

BLACK PERSPECTIVES

Introduction: Black Women and Reproductive Rights

By Hettie Williams August 1, 2022 4

This post is part of our forum on "[Black Women and Reproductive Rights](#)."



Demonstrators rally in Washington, D.C. during the 2021 Women's March (Ben Von Klemperer / Shutterstock.com)

"The Constitution does not confer a right to abortion; Roe and Casey are overruled; and the authority to regulate abortion is returned to the people and their elected representatives." These words appear in the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v.*

Jackson Women's Health Organization on June 24, 2022. *Roe v. Wade*—the 1973 decision by the Court that allowed women to legally seek abortions—and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*—a 1992 Supreme Court decision that upheld *Roe*—are now overturned. This mandate by the highest court in the land has everything to do with race—and how race intersects with class and gender. Black women and poor women of all races will suffer the greatest as a result of this judicial act presided over by mostly white men including Justices Samuel Alito, Brett Kavanaugh, and Neil Gorsuch. Many women will die, and a disproportionate number of Black and poor women will be harmed.

White Congressmen, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, and politicians will still pay for their mistresses, girlfriends, and wives to get abortions. Soccer moms and bourgeois white women will still have the resources to travel to other states to secure abortions. Samuel Alito, who wrote the majority opinion for the Court, went so far as to quote seventeenth-century jurist Sir Matthew Hale who prosecuted women as witches and held that men could not be punished for raping their wives. With this draconian, woman-hating opinion, Alito has shown us who he is, and his legal argument reveals how the Supreme Court fails to protect the most vulnerable groups in our society. The monstrosity of whiteness is to blame for this decision.

Donald J. Trump, a man who described those among the crowd of white supremacists at Charlottesville as "very fine people," helped to make this moment possible by playing on the fears and grievances of the white populace and by drawing from the Federalist Society-approved list of anti-abortion conservative jurists to appoint two white men (one of whom was very publicly accused of sexual assault) to the Supreme Court. His words and actions as president revealed a great disdain for people of color. As writer Ta-Nehisi Coates argued in "The First White President," white people *across every demographic* including gender and class voted to make this man president. But American racism did not originate with Trump, and we must understand the 2016 election as part of a broader backlash against 1960s liberalism and the 2008 election of President Barack H. Obama. This reactionary shift also arises from the fact that the United States is becoming more noticeably ethnically diverse. Whiteness is a harmful idea with devastating social consequences. It is a most monstrous idea that, for lack of a better term, far too often *trumps* gender when it comes to solidarity between women. The vast majority of white women in the United States voted for Trump in 2016 and again in 2020. White people voted for Trump because they fear losing their grip on power. As Black feminist scholar Brittney Cooper has argued, "White women want the power that white men have."

White women will, and have historically, voted against their own gender interests to maintain a patriarchal white supremacist system for the crumbs of power that they

might receive by collaborating with white men. Race affords white women access to power that Black women and other women of color do not have.

It is impossible to understand the overturning of *Roe* without grappling with the dynamics of race, gender, and class. The ruling will have devastating consequences, and it will lead to the deaths of many Black and Brown women, girls, and trans men. Black women are [disproportionately represented](#) among the poor and those without adequate access to healthcare. American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Black women make up the highest number of women in poverty as compared to their white counterparts. The same group of women who do not have equal access to quality healthcare—Black women—make up a large number of [sexual assault victims](#) among women. The likelihood of a man who does not want to be a father murdering a Black or poor woman has just increased exponentially with the overruling of *Roe* and *Casey*. The Supreme Court's decision has ensured that Black women have moved closer in proximity to death in a nation that already has an astronomically high Black maternal mortality rate. According to the CDC, Black women are three times more likely to die from [a pregnancy related cause](#)—exacerbated by their inadequate access to healthcare services.

This week's forum will grapple with these realities—offering both historical and contemporary perspectives on Black women's reproductive rights. As the leading voice on African American intellectual history, *Black Perspectives* brings together a group of talented scholars to offer their insights on these recent developments. Over the next several days, *Black Perspectives* will feature essays by historians Ashley D. Farmer, Jennifer L. Morgan, Tiana U. Wilson, and Elise A. Mitchell. The forum concludes next Monday with an interview of pioneering Black feminist Barbara Smith conducted by her biographer Joseph R. Fitzgerald. Together, the contributions cover a range of issues relating to Black women and reproductive rights. They look to the past to help us understand how we arrived at this moment. And they look toward the future—helping us chart a way forward.

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