Renee Bracey Sherman called "What the Abortion Bans Have to do With Poverty and Race."¹

In 1973, when Justice Harry A. Blackmun authored the decision legalizing abortion in *Roe v. Wade*, he wrote that "[t]he right of personal privacy includes the abortion decision, but this right is not unqualified and must be considered against important state interests in regulation." Although this was a win for those seeking to both legalize abortion and prevent harm inflicted on people seeking illegal and unsafe abortions, it also opened the door to restrictions on abortion.

In 2011, almost 90 percent of counties did not have an abortion provider, and since then that number has increased. Five states (Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota,

¹ <https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2016/05/25/what-the-war-on-reproductive-rights-has-to-do-with-poverty-and-race>

and Wyoming) have only one abortion clinic in the entire state, while others like Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Ohio, and Texas have only a handful of clinics left; a drastic shift from just a few years before.

The closures are particularly concentrated in the South where more than half of Black Americans reside. Despite anti-choice activists repeating the myth that most abortion clinics are set up in predominantly Black communities, fewer than one in ten are actually in communities with a majority of people of color.

With this tidal wave of anti-choice laws quickly washing away the rights *Roe v. Wade* gave to all women, it's clear that not all communities are impacted the same. In the United States, race and class are major factors in who can access abortion care, contraception, and maternal healthcare. However, mainstream discourse too often separates race and class from abortion. It ignores the complex issues around a person's ability to decide whether, when, and how to become a parent. It ignores how crucial the abortion decision is to gender equity, economic stability, and a healthy life free from violence. Mainstream discourse about abortion decisions does not often include the ability of someone to parent their children with dignity.

In 2016, an explosive social media campaign #ShoutYourAbortion launched and is still going strong. Organizers of that campaign encouraged everyone to share stories of how their lives were transformed because they had access to safe and legal abortions. However, like many visibility campaigns, voices of more affluent White women often rise to the top even though the majority of people seeking abortions are people of color.

Altheria Gaston *ForHarriet* blog that “celebrates the fullness of black womanhood” offers one explanation: Black women’s abortion stigma is compounded by misogynoir, “a term that captures the unique oppression Black women experience not just as a result of sexism, but as a result of sexism that is tinted by our Blackness,” she wrote. “It can serve as a caveat that Black women and women who are poor may face different consequences for shouting their abortion than White and affluent women.”

The additional stigma borne by people of color makes increased visibility challenging. It can invite a racist, anti-abortion backlash in addition to the usual misogynistic hate. All of a sudden, rather than simply being a “slut” for having had an abortion and daring to speak in positive terms about it, you’re also a “race-traitor” perpetrating genocide against your own people.

While claiming to care about Black lives, anti-abortion advocates have used racist billboard campaigns to shame Black women out of having abortions without addressing any of the reasons why black women choose abortion: lack of access to contraception and comprehensive sexual health education, along with severe cuts to healthcare, safety net, and nutritional programs. In 2010, 65 billboards went up in Atlanta declaring, “Black children are an endangered species.” Famously, in Chicago, a billboard featured an image of President Barack Obama and stated, “Every 21 minutes, our next possible leader is aborted.”

In response, billboards have gone up that speak to the needs of Black women. In Memphis, Tennessee, SisterReach used several billboards to address the need for access to healthcare that includes reproductive care, neighborhoods free from toxins and violence, and quality schools. The message of New Voices Cleveland's billboard, in the wake of the 2014 police shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, was that reproductive justice must include assurance that families are able to raise children free from racist violence, including police brutality.

Black women have historically found themselves at the center of the fight for reproductive freedom.

Sexual exploitation, violence, and forced reproduction were a central part of the slave trade after Congress passed the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves in 1807. Without the ability to import slaves from Africa and the Caribbean, slaveholders focused additional resources on ensuring their female slaves became pregnant and gave birth to healthy children—to create future slaves and expand property.

Once slavery was abolished and Black women needed support in raising their families, their fertility was deemed irresponsible and a burden to society. Yet access to birth control and abortion care was segregated. Historian Leslie J. Reagan writes, in *When Abortion Was a Crime*, that White hospitals and providers refused to offer health care to Black patients forcing Black doctors to set up separate illegal abortion and birth control clinics.

Race and racism have been intertwined with reproductive health care—and its lack. Hundreds of years later, not much has changed.

Although media depictions tend to portray a woman getting an abortion as a young, single, White, middle-class woman without children, the majority of people having abortions are in fact people of color, the majority of whom are already parenting in poverty. According to the Guttmacher Institute, Black women account for 30 percent of abortions, Latinas account for 25 percent, and other non-White races account for 9 percent.

Of all women obtaining abortions, 42 percent are living below the federal poverty level of \$12,880 for a single person without children. Women denied the abortions they seek are three times more likely to be living in poverty two years later.

Among the abortion restriction policies that drive numbers like these, the Hyde Amendment is singular in its effect of turning abortion access into a war on the poor. Hyde denied Medicaid recipients, disproportionately women of color, access to abortion care by banning insurance coverage. This policy leads one in four women to carry a pregnancy to term that she otherwise might not have.

