

SEARCHING FOR THE LOST RACE:  
CULTURE IN TEXTS AND IMAGES  
IN THE ABORTION DEBATE

by  
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## **Searching for the Lost Race: Culture in Texts and Images in the Abortion Debate**

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On August 27, 1871, a horrible stench issuing from a trunk in New York's Hudson River Railway station led baggage handlers to a decaying corpse. A young woman's naked body was found crammed into the small trunk, which had been checked for shipment to Chicago. For New Yorkers the mystery of the trunk was to discover who the woman was, how she had died, and who had put her there. Eventually they learned that the corpse was that of Alice Bowsby, who was killed by an illegal abortion performed by Jacob Rosensweig. Bowsby had been impregnated by a man named Walter Conklin, who had a reputation as a rake, and who shot and killed himself when the identity of the body was discovered. For New Yorkers the opening of the trunk revealed the horrors of the illegal abortion trade, and, in their eyes, the evils committed by abortionists. I came across this trunk in 1993, while attempting to put Comstock's crusade against obscenity in historical context. For me, the trunk opened the problem of understanding nineteenth century racial categories, and how racial politics influenced the construction of abortion as a social evil in the 1860s and 1870s. The strange constructions of race that were omnipresent in 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-abortion rhetoric led to a related question, namely, understanding the equally odd racial silence that attends the contemporary abortion controversy. In this talk I would like to interrogate the relationship between theoretical understandings of race, and its representations in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century abortion rhetoric. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century rhetoric, understanding the racial puzzle – indeed, understanding that the puzzle was actually about race – involves looking at texts and trying to understand the historical context in which they were written. For me, the problem was learning that the social category “white” that I, as a late-20th

century American and sociologist, imposed on the texts was blinding me to their racial content. Simultaneously, the same contemporary notion of race – that marks racial categories by color and denotes whites as unraced beings – has led me, as well as most sociologists and politicians, to overlook or ignore the racial content and politics of contemporary pro-life and pro-choice rhetoric.

### **The “Boxed Blonde” and the Evil Jew**

Descriptions of the body in the trunk alternatively dwelt on its beauty and its decay, but endlessly reiterated the fact that its hair was blonde. The New York Times, for example, stated

Human flesh has rarely been so foully treated. This woman, full five feet in height, had been crammed into a trunk two feet six inches long and eighteen inches deep. She had been put in upon the right side, the legs doubled up, and the head bent forward so that the face and knees almost met. Seen even in this position, and rigid in death, the young girl, for she could not have been more than eighteen, had a face of singular loveliness. But her chief beauty was her great profusion of golden hair, that hung in heavy folds over her shoulders, partly shrouding her face, and lay in heavy masses upon her breast (NYT 8/27/71:1).

The *Sun* was even more effusive in its description of the body:

In life the young woman was doubtless very beautiful, although now sadly disfigured by death's terrible follower. She was apparently about twenty years of age, of slight and delicate figure, and as ethereal as Guido's lo. A tangled mass of the most beautiful, golden hair falls in waves over shoulders which must have been as white as Parian marble, and eyes of blue that even death's horrors cannot pale look out in all their ghastliness from swollen and discolored lids...The face is terribly discolored, and the mouth is distorted by suffering. (Sun 8/28/71: 1).

The Sun description illustrates two features that predominated in descriptions of the mysterious corpse: insistent depictions of the body's beauty, in particular, obsession with the woman's blonde hair, juxtaposed with details about the state of decomposition of the corpse. For example, on the first day that the World reported on the murder they described the body as having a “very clear,

fair complexion...[and] a profusion of beautiful light hair,” then added that “decomposition had set in to such an extent as to render the appearance of the body truly horrible” (World 8/27/71: 8). The next day they noted that the body, which had been neither photographed nor placed on ice when taken to the Morgue, had become “terribly decomposed, and the features so swollen and distorted as to be beyond recognition.” Four sentences later, the body was described as having “finely-molded features, small hands and feet, and a great profusion of auburn hair. Her eyes were swollen, mouth open, and tongue protruding” (World 8/28/71: 5).<sup>1</sup> The blond hair of the victim was so often reiterated in descriptions of the crime that the Star used the headline, “The Boxed Blonde,” for one day’s coverage of the investigation (Star 8/29/71: 1). Similarly, the woman’s beauty was so often described that the Star headlined one article, “The Boxed Beauty” during Rosensweig’s trial (Star 10/26/71: 1).

