

Environmental Storytelling Series

of Central New York

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Reproductive and Environmental Justice

In 1994, a group of Black women activists gathered in Illinois to critique proposed federal health care reform. Calling themselves Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice, they had concerns with how reproductive rights movements focused almost exclusively on maintaining abortion's legality. Keeping abortion legal, however, was for many women of color, not enough to ensure reproductive freedom. Having the legal right to contraceptives is not enough if their cost is too high. Additionally, the dominant reproductive and women's movements often overlooked related issues, such as the lack of adequate pre- and post-natal healthcare and the need for living wages and healthy homes. As a result they proposed the concept of "reproductive justice" as a new way to think about reproductive rights more attuned to broader efforts to achieve social justice.

Several years later, sixteen different women of color organizations formed the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective to help coordinate and champion reproductive justice. Defining reproductive justice as the "right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities," they continue advocating for deeply-needed policy changes, helping teach and train about reproductive justice, and highlighting the links between reproductive issues and other struggles.

These struggles entwine with the pursuit of environmental justice, or an equitable distribution of environmental goods and bads regardless of race, class, or other social category. Everyday environments, where people live, work, pray, and play, drastically affect health outcomes, including around birth. Here in Syracuse, for instance, air pollution from highway traffic is a major health concern since the I-81 viaducts and exits often abut people's homes. Lead poisoning from inadequately maintained rental properties constitutes another environmental injustice, with 12% of Syracuse's Black children having elevated lead levels--doubling the rate among the city's white communities.

***"We can love the place that raised us,
and made us who we are."- SeQuoia I. Kemp***

Given all of this, we are still a long way from living in a reproductively-just society. For many, this unacceptable failure is quite literally a matter of life and death. Across the United States, the mortality rate among pregnant people has climbed over the past two decades. Each year, 700 people die during or soon after pregnancy, the large majority of which are preventable. This crisis is especially pronounced among Black women, who throughout the country are three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than are white women. In New York State, the disparity in maternal death is even more severe, with Black women five times more likely to die from giving birth. The state's Department of Health identifies discrimination "as a probable or definite circumstance" in 46% of all pregnancy-related deaths statewide. Babies born to Black parents, meanwhile, are significantly more likely to die before reaching their first birthday.

Achieving reproductive justice will require community-based and -building work. Only by attending to all facets of this interconnected problem, from a lack of adequate housing and nutrition to resources which might restore Black people from the emotional and psychological weathering many endure. Groups such as Doula 4 a Queen and Sankofa Heals help organize these efforts with the further hope that "self-determined reproductive wellness can heal generational wounds of oppression and disease and change the overall health for future generations."

SeQuoia I. Kemp

SeQuoia I. Kemp is native to Syracuse, NY and has been dedicated to birth work since the age of 14. She is the founder of Doula 4 a Queen—that centers itself around community-based doula practices, and she works to support families before, during, and after birth because she believes they deserve the ‘royal’ treatment. She is also one of the 3 founders of Sankofa Reproductive Health & Healing Center, which was founded to support families on the southside of Syracuse. Both organizations are making positive changes for Black women and women of color in the central New York area. SeQuoia has been recognized for her efforts by New York State, receiving the 2022 Senate Empire Award. Senator Rachel May praised Kemp stating, “SeQuoia Kemp, the founder of Doula 4 A Queen, is a birth worker, an advocate for Black health and wellness, and a health justice activist. Through her practice and advocacy, she is making a positive difference in health outcomes for women of color in Central New York.”



Birthwork and Collaborative Storytelling

Sequoia sees Doula work as an act “of reclaiming something that was historically ours and has been taken from us by institutionalized care... It’s a return to the tenets of people within your community, serving you, giving you support emotionally, physically, spiritually. It’s a return to taking care of our own to help our community heal.” (NPR). With the overturning of Roe V. Wade, Sequoia realized doula care is needed more than ever in our society. She states that “reproductive justice was a framework developed by Black and Indigenous women who recognized a duty to show up for one another, to defend our right to bodily autonomy and organize for a more just and humane society. My work is built upon that framework and legacy.” Drawing on her training and expertise in public health and nursing and her deep and extensive experience with mothers, SeQuoia takes pride in educating and advocating for her community in Syracuse. She aspires to be a homebirth midwife and utilize the past teachings throughout her practice.

