

Reproductive Rights as a Tactic of Necropolitics Under Neoimperialism

By Haley Kimberlin

ABSTRACT. Necropolitics, or “politics as a work of death” are evident in the reproductive injustices faced by marginalized groups of women such as Black, indigenous, and immigrant women. Tactics including coercive sterilizations and severe lack of access to reproductive care are employed within a neoimperial state with the intent of upholding an “imagined originary state”. This paper analyzes these tactics of necropolitics as a method of controlling bodies to uphold this perceived neoimperial sovereignty. It also offers a brief critique of the rights framework employed by current reproductive movements and the failure to address the reproductive issues of marginalized groups in a way that recognizes their restricted access to these rights, particularly the idea of choice.

Necropolitics, or “politics as a work of death”, have been studied as a facet of colonialism and evidence of its continued use can be seen in modern neoimperial eras. The post-colonial neoimperial system, according to Alexander, rejects those bodies that have the “capacity to destabilize a newly imagined homeland, threatening national sovereignty” (2006, p. 208). The politics of death are evident in the way reproductive rights movements have operated to control certain populations and thus in the continued struggles faced by Black, indigenous, and immigrant women living under a neoimperial power that places limits on who is actually able to access those rights. In a reproductive rights movement intrinsically warped by racism and therefore the control of certain populations, necropolitics are explicitly at work in the effort to uphold a strong, “imagined originary state”. Sovereignty as established under a neoimperial system rejects the idea of

the true originary citizens and seeks to eliminate this threat of upheaval through coercive reproductive tactics on indigenous women. Relatedly, immigrant women present a similar threat to the security of the “originary” nation and therefore necropolitics can be observed in the reproductive oppression of these women by the state. The reproductive realities of marginalized women, all of whom have been marked as threats by the neoimperial state, exist outside the realm of “choice” and therefore a rights-centered movement does not address these issues as well as an alternative focus on reproductive justice would.

The fight for women’s reproductive rights has been entrenched in racism by emphasizing the desirability of the white race over all others, and been used as a necropolitical ploy of neoimperial power. As Roberts states, “Race completely changes the significance of birth control to the story of women’s reproductive freedom” (1997, p. 56). This is especially evident in the forced sterilizations of thousands of Black women throughout history and the increasingly limited access to contraceptives that have forced difficult reproductive choices on poor women, particularly poor Black women. Angela Davis (1981) argues that many Black women have been victims of these sterilization practices since there is currently no other alternative other than abortion, which is inaccessible, and sterilizations remain free and easily available to poor women, provided by federal funds. These options, funded by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, are federal and state sponsored attempts to control the Black population by forcing the option of permanent infertility based on the idea of improving social well-being. This power over life and death allows the government to combat the “dark, inside threat that must be cordoned off, imprisoned, expelled...” (Alexander, 2006, p. 210). Davis reasons, “The birth control campaign would be called upon to serve in an essential capacity in the execution of the U.S. government’s imperialist and racist population policy” (1981, p. 215). Throughout the history of the reproductive

rights movement, the reproductive rights of women of color, those deemed outside the idea of patriotic citizens, have been utilized to control the expanse of these populations through government coercion. Necropolitics as a device of neoimperialism are explicitly at work in the accessibility and administration of birth control for those not included in the neoimperial view of citizens, in this case Black women of lower socio-economic status.

Necropolitics by way of reproductive coercion has also served to maintain the sovereignty of a neoimperial United States against indigenous peoples. Native American women of childbearing age have faced compulsory sterilizations at the hands of the United States government as a tactic to disenfranchise them from their indigenous identity. Ralstin-Lewis writes,

This long term strategy of the federal government has removed Indian people from their aboriginal homelands and subjected them to coercive medical practices, including sterilization, with the intent of reducing the number of Indians that can claim rights to Native land (2005, p. 82).

Since the idea of indigenous sovereignty infringes upon that of American autonomy by invalidating the status of the American nation as the entirely sovereign power, necropolitics in the form of reproductive violence have been enacted in order to render native people powerless. This necessary claim of a neoimperial state over the indigenous population is used to shift the perception of sovereignty in a very tangible way. "The sterilization of Indian women, and the resulting loss of children, endangers the sovereignty and economics of Indian nations" (Ralstin-Lewis, 2005, p. 83). By reducing the number of indigenous people through forced sterilizations the social, economic, and therefore political power of the Native American populace is undermined. Necropolitics have been enacted through enforced sterilization practices on native women

with the intent of destabilizing the true originary citizen in the face of maintaining sovereignty.