But when Bowsby was finally identified, and a picture (one of two of her in existence) obtained, she turned out to not be so beautiful in life as she was in death. The Star published a sketch from the photograph, which was the only visual image of Bowsby that ever appeared in the newspapers. Speaking rather unkindly of the dead, the paper noted, “she was certainly not the beautiful girl she has generally been described” (Star 9/3/71: 1).<sup>2</sup> Yet it was precisely the fact that the body had not been identified, perhaps in combination with the fact that decay had somewhat

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the descriptions of the body were truly horrible. The New York Times noted on August 30<sup>th</sup> that the remains had finally been placed on ice, and that while the stench from the body was almost unendurable even outside the room in the dead-house where it lay, hundreds came to “look upon the horrible mass.” Authorities allowed all who wished to view the body, although only hair, ears, and forehead remained intact (NYT 8/30/71). When the doctor and dentist who finally identified Bowsby came to examine the remains, the Star described the body as “teeming with maggots,” claiming that the body was hosed off before being inspected (Star 8/31/71).

<sup>2</sup>The Star also claimed that Bowsby was “a flirt,” and that many men, mainly married men, were as intimate with her as was Walter Conklin, the man assumed to be her lover.

obscured her features, that had allowed the press and the public to construct a fantasy vision of Bowsby and her life. The story of a beautiful young girl seduced and betrayed, which I have not discussed here, made compelling copy for newspapers, for it spoke to anxieties about a changing sexual and gender order and to the dangers women faced there (Beisel 1997; Walkowitz YEAR).

Similarly, the death of a beautiful and fair maiden, relentlessly referred to by the color of her hair, spoke to growing anxieties about race. Yet I did not at first recognize Bowsby and her hair as a racial symbol. This was in part because Bowsby's racial background, or country of origin, was never mentioned in the papers. But if her race was not consciously marked in the newspaper text, it was marked in the images that the news writers created. This suggests that Anglo-Saxons were an unmarked category in the 19<sup>th</sup> century -- the people whose race did not need to be mentioned. This was in sharp contrast to images of the abortionist who killed her. It would have been hard to miss anti-Semitism in portrayals of the man who killed her, Jacob Rosensweig, although it takes knowledge of nineteenth century racial thought to understand what these portrayals meant.

Rosensweig had been charged with manslaughter even before Bowsby was identified as the victim. The trunk was traced to his house, and as a known abortionist (the New York Times had recently exposed him, and a number of other abortionists, in an expose entitled "The Evil of the Age), he was immediately suspect. Ultimately a handkerchief bearing Bowsby's name was found in his home, sealing the case against him. While Bowsby's blondness was ubiquitous in newspaper accounts of her death, Rosensweig's Jewishness was endlessly reiterated in newspaper reports. For example, on the day he was arrested the New York Times claimed that he gave himself away at the police station by saying, without being questioned, "Yes I wash dar, but I just makes fun," proving him stupid as well as brutal (NYT 8/30/71: 8). Other newspaper accounts

also attempted to imitate his Polish (Jewish?) accent.<sup>3</sup> When asked by a reporter what he would desire to say to the public, Rosensweig “began by quoting the Hebrew phrase, ‘Shamu Ben Achlomen’ (World 8/31/71: 5). The same article noted that a large number of letters, written in Hebrew by Rosensweig’s relatives, were found in his home (World 8/31/71: 5). His mother was described as an old Jewess who spoke imperfect English (Sun 8/31/71: 1), while the Star captioned one article with the headline, “More Damning Evidence of the Old Jew’s Sin” (Star 8/31/71: 1).

Rosensweig himself pointed to his Jewishness, telling a reporter who tried to interview him that “I suppose you are aware that to-day is my Sabbath, and that my religious principles, being of the Jewish faith, forbid me attending to business affairs. That indictment is a business matter, and it would be breaking my Sabbath for me to preface or dictate a defense of my case for publication in the newspapers” (Star 9/17/71). Rosensweig then proceeded with the interview.

But what is most interesting in depictions of Rosensweig are discussions of his appearance and of what these physical features meant. At his trial the Star described him as follows:

His large bullet-eyes looked out boldly over the deep intrenchments which care or conscience has recently drawn around them, and seemed to be lost in wonder at the very existence of their proprietor. Those staring eyes of his do not appear to be on the most friendly terms. There is not much sympathy between them. The one is generally devoted to watching the Grecian bend of his Jewish nose, while the other seems to be on duty over a precocious lock of his curling red hair, which clings to the verandah of his left ear after the manner of a Virginia creeper (Star 10/26/71: 1).