Collaborative storytelling is foundational to SeQuoia’s birth and community education and advocacy work. Through dialogue, poetry, song, and movement, she draws out and connects the stories of mothers and birthing people to cultivate awareness, advocate for self and others and develop a community of mutual support. In this way, an individual’s experiences come together with others to make composite stories of struggle, celebration, and birthing justice.

While her focus is on the community of Syracuse, building coalitions means fostering relationships and raising awareness across political and academic institutions about environmental justice and the impact it has on marginalized birthing people. She frequently guest lectures for courses at colleges and universities including: Georgia State University, Colgate University, SUNY Upstate Medical, and University of Rochester.

Some Terms To Know

Reproductive Justice

“A framework developed by Black and Indigenous women who recognized a duty to show up for one another, to defend our right to bodily autonomy and organize for a more just and humane society.” (Source: Swann-Quinn 2022)

Maternal Toxic Zone

Areas that have characteristics that put pregnant people at risk, such as having a lack of access to proper healthcare, experiencing discrimination towards certain identities, and having higher rates of health issues such as cardiovascular disease. (Source: Aspen Ideas)

Community-Based Doula

Birthworkers who are trained to provide physical, emotional, and informational support to pregnant people before, during, and after birth. These doulas help center the care of pregnant people in communities that are familiar and safe to them, by meeting with pregnant people throughout their journey of pregnancy and beyond. (Sources: Ellmann 2020, DONA International 2014)

Birth Justice

The belief that pregnant people are “empowered during pregnancy, labor, childbirth and postpartum to make health decisions for themselves and their babies.” (Sources: Black Women Birthing Justice, Voices for Birth Justice)

Abolition medicine

Abolition medicine works within the modalities of transformative justice, actively dismantling structural racism within healthcare systems, medical training, and care. It calls for the divestment of all healthcare practices which further contribute to systemic racism and the generational incarceration of marginalized people through the direct implementation of life-affirming systems, narrative medicine, and which directly confronts structural harm. (Sources: Genetic Literacy Project, HHIVE)

Upcoming Workshops and Readings

Nonviolent Action from Civil Rights to Climate Justice (George Lakey, Thursday, April 13)

*Legendary civil rights and environmental activist and author George Lakey draws on principles from his 2018 book, **How We Win: A Guide to Nonviolent Direct Action Campaigning**, to discuss his work with the Earth Quaker Action Team (EQAT), a mostly youth-led coalition, which he co-founded to pursue ecojustice at the intersections of race, class, queerness, and the climate crisis. He will share stories of how the EQAT successfully mobilizes cross-sections of society to address the massive structural challenges we face in the United States, and how event attendees can also create inclusive nonviolent campaigns.*

Discussion Questions



- What does environmental justice look like for Black, Indigenous, and non-white families in Central New York?
- What have you always wanted to know about birth but are too afraid to ask?
- How do we make room for generational healing interpersonally, through our work and affiliated organizations, and at the societal level?
- What are ways that knowledge of reproductive justice and maternal care can be shared to people both within and outside of your community?
- How have you experienced the power and comfort found that comes from being cared for by people you can see yourself reflected in?

Lesson Plans & Activity Modules

Reproductive Justice & the Senses

- This activity can either be a writing or drawing exercise. It can also be a self-reflective exercise or spoken exercise. What does environmental and reproductive justice look like? Taste like? Smell like? Sound Like? Feel like?
- If in a group, discuss your responses with each other. What similarities and differences do you notice? What aspects of environmental and reproductive justice might you take for granted based on your privileges?

