

Column **Black Lives Don't Matter Because Black Wombs Don't Matter: Exploring the Reproductive Rights of Black Mothers**

by **Kimberly Harper**

"Black Lives Matter" is more than a protest slogan. It is a call for people to understand that the phrase is not being used in a superficial manner, but to draw understanding to the lived realities of people of color. Originally this column was to be about the Black Lives Matter movement and how technical communication supports oppressive policing practices via written discourse. However, as is the case with writing, sometimes we are moved in a different direction despite our best efforts to stay true to our original idea. The journey is unexpected. My original premise started with the notion that there is a "So What?" perspective from society that underscores the conversation surrounding Black Lives Matters. As I teased out my original premise I realized that in order to talk about Black Lives, I had to discuss the disregard for Black wombs—the source of Black lives.

This new path led me to look at reproductive discourses (legislative decisions, pharmaceutical directives, and unspoken cultural stereotypes) that affect how technical communicators who believe in social justice and equity approach the conversation of bias, race, and gender. The concept of neutrality is not a new conversation, and many technical communication scholars have called for new research, and curricular and pedagogical approaches that provide students with a more contextualized view of diverse cultural and historical perspectives. While researchers discuss how the body is commodified, we look past what that means for Black wombs, and we overlook (by choice and by ignorance) how written documents support power structures that ultimately reinforce oppressive practices. Technical communicators need to address these ideas in order to truly become advocates for all lives. This column takes a step in that direction by looking at how regulatory writing supports the indifference and disregard for Black wombs and how that disregard extends to Black lives. To understand where the indifference and erasure of Black bodies came from we must start with American history.

The indifference and objectification of Black bodies isn't a new phenomenon. This objectification is ingrained in the written discourse of America's tragic and messy 400-year relationship with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the American Civil War and Reconstruction Era, the Jim Crow South, the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, and present day. The Black body in many ways has been a blank canvas used to meet the needs of American society (Collins 129). When Black bodies were first brought to America they were used as labor for plantations, and a Black woman's ability to reproduce children who would become property provided value to slave owners. The financial gains associated with Black wombs set the stage for society to treat Black bodies as a commodity to be managed and used. In her book *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts underscores this when she states, "While slave masters forced Black women to bear children for profit, more recent policies sought to reduce Black women's fertility. Both share a common theme—that Black women's childbearing should be regulated to achieve social objectives" (Roberts 57). When slavery ended, the narrative about the Black woman's reproductive purpose changed because her body and children were no longer needed by plantation owners. Thus, she and her children became a burden on society. This new narrative served as a means for her continued subjugation and involuntary sterilization, as well as the rationale for images like the mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, Jezebel, and bad bitch (Collins 70-78). Evidence of this can be seen in how Black Women's bodies have been used to benefit others. The most recent example is that of cancer patient Henrietta Lacks.

Henrietta Lacks was a poor, Black woman who had her affected cells removed and studied unbeknownst to her or her family. Neither she nor her descendants were ever financially compensated by companies that created commercial products such as vaccines and medicines produced from research using HeLa cells¹. Lacks' family

¹ "The word HeLa is used to refer to the cells grown from Henrietta Lacks' cervix" (Skloot xvi). The term HeLa is an amal-

was denied compensation and until recently denied the right to control who used and published research about the HeLa genome². In 2013 the National Institutes of Health (NIH) reached an agreement with Lacks' family that granted them the right to control the consent process over the HeLa genome. Lacks' story demonstrates the power of race, gender, and class intersecting in a person's life. As a Black woman, Lacks was already silenced and her economic class meant that she didn't have the means to demand better medical treatment. Lacks' daughter, Deborah, so eloquently sums up the difficult questions surrounding her mother's life that I've felt it best to quote her at length when she states:

But I have always thought it was strange, if our mother cells done so much for medicine, how come her family can't afford to see no doctors? Don't make no sense. People got rich off my mother without us even knowing about them taking her cells, now we don't get a dime. I use to get so mad about that to where it made me sick and I had to take pills. But I don't got it in me no more to fight. I just want to know who my mother was. (Skloot 9)

Lacks' story is one of many where medical representatives felt that a poor, black person didn't deserve the dignity of a choice or the right to control their own wombs. These examples demonstrate the disregard for the wombs that carry black life. Medical consent was an ongoing problem for Black women all over the country and it grew alongside the American eugenics movement. The American eugenics movement sought to control the population by preventing people deemed unfit to reproduce. By 1907 the state of Indiana required the sterilization of mentally unfit individuals, and the trend continued throughout the country. While forced sterilization was initially selected for "undesirables" politicians eventually turned their attention to poor, Black women on welfare. The reproductive control of Black women's wombs and the systemic denial of their rights to motherhood, their children, and families are chronicled in the history of American legislative decisions that both

passed and failed. For example, Louisiana and Mississippi passed laws that made it illegal to have two or more illegitimate children. In 1960 David Glass attempted to pass a bill³ that would force sterilize Black women who received welfare. Glass' reason for the bill was to "discourage immorality of unmarried females by providing for sterilization of the unwed mother" (Washington 203). The bill passed the Mississippi House but failed to secure enough votes in the Senate. Despite laws like this not passing, Black women continued to receive involuntary sterilizations funded by the federal government (Washington 204). Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer fell victim to the "Mississippi Appendectomy" that many Black women in the South were subjected to. Hamer went to have a uterine tumor removed and ended up with an involuntary, full hysterectomy. History is replete with stories of black bodies being used and abused, and the justification can usually be traced back to some form of written discourse. I argue that the legislative decisions, pharmaceutical directives, and cultural stereotypes contribute to dismissive counter discourses that surround the Black Lives Matter movement.