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<sup>3</sup> The Evening Post quoted him as saying, “Yes, I was dere, but I just makes fun,” while the World as responding to a question from an undertaker who claimed that Rosensweig had visited him about burying a dead servant by saying, “Veil, yes; but I only makes a little fun; I didn’t mean nothing. I vant to see how much you charge” (World 8/30/71: 1; Evening Post 8/29/71).

Yet the Evening Telegram noted that Rosensweig had Jewish features but that there was nothing sinister in his appearance, describing him as having “a massive head, covered with thick brown hair, curled close to the skull, and a Hebrew cast of countenance...in his appearance there seemed to be nothing of the villainous cast, on the contrary the accused wore a quite respectable exterior than otherwise” (Evening Telegram 10/23/71: 1). The Star described him as plainly but neatly clad in a black suit, freshly shaven, and “his sandy hair was combed down as smoothly as it could be under the circumstances. His boots were blackened, and he wore an immaculate shirt bosom ornamented with a real or imitation diamond pin. Altogether, Rosensweig presented a very gentlemanly appearance” (Star 9/17/71). The World found less to like in Rosensweig’s looks, describing him at trial as “dressed in the same rusty black suit, every curl of the carrotty red hair laid in the same position on his low forehead, the cat-like eyes nervously shifting from side to side, the same stealthy smile on the thick lips” (World 10/27/1871: 3), but earlier had described him as having “a mass of dark brown curly hair...and thin, sensual lips” (World 8/29/1871: 5). The Sun also found something sinister in Rosensweig’s appearance, describing him as having a “noiseless, crouching gait” and noting that “there is scarcely any expression on his face except when he talks in his low, sweet voice, and then he looks sly, insinuating, and is so polite one would be apt to be afraid of him” (Sun 10/31/71: 1). While there was unanimity on Bowsby’s beauty and blondness, reporters were in little accord about what Rosensweig looked like – except that he had curly hair, and was a Jew.

There was agreement, however, that however Rosensweig looked, he was evil. The New York Times cited evidence “establishing the guilt of the monster Rosensweig” (NYT 9/3/1871: 8), while the Evening Telegram referred to him as “the arch fiend” (Evening Telegram 10/28/71: 4). The Star explained that Rosensweig’s father was a butcher, and in helping his father the son

“developed a naturally cruel disposition, which has since developed into demonic brutality, which did not hesitate even at the sacrifice of human life” (Star 9/3/1871: 3). When Rosensweig received the maximum sentence for the crime of manslaughter (seven years at hard labor), the newspapers rued that he could not be tried and hanged for murder. The World’s reasons for regret that Rosensweig could not be executed mentioned the prisoner’s Jewishness:

His demeanor in prison and in court, from the sickening cant with which he refused to take measures in his own defence [sic] upon the Jewish Sabbath to the stony callosity with which he handled the cerements of his victim and the impassive impudence with which he received his sentence, was all such as to show a two-legged beast who could not be other than a standing threat against society while he was left in it (World 10/29/71: 4).

When I first read these articles about the trunk murder I interpreted them as evidence that constructions of abortionists as villains in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were partly dependent on mobilizing anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic sentiment (see Beisel 1997). It did not occur to me that the journalists who wrote these articles were mobilizing racial sentiment, in part because I was focused on descriptions of Rosensweig and did not think about the significance of all that blonde hair. When I thought about the anti-Semitism in the portrayals of Rosensweig I considered it a sentiment against the Jewish faith, and not against the Jewish race.

But then I started reading the arguments 19<sup>th</sup> century physicians made when they argued for laws making abortion illegal at all stages of pregnancy. The American Medical Association launched its crusade against abortion in 1858. Physicians agitating for laws making abortion illegal argued that the Irish were an uncivilized race that was out breeding native-born Protestants, that because of their fertility (which was spurred in part by their religion) the Irish would take over political and social institutions, which would mean the end of American civilization, and that Anglo-Saxon’s women’s duty to the nation required them to reproduce. This came as a surprise to me because historians writing about the nineteenth-century anti-

abortion movement have argued that its actors were motivated by concerns about women's social roles, and have largely ignored the nativist aspect of rhetoric. It took me awhile to understand that this rhetoric reflected 19<sup>th</sup> century racial categories, in which the group we now know as "white" was fractured into a number of hierarchically ordered races, and that the rhetoric about the Irish and reproduction was a rhetoric about race. In 19<sup>th</sup> century racial thought the Hebrew race was separate, and inferior, as well, although the Jews did not pose the demographic threat Irish Catholics did.