The preservation of the United States' sovereignty is further constructed through the prevention of immigrant women's access to reproductive health, a display of necropolitics that seeks to remove the threat of the dark external Other. Immigrant women face the unique challenge of attempting to access reproductive healthcare in a system that either does not recognize their existence or expulses them at the detection of their presence within the state. Henriquez and Hooton found, "For an undocumented immigrant Latina, her need to access reproductive health care is inextricably connected to her immigration status, her fear of deportation..." (206, p. 39). Due to immigrant women's status on the fringes of society and thus the increased risk of deportation, arrest, discrimination, or violence forces the abandonment of reproductive rights, and thus justice. This vulnerable position of immigrant women has resulted in a greater risk of reproductive health difficulties, some of them deadly.

A 1987 study of Colorado migrant farmworkers found that among sexually active women, 24% had been sterilized; one-third had had one or more miscarriages or abortions; and one in eight had an infant die within the first year of life (Golichenko & Sarang, 2013, p. 46).

These women face severely limited access to prenatal care, contraceptives and other forms of birth control, as well as a greater threat of reproductive abuse such as sterilization. There is no coincidence between the marginalized status of immigrants and the prevention of reproductive care for immigrant women as this occurs within a state that regards them as an inherent threat to national security. As Alexander argues of neoimperial sovereignty,

Ultimately, it is the immigrant who is positioned as perennial suspect, risky by virtue of status and bearing the disproportionate brunt of enemy, further

criminalized and made to function as nonpatriot in this matrix where status and implied propensity meet...(2006, p. 212).

The neoimperial vision of these women, and therefore the state's regard for them, is embedded in the idea that the status of immigrants as outsiders exists separate from the concept of the ideal patriot and thus must be removed. This exercise of power over who lives and who dies by way of lack of access to reproductive care for immigrant women is enacted as a function of a neoimperial power in order to maintain a strong, sovereign state against an external threat.

Given the wide variety of reproductive injustices faced by Black, indigenous, and immigrant women, the current rights-based reproductive movement does not appropriately address the ways in which the neoimperial state enacts necropolitics against communities of color. A reproductive rights movement that operates within a neoimperial system and emphasizes *rights* over *freedoms* inherently places restrictions on who is able access those rights. The roots of the current mainstream movement lie in the rights framework of traditional white feminist movements that places emphasis on the rights of "individuals" and thus applies only to a select group of women. Under neoimperialism, this group excludes those women that do not align with the vision of the putative originary citizen (Alexander, 2006) and thus are undeserving of the protections that rights provide, namely Black, indigenous, and/or immigrant women. This rights-centered approach does little to address the limits of combatting reproductive injustices committed towards marginalized groups who do not reap the benefits of fully realized rights, such as the forced sterilizations of thousands of Black and indigenous women. In particular, the rhetoric of choice regarding abortion rights that is the cornerstone of the mainstream reproductive rights movement presents problems because is centered on

certain assumptions of privilege that are only relevant to a few women who have access to a variety of choices (Price, 2010). By emphasizing choice above all other reproductive issues the movement only succeeds in excluding marginalized women from the movement, rather than affording them an alternative to the reproductive coercion or neglect they experience at the hands of the state. As Smith argues, "...the pro-choice position actually does not ascribe inherent rights to women either. Rather, women are viewed as having reproductive choices if they can afford them or if they are deemed legitimate choice-makers" (2005, p. 128). Given the way the statuses of Black, indigenous, and immigrant women have been constructed outside of the neoimperial state, the application of a rights-based reproductive movement does not fully address the necropolitical tactics faced by these communities. In combatting necropolitics in the reproductive rights arena, there is a need for a more intersectional approach that separates reproductive "rights" from reproductive "justice".

Necropolitics manifest in the continuation of the fight for reproductive freedom by Black, indigenous, and immigrant women who exist under a neoimperial system that regards them as outside the realm of full citizenship. The neoimperial power's use of necropolitical tactics have included the institutionalized sterilizations of Black and indigenous women, as well as the severely restricted access to reproductive care for immigrant women, all of which are enacted with the purpose of upholding the perceived originary nature of the state. Since necropolitics have been a constant method of a reproductive rights movement that targets race and enacts population control, the application of a rights framework does little to protect those bodies that have been marked as "perennially threatening" and thus are not afforded the same "rights" as others. Within the neoimperial state, it is imperative to distinguish between this existing rights discourse and the necessity of fighting for a more intersectional reproductive movement that emphasizes the objectives of reproductive justice and

freedom. The hope is that this new framework will embolden marginalized communities to become more active in the politics of reproductive freedom for all (Price, 2010).

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