

CHOICE/LESS 207: Cherisse Scott

Jenn Stanley: For Rewire Radio, I'm Jenn Stanley, and this is CHOICE/LESS. Last week we heard from Tasha, who talked about her surprise when anti-choice protesters used her race to try to shame her out of having an abortion, saying that she was being complicit in the black genocide. This isn't new rhetoric. Anti-choice activists often evoke civil rights leaders and appropriate their language in an attempt to control black women's bodies. Today's storyteller, Cherisse Scott, knows this all too well, and she's devoted her life to helping women and gender-nonconforming people of color to take back control of their bodies and lives through her reproductive justice advocacy. She came to this work through her own experience and has been gaining major national attention both within and outside of the reproductive justice community. Last year she was a guest on Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, and a few months later, she made a Facebook Live video in response to Nick Cannon's comments that Planned Parenthood was a eugenics program meant as population control for black Americans.

Cherisse Scott: What's up, Facebook? I really can't keep responding to this foolishness that I'm hearing back and forth about Planned Parenthood being the reason that the black community is losing babies or whatever, and they're supposedly killing our babies. You know what? And I'm going to say this as a black mother, I'm going to say this as a black woman who has had an abortion. As a matter of fact, I've had three. Okay? I'm going to say this as somebody who not only does this work for a living, but lives this life as a single black mamma raising a single black-ass child in America today. Y'all need to get out of this whole Planned Parenthood foolishness, okay? You all can keep ...

Jenn Stanley: Cherisse says these kind of narratives shame women of color and poor women while simultaneously erasing them, and she should know. When she was 29 and living in Chicago, anti-choice activists masquerading as healthcare providers told her a lie that would change her life forever. Here's her story.

Cherisse Scott: 14 years ago, back in 2002, I was trying to be an artist. My background was music and communications. (singing) I was on tour. I was the lead of my tour, realized I was pregnant while I was in my first big gig out of New York, and I was just trying to do what I needed to do to be able to get back into that career that I really thought was about to blossom into this thing that I had always hoped for that I worked so hard for. But I wanted to be a mother too, and I just wasn't ready, and I definitely wasn't ready in a situation where the other parent was not willing to be there emotionally, physically, mentally, or financially.

Jenn Stanley: So she searched in the Yellow Pages for an abortion clinic and made an appointment. She had a day job at the time to supplement the money she was making with her music, and she had to take the day off work for her appointment.

Cherisse Scott: They were located in a very unassuming office building, downtown Chicago. The office looked kind of legal-ish. There was a white woman, older woman. She got up from her desk and greeted me, shook my hand, thanked me for coming in today, confirmed that I was the person, it was my appointment. They had me sit down for a second, fill out some paperwork, and then I was taken into a room, and in that room, which was a basic little kind of office room with some seats and television, maybe a VCR or something at the time, and maybe a DVD player.

I don't really remember, but there was then, the woman, that same woman came in and talked to me and asked me, had I really thought my choice through, and I'm like, "What?" Like yeah, well, maybe this is the counseling section, I didn't really know what to expect. At that moment, it still was not like clinic-looking. It didn't look like it was a doctor's office. It just looks more like a, just an office. And so I'd go in there, I'm like, "Okay," so we're having a conversation, and she asked me if I considered like adoption.

And I was like, "Yeah, I mean, I'm a black woman. We don't really do that. We raise our babies, if we can. If we can't, more than likely we're going to terminate this pregnancy because of, it's just ... Yeah. Somebody else raising our children a lot of times, especially voluntarily, isn't necessarily the thing that's always the road traveled so much for black women." So I think that once she realized, after a while of having that conversation back and forth, she realized that she really wasn't able to, I guess, move me wherever she was trying to move me, which was definitely away from abortion, and to consider adoption. I think that she kind of gave up, had me sit there for a moment, had me look at a video, and this video showed these different steps of an abortion process.

It showed this kind of animation of the triceps going into the woman's uterus and pulling the baby's head out, and definitely clamping the head, and it was just like a full-grown baby in the womb and everything. It was just very, very graphic, and then having the doctor put the dilators and those types of things on the, and they're bloody, and sit them on the tray and all of those ... So it was graphic and just weird, and I just, and with the understanding that they really wanted me to understand what I was about to do, so they wanted to show me this video, and so that video went on, I don't know, maybe 30 minutes of different types of procedures at different stages of sizes for the baby and these types of things, and then a black woman would sit in to talk to me. And she tried to ... By that time, I was asked by the white woman if I was on food stamps. I was asked by the white woman if, was I on WIC, did I have other kids, those types of things. I was like, "No."

I mean, I had a, I was working for quite a fluent national legal firm, at that time, and, I mean, I had a job. Again, I was just coming off of tour, and I was the star. No, I was fine. I wasn't in a financial lurch or anything like that. I came for an abortion, so once we ruled out that I wasn't, I guess, this kind of understood welfare queen type, they sent the educated black girl in to talk to me, and she wanted to have a conversation about me having the baby, understanding that I'm trying to pursue my dreams. They'd get all into your business so that they can kind of use that to kind of dissuade you.