Contemporary historians have failed to pay attention to this 19<sup>th</sup> century racial rhetoric for two reasons: first, contemporary racial categories have to do with social attributions based on skin color, and black/white distinctions dominate discussions of race. The idea that the Irish could be seen as a separate and inferior "race" – or that race is so mutable that people we now consider "white" were actually seen as being physically racially distinct – is quite foreign to the contemporary racial imagination. Historians couldn't see race in this rhetoric because we no longer "see" the white races. In retrospect, I feel a little silly for not understanding that language about Rosensweig was racial language – the Holocaust was, after all, about eliminating a threatening race and ensuring the racial purity of Germans. The horrors of the Holocaust led to the decline of eugenic thinking in the United States, and helped consolidate the Jews within the American social category white (Jacobson 1998). But Americans tend to assume that the racial logic that led to the Holocaust was confined to Germany, rather than understanding that a similar debate about race occurred in the United States at the turn of the century. Race suicide arguments asserted the superiority of persons of Anglo-Saxon descent, noted that births among recent immigrants far exceeded those among "old stock" Americans, and asserted that the quality of the American population was declining. Thus Americans in the North debated a "race

problem” that concerned white races.<sup>4</sup> “Ethnicity” as a term was coined to mark difference among groups of people whose history as “races” has been erased in the contemporary social imagination (Jacobson 1998).

But the second reason historians have read the nineteenth century conflict about abortion as being a conflict about gender is, I believe, because the contemporary abortion conflict is, as Luker (1984) argues, about the politics of motherhood and gender. Race is rarely mentioned in the contemporary abortion debate. And then I started wondering, why not?

Studies of the abortion conflict have tended to be of white activists, and members of major pro-life and pro-choice organizations are overwhelmingly white. (There are black pro-life and pro-choice organizations, but they have little visibility in debates about abortion). I thought it was odd that race was so seldom invoked in debates about abortion. The publication of the Bell Curve opened a public discussion about race and genetics, and there has discussion of the effects of immigration on America’s racial composition. Both of these arguments are similar to language used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but these issues have not been invoked in discussions of abortion.<sup>5</sup> The abortion movements seemed to be movements of white folks talking about white families

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<sup>4</sup>While the Irish, Germans, Jews, Italians, and Slavs all came to the United States under an 18th century immigration act that gave “free white persons” the right to enter and become citizens, native Anglo-Saxons increasingly saw these newcomers as unfit for self-government and a threat to the republic (Jacobson 1998). Contemporary sociologists use the term “race” to refer to categories marked by bodily difference -- most importantly by color -- and “ethnicity” to mark differences based on country of origin (Jacobson 1998; Omi and Winant 1994:55; Tilly 1998:64). But, as Jacobson notes, “an earlier generation of Americans *saw* Celtic, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon, or Mediterranean physiognomies where today we see only subtly varying shades of a mostly undifferentiated whiteness” (1998:10).

<sup>5</sup> There is a strain of white supremacist thought that argues that abortion is about greedy Jewish doctors killing white babies and thus making the population blacker (citation to *White Lies*). This exactly misstates the demographic consequences of abortion, which makes the population whiter.

(although there have been African American leaders of Planned Parenthood (Wattleton) and National Right to Life (Mildred Jefferson). When I began work on abortion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century I thought I was writing a book about reproductive politics and the meaning of whiteness in two centuries when different people were categorized as “white.”

I was not wrong about the composition of the pro-choice and pro-life movements, but I was wrong about who was having abortions. One-third of abortions are being obtained by African-American women, which means if abortion has been a white women’s issue, it certainly is not just a white women’s practice. One question that has emerged in this project is how a practice that is disproportionately engaged in by black women is represented by movements that are predominately white. As it turns out, race is signified in the 20<sup>th</sup> century much as it was in the Bowsby case: through blonde hair.

### **Images of Race in Contemporary Abortion Politics**

An examination of pro-life and pro-choice literature shows that, with the exception of literature directed at African-Americans, abortion is portrayed as an act engaged in by white people. This is the case even though the pro-choice movement has been engaged from its beginnings in efforts to make abortions available to poor – and black – women. Yet even the issue of funding abortion for women on public assistance -- where I expected to find a rhetoric about race -- has often been publicly portrayed as an white women’s issue.