It's been 48 years since *Roe v. Wade*. Many Americans can recall the days before the landmark decision, when women sought abortions from illegal providers and died as a result. We haven't come so far. A new report from Guttmacher suggests an upward trend in women trying to self-induce; the organization's latest survey on abortion rates, from 2017, found that 18% of nonhospital facilities said they had treated at least one person for an attempted self-induced abortion, up from 12% when the data were last collected, in 2014.²

² <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/19/759761114/with-abortion-restrictions-on-the-rise-some-women-induce-their-own>

In 2015, in Indiana, Purvi Patel, a 33-year-old Indian American woman was accused of feticide after seeking treatment at an emergency room for a miscarriage. Authorities found text messages where Patel told a friend she purchased abortion medication from a Hong Kong pharmacy. Patel is serving a 20-year sentence, and in May 2016 filed an appeal. There are many others. Women of color tend to live in poverty and tend to lack access to reproductive health care. They also tend to be criminalized for self-inducing abortions. As states increasingly criminalize abortion, low-income women of color are the targets.

It is paramount that we fight for reproductive justice and bodily autonomy at the same time we fight for Black liberation. As activists attempt to reverse the tide of abortion restrictions, it would be a mistake not to make racial and economic injustice central themes in the reproductive rights movement going forward. Lives depend on it. And not just the lives of Black women. If we cannot learn to live as if every life lost to racism and patriarchy was one of the lives of our beloved family and community, then this violence will continue.

And now, Two days after Texas' new abortion restrictions went into effect, women's health clinics in surrounding states were already juggling clogged phone lines and an increasing load of appointment requests from Texans.

At a clinic in Albuquerque, New Mexico, an abortion provider said that on Tuesday, the day before the law's enactment, every patient who had made an appointment online was from its neighbor state to the east. By Thursday, all of New Mexico's abortion clinics were

reportedly booked up for weeks, and a Dallas center had dispatched dozens of employees to help the much less populated state's overtaxed system.³

But for every Texan who is able to leave town to elude the new law, there are more who can't.

"That's the people that have a working car, that can get time off, who have somebody who can take care of their kids," said Vicki Cowart, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains, which covers New Mexico, Colorado and Las Vegas, Nevada. "There are going to be thousands of individuals who don't have that wherewithal, and it's really particularly going to impact women of color, young women, rural women."⁴

The Texas law nicknamed the "heartbeat law" prohibits abortions after doctors detect a "fetal heartbeat," which can be as early as six weeks along, when many people still don't know they are pregnant. Experts call the term misleading because embryos haven't developed a heart by this stage but do exhibit cardiac activity.

Dr. Nisha Verma, a physician who provides abortion services and a fellow at the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, said the activity measured on an ultrasound in early gestation is electrical impulses, not a true heartbeat.

³ <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/09/02/texas-abortion-out-of-state-people-of-color/>

⁴ Ibid

“When I use the stethoscope to listen to a patient’s heart, that sound that I hear is that typical bum-bum-bum-bum that you hear as the heartbeat is created by the opening and closing of the cardiac valves. And at six weeks of gestation, those valves don’t exist,” Verma said. “Flickering that we see on the ultrasound, that’s super early in the development of a pregnancy, is actually electric activity. And the sound that we hear at that point is actually manufactured by the ultrasound machine,” Verma added.⁵

The law also does not exempt cases where someone was impregnated as a result of rape or incest.

But the state does not enforce the law. Instead, private citizens have been authorized to sue those they suspect are violating it, ranging from abortion providers to abortion funds and even other civilians, like Uber drivers who drive women to abortion clinics. And under the law, anyone in the country is able to file lawsuits against Texans they suspect of aiding in a now-illegal abortions. Vigilantes, mostly white and male, can now cloak their racism behind heartbeats.

After all of these words, I am left empty, reeling from the elections in New Jersey and Virginia, watching how democracy can be made into a weapon to be used against itself, and I wonder, where are we going and who will end up there with health care, education and human rights? Though I might make the cut, would I want to if only people who looked like me were there?

⁵ <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/09/02/texas-abortion-heartbeat-bill/>

So please dear ones, no matter where you are in your reproductive cycle, raise your voices. It is our moral duty as Unitarian Universalists that uphold the inherent worth and dignity of all beings and the interconnected web of all existence. This goes beyond abortion. This is about valuing the lives of fellow human beings that we are sure have heart beats, right here, right now. How long will it be before black women are killed by Texan vigilantes Uber Drivers who can make this decision if someone asked to be driven to an abortion clinic?

I am heartened by all of you, by all people who are still fighting the good fight even as the odds shift away from justice and dignity.

Keep the faith dear ones, not only by remembering that it is the cauldron that Unitarian and Universalism were fired born within and it is our very ancestors who whisper to us in our dreams to keep this faith, this faith that together we can build a better world, but also because it is the only choice we have if we are to stay strong enough to love bigger, give more, and stand or wheel our way together to a world where everyone has a seat at the table of dignity.

Amen.