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The Albany Birth Justice Storytelling Project

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Abstract:

The ABJS Project is participatory action research that combines a photovoice and transformative storytelling approach to collect qualitative data on the experience of Black birthing people from Albany who are impacted by racial inequities in birth outcomes. The methodology promotes self-reflective, trauma informed education and care among co-researchers, including undergraduate students and storytellers from Albany County.

Project Description

The ABJS Project is publicly engaged scholarship addressing racial disparities in birth outcomes that furthers the university's core mission of producing impactful research.

Although maternal care is one of the most profitable areas of the health industry, it fails to provide accessible, culturally aware, and equitable outcomes for Black birthers. The national crisis in Black maternal health manifests locally. Albany county has 23.2 deaths of Black babies per 1,000 births as compared to 8.5 deaths for all babies. 16.2 percent of Black babies in the county are born preterm, and 14.6 percent have low birth weight. The comparative figures for all babies are respectively 11.6 and 8.7 percent (NY State Health Equity Report 2016). How do Black women in Albany County experience pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period? What are the needs and assets of local communities impacted by racial disparities in birth outcomes? In what ways can we organize to build supportive, cohesive communities around birthing peoples? Guided by these research questions, this project employed transformative storytelling and photovoice – methods that center the voices of those most impacted in producing knowledge about and designing ways to address the problem.

The methodology was developed in consultation with community partners through the creative initiative of a former student, Emily Cooper. Cooper piloted the project in the spring of 2018 through her internship (course AWSS 492) with BirthNet, a local education and advocacy organization on childbirth and maternity care.¹ Planning began in 2018/2019 through the leadership of project coordinators: Rajani Bhatia (faculty sponsor), Emily Cooper (alumna), Mahalia Cummings (undergraduate), and Nakia Tillman (community partner). Through a competitive process including submission of resume and interviews, a team of mainly undergraduate students (“the listeners”) was recruited in fall 2019. Preparation began in summer 2019 with assigned readings and the production of an autobiographical photovoice narrative on a health-related theme². In fall of 2019, students enrolled in an independent study (WGSS 397) with the faculty sponsor, and met regularly to engage readings, undergo methods related training such as in trauma informed listening and basic video editing, to conduct community outreach to recruit “storytellers,” and to work in the library to produce photovoice narratives about the pregnancy, birth, and early parenting experiences from ten storytellers. On March 7, 2020, all

¹ [Nakia Tillman's Story](#) served as the pilot for this project and is available to view with permission of the storyteller.

² [Jessica Ramsawak's Story](#) is available to view with her permission.

co-researchers met to view draft narratives and conduct preliminary analysis.³ The project was to culminate with a public event on April 25th (cancelled due to the pandemic) showcasing the data produced during National Black Maternal Health Week. The project received co-sponsorship from IFW, WGSS, CEMHD, and BirthNet with in-kind support from CURCE, Youth FX and The Children's Café in Albany's South End.

The library, particularly resources and staff of the IMC, provided crucial support to this project. Ms. Regina Testa prepared a handout in spring 2018 to guide students in the making and submission of their photovoice narratives with information on audio recording and video editing software, saving and submitting files, importing images, using voiceover, and transitions. In fall of 2019, Ms. Testa met with students in two sessions (one each for Mac or PC users) to provide information on how to utilize the equipment in the IMC and provided training on basic audio recording and video editing skills. When we ran into challenges on a case basis, students consulted with IMC staff to secure a quiet place to record, figure out how to eliminate background sound, or add subtitles to their narratives. How students evaluated and incorporated the resources assigned in this project will be described below in individual or clustered annotations.

³ [Kassandra Pointer's Story](#) is one of ten stories created for this project. It is available to view with the storyteller's permission. This narrative was created by Emily Tineo.