Let’s start with images from pro-life and pro-choice movement. These show that abortion has been portrayed largely as an issue about white families

SLIDE: Children’s world (white baby)

This is the archetypal pro-life image, virtually all of which show a blond-haired baby. The blondness of babies also shows up in pieces like the pro-life “Diary of an Unborn Child,” which

attempts to make fetal life human, and fetuses babies, by ascribing thoughts and emotions to fetuses starting at the moment of conception. The diary starts:

October 5: Today my life began. My parents do not know it yet, I am as small as the seed of an apple, but it is I already. And I am to be a girl. I shall have blond hair and blue eyes. Just about everything is settled though, even that fact that I shall love flowers.

October 23: My mouth is just beginning to open now. Just think, in a year or so I shall be laughing and later talking. I know what my first word will be: MAMA.

December 13: I am just about able to see. It is dark around me. When mom brings me into the world it will be full of sunshine and flowers. But what I want more than anything is to see my mom. How do you look, mom?

December 28: Today my mother killed me.

Both the slide, in which the words “my mom let me live,” are attributed to the baby, and this diary, refer to a common theme in both 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century anti-abortion arguments: that of murderous mothers. Luker is absolutely right in her assertion that the abortion conflict is about the morality of women, but, I would add, the women at issue are white.

Fetal development, as illustrated in the diary, is a standard text and image in pro-life literature. What is of interest to us here is that in visual sequences of fetal development a white baby is invariably the outcome of the process. In answer to the question “what race is a fetus,” the answer in this genre of pro-life literature is that the fetus is white. And usually blonde.

Here are two pro-life examples of fetal development sequences:

THREE SLIDES: Love and Let Live, 1989 Human Life International,

THREE SLIDES: The First Nine Months, Focus on the Family, 1989. Again the first slide shows the embryo, while this second shows a 4 ½ month fetus and the final slide shows a white baby

with its mother.

We can contrast the use of images by the pro-life movement with those used by the pro-choice movement.

SLIDE: Keep Abortion Legal and Safe: This poster refers to one of the most common visual images in the pro-choice movement: the coat hanger, representing the means women will resort to if legal abortion is not available. My point here is that the pro-choice movement often does not rely on images of people, it relies on arguments. Race is not mentioned or pictured.

I've not included images that the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) called "shock photographs," which they started using in the early 1970s as a counter to pro-life images of mutilated fetuses. Two of the photographs were of women who had died of illegal abortions; the most circulated one shows a naked woman crouched on the floor of a hotel room, her buttocks towards us, with a pool of blood between her legs. Both of these images were of women who appeared to be white, and were taken from coroner's files in Minnesota. This is also interesting, because in the 1950s nearly four times as many women of color as white women died as a result of illegal abortions.<sup>6</sup>

SLIDE: You are in Good Company: Here is an image from a poster that the National Abortion Rights Action League) distributed in the 1990s. It looks like the picture was taken in the late 1970s or early 1980s. For the purpose of this talk, however, what is most important is the under representation of women of color in this picture. To represent how many African-American women are in the company of women who have had abortions, between a quarter and a third of the women pictured here should be black. I count one, maybe two, on the poster.

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<sup>6</sup>Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime*, p. 211.

Women obtaining abortions have been portrayed as white from the earliest years of the abortion rights movement. These slides are from a brochure distributed at the 1977 NARAL national conference:

SLIDE: The cover shows a white woman patient with a white physician and nurse

SLIDE: Here is a white family. The caption to this photograph explains that this couple had a little girl die at age 4 from Tay-Saks disease, a genetically transmitted illness most common in Jewish families. The caption says that the couple would have been afraid to have more children if genetic screening and the possibility of aborting a fetus that would have Tay-Saks were unavailable. The message is that legal abortion made this family possible.

### **Racial Imagery in Pro-life movement**

Although a third of abortions are obtained by African-American women, this fact is never stated in pro-life or pro-choice discourse. The pro-life movement instead invokes race by appealing to racial atrocities. The Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision is cited to argue that just as the Court decreed that the slave Dred Scott was not human, they have decreed that fetuses are not human. The other racial atrocity frequently referred to is the holocaust. Here the argument is that the termination of millions of pregnancies is analogous to the murder of million of Jews. These arguments have been made from the beginning of the pro-life movement, and recently reached their most incendiary expression in the Nuremberg Files web site, which compiled a list of abortionists and urged people to gather information on them and their families for future war crimes trials. The site became notorious because abortion providers who had been killed had their names struck out. A jury found the web site operators guilty of inciting violence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>**But Hitler only killed Jews, didn't he?**

Few know that the first gas chambers were erected in the state mental hospitals. Only the

While the pro-life movement appeals to racial atrocities to argue that abortion is a form of genocide, they also make specific appeals to African-American women to not abort. This next slide is a picture of a mutilated fetus. While images of mutilated fetuses are common in pro-life leaflets, this is the only such image that attributes a race to the fetus.