Drawing Reproductive Justice

Divide a piece of paper into three sections. Draw an ideal image of your pregnancy or being a part of the pregnancy experience in the first section. Draw an ideal image of you giving birth or being a part of a birth in the second section. Draw an ideal image of you postnatal or being a part of the postnatal experience in the third section.

- Reflect on the drawings. What people are in the drawings? What objects are in the drawings? What differences across the sections do you notice? Based on your drawings, what are some things needed for reproductive justice? (ex: access to healthy foods, support networks, mental wellbeing)
- If in a group: Share with each other your drawings. What are the differences and similarities across people's drawings? What would you add to your drawing after seeing other drawings? What needs to happen for your drawings to become a reality?

Selected Additional Resources

Organizations

Black Mamas Matter Alliance aims for “a world where Black mamas have the rights, respect, and resources to thrive before, during, and after pregnancy” by lifting up the voices of Black mothers while advancing policy, research, and community care.

Doula 4 a Queen, which SeQuoia Kemp founded, strives “to reduce racial disparities in maternal and infant health through a community-based model of care” by helping families across Central New York who are seeking to welcome a child.

The National Birth Equity Collaborative conducts training and research while providing technical tools and policy advocacy with the aim of optimizing “Black maternal, infant, sexual, and reproductive wellbeing.”

Syracuse’s Sankofa Center is an officially designated “Perinatal Safe Spot” which reflects differing cultural preferences. The center provides reproductive services ranging from doula care and training to counseling and advocacy to yoga and counseling.

Village Birth International seeks to create spaces where “community people can serve their families in the childbearing year.” They currently serve families in Syracuse, New York City, New Jersey, and northern Uganda.

Books and Scholarly Articles

Octavia Raheem’s *Gather* brings together poems, sayings, and meditation prompts while helping readers find peace with their internal selves.

Loretta Ross’s *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (edited by Rickie Solinger) serves as a thorough, moving primer for understanding reproductive justice and gender politics amidst U.S. racial capitalism.

Elizabeth Hoover et al., “Indigenous Peoples of North America: Environmental Exposures and Reproductive Justice,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 120, no. 12 (2012): 1205422.

Melisa Murray, “Race-ing Roe: Reproductive Justice, Racial Justice, and the Battle for Roe v. Wade,” *Harvard Law Review* 134 (2021): 2025-2102.





photo by Anastasiia Shadrina

Call to Take Action

- Contact your NYS Senator, House Representative, and your local assemblyperson and urge them to support the Certified Professional Midwives Licensing Act S310/A7898A

MORE MIDWIVES = SAFER BIRTHS

- How to find your Senator: <https://www.nysenate.gov/find-my-senator>
 - How to find your Assembly Person: <https://assembly.state.ny.us/mem/search/>
 - Call, email and tweet urging them to support this bill
 - Follow @nycpm on instagram and sign up for notifications
- Sample Scripts for Calls and Emails:

“Hello, my name is [insert your name] and I am your constituent from [insert city and state.] I am calling to ask you to support the Certified Professional Midwives Licensing Act (bill number S310/A7898A). New York is in an ongoing maternity care crisis which disproportionately affects Black and Brown birthing people. Licensing certified professional midwives is an important step in addressing this and providing more maternity care options in New York. As a (parent/birthworker/constituent) I urge you to co-sponsor the Certified Professional Midwifery Bill (bill number S310/A7898A). Black maternal health and birth justice advocates support this bill and encourage you to as well. Thank you.”
 - Donate to Doula 4 a Queen community Birthworker fund for pregnant people who can not afford doula services and would like support on their birthing journey:

<https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/SequoiaK>

- Invite SeQuoia to speak at your organization or college/universities.
- Inform the campus community about what’s happening in regard to the Black Maternal Health Crisis.

Syracuse University

College of Arts & Sciences



WRITE OUT

REPAIR

SYRACUSE SYMPOSIUM 2022-2023

Syracuse University Humanities Center



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