



Creating a Black Agenda in Bioethics

by Faith E. Fletcher

While studying abroad in South Africa this past summer, I received an email from Dr. Vanessa Gamble, director of the Tuskegee University National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care inviting me to attend a small, interactive conference at Tuskegee University from June 17th – 19th, 2005. The conference was titled “Creating a Black Agenda in Bioethics” and its objectives were strengthening the network of Black bioethicists and beginning to craft a concrete action plan advancing bioethical issues in the Black community. Questions to be addressed included: What are the current topics and areas that Black bioethicists are tackling? What are we missing? How do Black bioethicists become more visible in the multiple discussions and activities around bioethics that are relative to the Black community? How do we nurture and support Black bioethicists and their work? Where do we go from here?

As a graduate student studying bioethics I was honored to be invited to an invitation-only bioethics conference. Returning to Tuskegee University, my alma mater, as a conference participant was an overwhelming experience. When I arrived, I noticed that there were only forty participants and only three were students. This conference was much smaller than other conferences that I have attended.

The first night began with a mixer to help everyone get to know each other better. Conference participants introduced themselves by saying something that was unique about themselves and by explaining their interest in bioethics. As I listened to everyone’s stories, I realized that bioethics was more than an academic endeavor for them; it was their passion. Everyone had their own story that brought them to the field of bioethics and ultimately brought us together at that special moment in time to share those stories. Although my story wasn’t as defined as others, it still had significance. One participant commented, “There’s a sort of kinship you develop as a reader with the author and there’s just an aura you get from being in the midst of those people. To put faces with the words is overwhelming.” As she made that statement I looked over to the tables of Gamble, Dorothy Roberts, Dr. Annette Dula, and Dr. Charmaine Royal (whose work I had read and cited on numerous occasions) and I was finally able to put their words with their faces. Moreover, being among my former professors and mentors—people who were instrumental in introducing me to the field of bioethics—was a privilege.

As a sophomore undergraduate student at Tuskegee University I enrolled in a Philosophy and the Law course. At the end of the semester, I was required to select a philosopher who had written a piece that combined philosophy and law and to critically analyze the piece in 10-15 pages. I knew if I had to write 10-15 pages, I wanted to write about something that had meaning to me. For that reason I avoided the writings of the traditional philosophers we had studied all semester. I stumbled upon a piece about the incarceration of Black crack-addicted mothers by Roberts. I didn’t know if she was a philosopher or a lawyer or both but I knew I wanted to write my paper on the topic.

Last Spring in a sociology graduate course, I was assigned *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction & the Meaning of Liberty*. For some reason, as the reader, I felt a closeness with

the author, but I couldn't figure out why. In my graduate Bioethics and Law Course I was given a similar end of the semester assignment and I chose to write about the involuntary sterilization among minority women. A couple of days after turning in that assignment, I was looking through some of my old files and I found paper on the incarceration of Black crack-addicted mothers. I couldn't figure out where the paper came from but almost every sentence began with "Roberts said," "Roberts maintained" or "Roberts believed." I then realized that I had written about a similar bioethics and law issue three and a half years ago reported by Roberts. As an undergrad, I am sure I rushed through the paper without giving much thought to who was writing on the subject even though it was of interest to me.

Having the opportunity to meet Roberts, a Kirkland & Ellis Professor of Law at Northwestern University School of Law and returning to my school as not only as a Tuskegee alumnus, but as a participant in a bioethics conference made me cognizant of my academic and personal growth. I even happened to have my book *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction & the Meaning of Liberty* with me that Roberts signed quickly to avoid feeling embarrassed in front of her colleagues. She wrote, "Faith, it was great to meet you in Tuskegee. Best wishes for a successful and meaningful career in bioethics! Dorothy Roberts."

Many of the questions that we set out to answer in the conference engendered other questions. For example, an initial question was "What are the current topics that Black bioethicists are tackling? What are we missing?" Some questions that arose from discussion of this initial question were: "How do you define a Black bioethicist? Does a Black bioethicist have to focus on Black issues or do they just have to be Black? Is there a specific methodology that Black bioethicists have to use? If I am a theologian, attorney, dentist or physician by trade would I be considered a bioethicist?" There is no simple answer to these questions; scholars grapple with them on a daily basis. I think Dr. Judith Andre says it best in *Bioethics as a Practice*: "The practice called bioethics is more than an intellectual discipline. It helps attract and focus public attention; it helps society think more deeply about matters of health. For these reasons we need to ask whether we are making the world better or dazzling it further into blindness. In contrast with the fora ordinarily available to scholars and clinicians, bioethics supplies a bully pulpit, one that we should use thoughtfully"(77). Perhaps categorizing, defining, or identifying bioethicists or bioethics should not be the major concern and exchanging bioethical jargon should not be the focus. Instead, those in the field should use their talents and gifts collectively to promote a more just society as well as encouraging others to do the same.

On day two of the conference, Dr. Rueben Warren, Associate Director of Institute for Faith-Health Leadership Interdenominational Theological Center and Associate Director of Environmental Justice at Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reflected on his experience orchestrating, along with Gamble and others, the nationally known apology from the United States government for the US Public Health Syphilis Study. He explained that although some felt the apology should ideally come from the CDC, problematically, the director of the CDC at the time was Black. (Many audience members chuckled—imagine the reaction that would have taken place if a Black man had apologized for the abuses that occurred in the study.) Instead, they pushed for, and received, an apology from the president of the United States.

In her closing remarks on the final day, Roberts listed some of the many issues that emerged from the conference: activism, service, and community involvement. In addressing the question of a distinctive Black bioethics she contended that "traditional bioethics has failed to highlight issues of particular concern to Black community. It is more than applying traditional bioethics to racial issues." She elaborated: "Race is relevant to *all* bioethics issues." According to Roberts, the methodology one should use to transform bioethics is through narrative/storytelling and community involvement through a multidisciplinary approach. Roberts challenged everyone not

only to include race in the bioethics agenda, but also to transform bioethics to aid in the struggle against racism. She said the agenda is among us, in our professions, and in our communities. Finally she concluded by saying those who practice bioethics should be about giving life and saving lives.