SLIDE: Civil Rights, 1989 Human Life International

There are two important things to point out about this slide. The first is that the blood in this picture is black. I think that this fetus looks like it has dark skin because the slide has been darkened – most of these images have a lot of red blood in them. The skin color differences that are invoked to impose the social category of race on children and adults are not, to my knowledge, apparent in a five month old fetus, indeed, this fetus has a quite different color than those in the developmental sequences I showed you earlier, which are white, yellow, or pink. The second interesting thing about this slide is that the argument it makes – that if we believe in civil rights for African-Americans we must prohibit black women from aborting – is similar to an argument made about feminism. You might have seen the bumper sticker that says “equal rights for unborn women.” I have a copy of a poster that says “Little Girls Deserve Equal Rights” – in this case, however, a little girl is shown, not a mutilated fetus, and she is blonde.

What should we make of these racial representations in pro-life and pro-choice rhetoric?

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most defective and burdensome were killed at first but then the price tag on human life was progressively marked down. After the mental hospitals were empty they turned to institutions for defective children, then to the incorrigibles in prison, to the nursing homes and the aged, and finally ... to a “defective race.” Before the Jews, about 300,000 pure blood Germans had been killed because they were “useless eaters.” For an entire decade prior to that however, permissive abortion-on-demand had apparently established well the fact that a human life was only worth so much pain or inconvenience to those around him. The anti-life mentality was there. Hitler only perfected the techniques. (From a pro-choice fact sheet quoting Wilke’s Handbook on Abortion, c. app. 1972, 1978)

Eventually I came to realize that the methodological point we all understand about texts applies as well to the study of images: what we make of them depends on our social location. Thus one, generous, interpretation of these pictures would be that since a majority of abortions are obtained by white women, these representations of white babies and women simply reflect the predominant reality. A second interpretation would be that since much of this propaganda is aimed at a white audience, that it would make sense to use white images, for they would arouse greater sympathy. But the flip side of sympathy is lack of concern for the people who are not represented. Dorothy Roberts has argued that one expression of the value attached to people is the value attached to their children, so that policies such as welfare caps reflect the lack of social value attached to black children. One interpretation of the lack of images of black children in pro-life rhetoric is that a white fetus or baby is seen as more valuable than an African-American child. Certainly the pro-life argument that unplanned pregnancies should be carried to term because of the demand for children to adopt is predicated on the availability of adoptive homes for the children who result from unwanted pregnancies. But white children are much more readily adopted than African-American kids. (Photographs of adopted children are frequently seen in the National Right to Life News, and in the issues I've gone through so far these children have all been white, but I've only gotten to 1981). Similarly, pro-choice images may feature white women because the plight of white women seeking to terminate a pregnancy might be viewed with more sympathy than that of a woman of color with a problem pregnancy.

### **Racial Justice, Medicaid Abortion, and Pro-Choice Arguments**

This lack of racial referents in pro-choice rhetoric is odd because the pro-choice movement was determined from its onset to provide abortions for poor women, who are disproportionately black and Hispanic. The history of the first 15 years of the pro-choice

movement suggests that, while making abortion legal and available was originally seen as being an issue of justice for poor and minority women, the issue over time became a “white women’s issue.” This was probably due to a decline in public concern for the poor (and willingness to pay for government programs to support them), the end of the civil rights movement and a concomitant decline in the power of arguments for racial justice, and finally, by the denial of the black political establishment that abortion was an issue important to black women.

In October of 1971 Dr. Edgar Keemer, a Detroit physician, issued a challenge to Michigan authorities to arrest him for violating Michigan’s abortion law. He claimed that the abortions he did for women in “Detroit’s ghetto area” were done because in his professional opinion the pregnancies were a threat to the women’s lives and health. At a NARAL press conference he presented an affidavit, telling of abortion therapy that he had administered to a woman he called “Mrs. “X,” a forty-year-old mother of seven. Mrs. X, who was unable to take the pill or use the IUD, had also had two illegal abortions. When she obtained a tubal ligation, the surgeon told her afterwards that she was pregnant but that he could not terminate her pregnancy because the hospital abortion committee would not allow it and, unfortunately, she possessed neither the private insurance coverage nor the cash for treatment as a private patient. He suggested that she travel to New York for an abortion. Keemer continued:

“Mrs. “X” characterized the New York suggestion to me as “ridiculous.” How could she leave seven children to go to New York? She had never traveled that far. Who would care for her children? Who would go with her so she wouldn’t get lost? How would she even pay for such treatment with no Blue Cross? Would Michigan Medicaid cover it? Even if the treatment were free, where would she get the bus fare? All she had was \$50.00. She is an ADC welfare recipient.”