Legislative Decisions as Technical Communication

When we address examples of regulatory writing it is hard to turn a blind eye to the notion that technical communication is neutral or free of bias. A starting point for unpacking this myth of neutrality begins with acknowledging that bodies of color are marked and treated differently. Nowhere is this more evident than in the veiled language of regulatory writing (Williams 2). In her text *From Black Codes to Recodification*, Miriam Williams discusses how "specific language was used to veil mentions of race and racial discrimination in both literature and law" (2). Researchers found that sterilization laws funded by the birth control and eugenics movements were deeply informed by race and full of veiled language. For example, language from the 1924 Virginia Compulsory Sterilization statute aimed "to prevent reproduction by potential parents of socially

gamation of Henrietta Lacks name and was used by researchers at Johns Hopkins to identify Mrs. Lacks cells without directly naming her as the donor.

2 A genome contains all the genetic information (DNA) of a person's cell. It contains hereditary information.

3 An Act to Discourage Immorality of Unmarried Females by Providing for Sterilization of the Unwed Mother under Conditions of this Act"

inadequate offspring" (Roberts 68). Terms like feebleminded, inadequate offspring, and imbecility were used in the written reports, proposals, medical documents, and laws that governed reproductive rights (Roberts 70). When discussing Black people, the language was more direct. Report titles include *Some Notes on the Negro Problem*, *The Problem of Negro-White Intermixture*, and *Intermarriage with the Slave Race*. These titles and terms represent a bigger problem—one that shows how written documents help perpetuate systems of oppression in a society. The eugenics movement and birth control movement eventually set the stage for a new type of assault on black wombs—the criminalization of black reproduction.

The introduction of doctor administered contraceptives like Depo-Provera and Norplant opened the door for a new wave of population control discourse that revolved around the need to control "welfare mothers." In 1978 the cancer drug Depo-Provera was tested on healthy, poor women of color and only when the government found out that Depo-Provera caused breast cancer in beagles did funding for the study end. After Depo-Provera was discontinued Norplant was the next doctor administered contraceptive. Maryland Governor William Schafer "suggested that the state consider making Norplant mandatory for women on welfare" (Roberts 110). States like Mississippi and South Carolina introduced legislation that would require women on welfare who already have children to get Norplant as a means for continuing their benefits. In 1990 *The Philadelphia Inquirer* published an article titled "Poverty and Norplant: Can Contraception Reduce the Underclass?". The article caused a stir by suggesting that Norplant could help control reproductive rights of the underclass and people in the inner city—read black, urban, and poor (Roberts 107). *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* also reported that Norplant "offers society yet another way to curb the expansion of an underclass most of whose members face a future of disorder and deprivation" (Roberts 107). In addition to representing "welfare mothers" as women in need of reproductive control, the discourse also started to criminalize black reproduction. The crack epidemic of the late 80s and early

90s wreaked havoc on the African-American community. The increased drug use resulted in many women becoming addicts and giving birth to children who were addicted to crack. Healthcare providers often saw these mothers as criminals and not victims of an addiction, and the terms "crack babies" and "crack mommas" became part of popular language. In her book *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts addresses the disparity and treatment of Black mothers on crack when she states, "health care professionals report Black women who use drugs during pregnancy more readily than they report their white patients [...] Black women were ten times more likely than whites to be reported to government authorities" (175). Obviously, drug use of any kind is dangerous during pregnancy; however, the way in which Black mothers on crack were portrayed in the media and treated by healthcare providers makes one wonder how blaming these mothers pushed the narrative and cultural stereotypes of a black mother's irresponsibility further. It is a stark contrast to the way the opioid epidemic gripping America now is described in the news. Drug use among white, middle class women is an illness and not a crime, and mothers who are addicted are given treatment options to help them keep their babies as they work through rehabilitation.

Cultural Stereotypes

In many ways, the cultural stereotypes of Black mothers are a justification for the killing of black men, women, and children. After all it is their unrestrained sexual appetite that makes them mothers, and it is their wombs that bear children who are filled with "incurable immorality" (Roberts 8). A recent study by the Center on Poverty and Inequality at the Georgetown University Law Center reports that "adults see black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers, especially in the age range of 5-14." (Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez 1). From an early age, Black girls are subjected to stereotypes that support the idea that they become Black women who are at their core unfit to be mothers. When people see yet another Black mother on TV crying about their dead children (Trayvon Martin, Sabrina Fulton; Tamir Rice, Samira Rice; Eric Garner, Gwen Carr; Sandra Bland, Geneva Reed-Veal; and Philando Castile, Valerie Castile),

society at large doesn't see a grieving mother. They see a Black woman who was unfit to be a mother crying over a child that they corrupted before it was born. Society doesn't see the "complex set of stereotypes that deny Black humanity to rationalize white supremacy" (Roberts 8). The media creates a narrative that criminalizes the victim and dehumanizes Black mothers.



As artist Anika Sabree captions in her image "Got Justice? We Should know their names." Their lives mattered and their families matter. Technical communication programs and writing programs that focus on public writing need to understand the systemic pressures that allow for these killings to happen year after year. A starting point for this transition is to teach the next generation of scholars about the myth of neutrality and use of veiled language in written documents. Technical communication scholars need to find ways to incorporate pedagogies that help students unpack the complex nature of rhetoric and persuasion in writing. The myth that technical communication is free from bias helps perpetuate laws that are racist, misogynistic, and homophobic. The argument surrounding Black Lives Matter isn't about saying one group matters more than another. It is about acknowledging the fact that Black Lives don't matter enough and neither do the wombs that bore them.

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