

Sameerah Ahmad
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Dr. Lisa B.Y. Calvente
DePaul University
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READING INQUIRY #1

When exploring the history of sterilization, the application of theoretical understandings of racial ideology, mythology, and knowledge are useful in interpreting the history of women of color's bodies. Collaborating theories informed by the work of Louis Althusser on ideologies, David Goldberg on racial formation, Angela Davis on the exploration of Black women's lives under slavery, Jennifer Morgan on antique travel accounts, and Dorothy Roberts on the Black body, show that sterilization spans beyond health or biology, beyond a fleeting history, *and is essentially rooted*, in dominant Western hegemony; primarily white supremacy.

The first thesis of Louis Althusser's, "On Ideology," states that the concept "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," and secondly goes on to say that ideology "has a material existence" (Althusser p. 1548-1500.) Althusser's action-based understanding emphasizes the practices, rituals, and ideological apparatuses that support the replication systems and hegemonies. Therefore, it can be argued that ideology is necessary for the production and sustaining presence of dominant, including Western, hegemony. Furthermore, the author explains that we, as subjects, engage in practical rituals and that recognizing such:

"...only gives us the 'consciousness' of our incessant (eternal) practice of ideological recognition—its consciousness, i.e. its *recognition*—but in no sense does it give us the (scientific) *knowledge* of the mechanism of this recognition. Now it is this knowledge that we have to reach...in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e. subjectless) discourse on ideology" (Althusser p.1503-1504)

Ultimately, the application of Althusser's theory of ideology helps to understand the ways in which hegemony persists and "the reproduction of the relations of production is to be assured". (Althusser p. 1508).

Building on Althusser's framework, David Goldberg's, "Racial Knowledge," explains that the State conjures socially scientific analyses and results to "legitimize State pursuits and to rationalize established relations of power and domination" (Goldberg p. 229). Sterilization, most predominantly impacting women of color's bodies, represents an historical, and enduring, example. Furthermore, Jennifer Morgan's, "Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology," exploration of the racial formation surrounding women of African descent under the lenses of European racial ideology. These dehumanizing and animalistic accounts, from the perspective of white European men, of the bodies of the Black women they came into contact with, necessarily inform an understanding of how a violent and more historically recent campaign, for example the sterilization of women of color in the U.S., can develop and persist.

Beyond antiquity, an understanding of sterilization in the Western World is informed by the consideration of Black women's bodies under U.S. slavery alongside the modern Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Angela Davis, in her "The Legacy of Slavery," argues that from the slave-master's view, "slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force" (Davis p. 7). Davis goes on to describe the hijacking of Black women's bodies, including their reproductive rights and processes (enforced in part by sexual coercion), which historically precedes the growth of the modern sterilization movement in the U.S.; sterilization, ultimately and primarily, effecting women of color's bodies, especially Black women. Davis' nuanced approach to the understanding of Black womanhood under slavery is knowledge that operates in contrast to what the Western world's knowledge which has

perpetuated dangerous myths. These myths include the assumption that Black women were only used as “breeders” within the slave system, which disregards the historical reality of Black women’s labor, and its even “genderless” status on equal footing to men’s labor, preceding the pressures of a decreasing slave trade which then pushed Black women into the “breeder” designation to produce more slaves, and so on. Myths from the “Mammy,” to the “Jezebel,” to “crack babies,” to the “Welfare Queen” remain pervasive.

Dorothy Roberts addresses these, and other, myths around Black women and people in the introduction to her book about race and reproduction; *Killing the Black Body*. Roberts’ asserts that “America has always viewed unregulated Black reproduction as dangerous” and outlines a series of historical occurrences -- and the corresponding systemic perpetuation of -- violence against Black women’s bodies, including sterilization (Roberts p. 8). An understanding of the ways in which mythology operates is important to fully understand the initial cases and continuation of sterilization. Roberts explains that the “degrading mythology about Black mothers is one aspect of a complex set of stereotypes that deny Black humanity in order to rationalize white supremacy” (Roberts p. 8). In terms of knowledge, the plethora of historical incidents Roberts brings to light in her book provides a practical example of alternative knowledge surfacing and persisting within the dominant hegemony’s perception of knowledge around Black bodies and the dominant ideology’s successful perpetuation and underpinning of white supremacy.

Roberts provides a stark example of the dehumanization of Black women’s bodies and complete disregard for reproductive rights. The author describes the case of Bob Grant, “a popular New York radio talk show host,” who related welfare mothers’ sexual reproduction to multiplying maggots and who called “his welfare reform proposal the “Bob Grant Mandatory

Sterilization Act”” (Roberts p. 18). Grant’s exaggeratory term bleeds into an ideology that parallels the actual sterilization of women of color in the U.S. The history of sterilization is intimately connected to the creation and endurance of dangerous myths which support dangerous racial ideologies. Alluding to Althusser, these ideologies contribute to the reproduction of existing power relations through repressive and state ideological apparatuses (coercing conformance and obedience) in which people are interpolated into subjects which have historically been objectified, categorized, and enslaved at the same time that they do not possess freedom of choice (Calvente 9-8-16). “Knowledge” such as the social science fields’ historic collaboration with the State, helps to put into practice and enforce dominant racial ideologies, including the exploitation and oppression of people of color under white supremacy.

A specific example of this oppression is the sterilization of Black women in the United States of America. Roberts explains, “A lurid mythology of Black mothers’ unfitness, along with a science devoted to proving Black biological inferiority, cast Black childbearing as a dangerous activity” (Roberts p. 21). The response to this “dangerous activity” was to stem Black birth. Whereas Davis describes the evolution of Black women under slavery (including to the status of “breeder” made possible by the violent control of Black women’s reproductive practices), Roberts points to shifts over time which ultimately have led to the sterilization of Black women in the modern United States. This sterilization was possible through racist ideologies, myths, and practices. For example, Roberts highlights the rise of eugenic science, made possible because “Eugenic ideas found fertile ground in America” including the fear of “race suicide” (Roberts p. 60). Roberts even outlines the surprising alliance between Margaret Sanger, the historically popular advocate of birth control and white women’s rights, and the eugenics movement (Roberts p. 72). Regardless of Sanger’s individual intentions, the implications of this alliance and

the perpetuation of white supremacy in the U.S. have negatively, and violently, attempted control over Black birth. Whether these practices of sterilization were deliberate, temporary (Norplant), or disguised (birth control), the history of sterilization and women of color's bodies, especially Black women, benefits from a theoretical understanding of racial ideology, mythology, and knowledge.

References

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