Keemer was supported by the Michigan Clergy Counseling Service for Problem Pregnancy. A leader of the counseling service talked about how heartbreaking it was to know that while wealthy women could obtain abortions through their service's referrals, the poor women who came to them could not afford to travel east for abortions even if the service could refer them to New York abortionists who would not charge. They commended Keemer for serving "persons living in the black ghettos of Detroit." The racial composition of poor patients seeking abortions was clearly a subtext of these statements.

Lawrence Lader, the Chairman of the National Abortion Rights Action League, announced that Keemer's challenge was part of NARAL's strategy to provide abortions to women in the Midwest. He said,

"Even though we have come a long way with 400,000 legal abortions this year, we must set ourselves another crucial objective: equal rights to abortion for the poor. A woman of means can fly from Chicago or Miami to New York and afford both the abortion and the plane fare. But the poor woman, even when the Clergy Service or other agency service secures medical treatment in New York without charge, cannot even afford to travel – or to hire a baby-sitter for her children during her absence."

While the pro-choice advocates lobbying for a change in Michigan's law were somewhat circumspect in their discussion of the relationship between race and poverty, this very relationship was a key point in the legal challenge to the Hyde Amendment. The Hyde Amendment, passed by Congress in 1977, cut off federal funding of abortions for poor women. One of the challenges the ACLU and NARAL made to the Hyde Amendment argued that it was a violation of the constitutions' 5<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments, which guarantee that the law must equally protect all individuals. The Hyde Amendment, they claimed, singled out indigent, pregnant women for

special hardship by forbidding Medicaid to cover one medical procedure. Their brief continued:

“In addition, black and other minority women are disproportionately represented among Medicaid-eligible women. During 1974, non-whites accounted for approximately 43.4% of Medicaid recipients in the U.S. It is further estimated that 38.5% of all non-white women are Medicaid recipients, compared to 7% of all white women. The Hyde Amendment, therefore, has disparate impact on black and minority women’s ability to obtain medically necessary abortions. We submit that this is a violation of their right to equal protection and due process under the law.”

Over time, the argument that black women would disproportionately suffer if abortion became illegal, or funding for abortions for poor women was ended, disappeared. While the relationship between race and poverty is hardly a secret -- decoding the image of the “welfare queen” depends on public belief that welfare serves an undeserving minority population -- cartoons addressing the issue of funding for Medicaid abortion portrayed it as a white women’s issue. (These cartoons come from NARAL’s clipping service files for 1978 and 1979. All these cartoons are pro-choice, not by my choice. Rather, all the cartoons the service clipped were pro-choice cartoons -- which supports the pro-life argument that the media has been biased towards the other side.)

This cartoon is about medical providers and the costs of abortion:

SLIDE: If you have to ask: In this slide a white receptionist tells a white patient that if she has to ask the price of an abortion she obviously can’t afford it.

The Hyde Amendment (which ended federal funding for abortion) also prompted a series of cartoons about politicians:

SLIDE: Sistine Chapel ceiling with white god from Congress and poor white woman

SLIDE: PA Legislature has condemned you...shows a white woman at a bench occupied by a white judge, executioner, bishop, and Jesse Helms.

SLIDE: RAPE fraud (black woman, white senator): Here is a cartoon about a white politician who becomes hysterical when a black woman requests funding for an abortion of a pregnancy that resulted from her rape. He accuses her of raping him because she seeks funds. What is most astonishing about this cartoon is the combination of a gross racial caricature of the woman with the assertion that the senator hates her because she is a woman. The issue of race is obvious, and unstated, in this cartoon.<sup>8</sup>

NARAL lost a critical fight about abortion funding when, in 1988, the pro-life movement won a Michigan state referendum ending state funding of Medicaid abortions. The pro-life lobby played on two themes: people's resentment of taxes, and of abortion providers getting rich on Medicaid money, and second, they claimed that abortion had become an "irresponsible means of birth control," because "98% of abortions are obtained for social, emotional or financial reasons, while only 2% are due to serious health problems, rape, incest, fetal handicap or danger to the

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<sup>8</sup>While funding for abortion was portrayed as a white women's issue, at least some people knew that the lives of black women were at stake. The question is, what sort of arguments would legislators, and the public, be sympathetic to? An Illinois lobbyist for Planned Parenthood wrote to NARAL in 1978 urging them to hire a lobbyist and to pursue certain strategies. Her letter makes clear the role of race in abortion lobbying.

I've been around long enough to know what works here and what doesn't. What these men respond to are arguments about the deaths of poor women (not Black women) from self-induced abortion when they already have five kids to care for, or the danger to the health of a woman who has a serious health problem like cancer or diabetes who would be unable to have her abortion funded by public aid, or how much it's going to cost the taxpayers in their districts to support heaps more Chicago Black babies on welfare if abortion is outlawed. (I don't use the latter argument myself, because of obvious reasons. That's not to say that for some legislators, however, that isn't the most persuasive reason why they should vote against [cutting off Medicaid funding of abortions] HB 333). Letter To Lorraine Lathrop, Charleston, IL from Peggy Fenley, Planned Parenthood, Illinois Affiliates Council, Public Information Office, October 20, 1977.

mother's life.”

The pro-choice movement responded by arguing that it was cheaper to fund abortions than to pay for the costs of bearing and rearing a child on welfare, ignoring the dubious racial politics that claim invoked. In this pamphlet (SLIDE) called a little white lie, they called on voters to defend the right to abortion by defending medicaid funding.

“pushers of proposal A want us to believe it's only an issue about stopping Medicaid funding for abortions.

Truth: Proposal A is about everything *but* funding.

It's about taking away the *rights* of poor women today..and *all women* tomorrow.

It's about *hurting women* who most need our help.”...

“It's about forcing *disadvantaged women* to return to unsafe, illegal back-alley abortions.

It's about one more attempt to *keep the poor dependent and struggling*.

The truth is Proposal A isn't about funding...It's about taking away our legal right to choose.”

While the campaign to defeat Proposal A certainly tried to invoke sympathy for poor women, the issue of race was never explicitly invoked in the campaign, even though 40% of the nation's AFDC recipients were African-American (Guilens 1999: 106). This racial silence is in part explained by the position black politicians have taken on the issue of abortion. During the Michigan referendum on Medicaid the Democratic party, whose platform included a statement in favor of funding for women on public assistance, did little to help the pro-choice movement. Detroit's African-American Mayor, Coleman Young, reportedly refused to mobilize his various coalitions, arguing that abortion was a “white women's issue” (citation). The reluctance of black politicians to support the pro-choice movement started much earlier, most notably in 1977, when Jesse Jackson announced his support for the Hyde Amendment (a position he abandoned when he

ran for President). Bebe Moore Campbell, writing about the abortion issue in *Essence Magazine* in 1981, argued that the “strong religious backgrounds” of black people explained the community’s silence on the issue of abortion, even while many African-American women choose to abort their pregnancies (Campbell 1981). The importance of black churches in Coleman’s political coalition probably explains why he refused to help the pro-choice movement save Medicaid funding in Michigan, even though Detroit’s welfare population had to include a very large number of Black women. What is most startling in the case of Michigan Medicaid funding is that while stereotypes of persons on welfare (reflected in the claim that “irresponsible” women sought state funding for their abortions) certainly played a role in the pro-life referendum victory, and stereotypes of welfare recipients are, in part, racial (see Gilens 1999), the black women who would be hurt by the cutoff of welfare funds were erased in the debate. Abortion had become an issue about white women and babies.

## **Conclusion**

Historians have overlooked the racial content of 19<sup>th</sup> century discourses about abortion, and sociologists, with the exception of those who have studied racial differences in abortion attitudes (see Dugger 1991; Hall and Ferree 1986; Lynxwiler and Gay 1994, 1996; Wilson 1990, 1992) have done the same with the racial aspects of contemporary abortion politics and practice. The blindness about the racial aspects of abortion in the nineteenth century was caused by scholars imposing contemporary racial categories on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which literally did not allow them to see racial politics as they then existed. But the failure of a theoretical paradigm about race to comprehend the 19<sup>th</sup> century racial politics of abortion does not explain why scholars have also missed racial dynamics in the 20<sup>th</sup>. I think scholars have missed race in contemporary abortion politics for the same reason I missed the significance of Bowsby’s blonde hair – because

whiteness is an unmarked, and presumed normative, category. In comparing the rhetoric and images of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with those of the 20<sup>th</sup> we can perhaps see what has been hidden.