"Yeah, you want to live your dreams," like the college dude. "Oh, yeah, I know you want to go back to school, or you want to finish college, but ... " There's really not a "but." I'm here for an abortion, and by the ... So she goes into this whole, "I thought the same thing. My husband and I, we weren't ready to have a baby. We were just recently married, and we were going to have an abortion, and we thought against the abortion. We thought that wasn't the best idea, and now that the baby is here, we love our child so much, and oh, this and this and ... " And that was great, but I was like, "Ma'am, look. I'm pregnant by somebody who says he don't want me, and he's not going to help me with this baby. Am I at an abortion clinic or not?" Because I didn't really have time for the back and forth.

I was just irritated by this time. "I mean, I've been sitting here, almost, for two hours, and I've not seen a doctor, nobody's come and checked my pulse, taken my blood pressure." I didn't even know what to expect. I had never had an abortion. I didn't know what to expect at the time. "No, you can't ... " Finally, they just had to say, "No." I was like, "So why am I here?"

Jenn Stanley: Cherisse was at a crisis pregnancy center. Crisis pregnancy centers are non-profit organizations that often masquerade as abortion clinics, but their purpose is to dissuade women against abortion. She was furious, but also concerned. The people at the crisis pregnancy center told her that an abortion could hurt her chances of getting pregnant in the future, and she knew that someday she wanted to have children. She just wasn't ready yet.

Cherisse Scott: I was scared, and I had to come back to this boy's daddy and say, "I want to have a baby. They said that if I do this, I'm never going to be able to have a baby." Maybe that's why he's not here. Maybe because we had a decision. We made a decision. I don't know that I ever shared that part before. We made a decision. He gave me the money to get it done. I didn't go through with it, because I wanted to have a baby later. They lied, though. One, not even a year after my son was born, I lost my job, so I had to deal with unemployment. I had to deal with trying to figure out getting unemployment wages. I had to deal with the fact that I then lost my healthcare. It was different. It was hard, and again, those people were nowhere. There wasn't like any follow-up call, "How are you? How was the birth?" None of that. None of that.

Just sent me away with the rattle and a onesie, but there wasn't any follow-up to make sure that after I brought this baby to term, that that baby was okay, or that I was okay.

Jenn Stanley: And she wasn't okay. Cherisse said she suffered from postpartum depression, and losing her job while navigating single parenthood set her up for years of financial struggle. She got pregnant three times after her son was born and had three abortions. The first was when her son was still a baby.

Cherisse Scott: Well, that time, I got a little bit more savvy to figure out exactly where I was going, and I just went with the household name. The household name that I knew did abortions, I didn't know that place, but by the time I kind of had the experience, I got a little bit more information, right? So the household name that I was familiar with was Planned Parenthood, so I found a Planned Parenthood in my community. I was very fortunate in that situation. The person who I became pregnant with was very supportive and very loving and very caring and was really supportive of whatever choice I had. He was there with me, stayed with me, took care of me and everything, so that experience wasn't bad, but at least it was more informed than the decision before. I was very lucky to go somewhere where ... I mean, the thing that was really great was a question that I will always remember and that I even mentioned in my rant.

I was asked, had anybody forced me to be here today to get an abortion? And I was like, "No. Nobody's forcing me," and she was like, "Okay, just want to make sure, because we don't want to force you, if this isn't what you want to do." I just thought that was really great. That's also something that you don't hear for folks who want to use this kind of narrative that Planned Parenthood has this agenda to eradicate the world of black people, like Planned Parenthood doesn't have the gun in the street on us, Planned Parenthood didn't get me pregnant. That second abortion, like, was a contraception sabotage issue, and that third abortion was really a choice. I was actually about to get married, we were engaged, and I just chose not to, because I wasn't 100% sure that I was in a relationship with somebody for real that I was going to be able to live with forever. Just, it's really traumatizing when you have to raise a baby alone. People don't ...

And I'm not saying that he's a bad person, but I will say that the trauma is something that cannot be ignored. Just like any other kind of trauma, and maybe people don't want to believe ... Folks don't take postpartum depression seriously. So, I mean, I think that those three abortions, after I had, I went ahead and brought that baby to term, yeah, maybe those ... Maybe I would have brought another baby to term had I not been ... If I would have been able to get the first abortion, let me say it like that. I think that I may have ... I'm sure I would have gone ahead and had another child at another time. I'm sure that I would have. I'm sure that I would have.

Jenn Stanley: Cherisse felt she didn't have any control over her life, and more specifically her body. She never learned comprehensive sexual education or how to track her cycles. Then she learned about reproductive justice, a term created and popularized by women of color, activists, and organizers in the reproductive rights movement. The term is more all-encompassing than reproductive rights and calls for the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls based on the full achievement and protection of women's human rights.

Cherisse Scott: It wasn't until after I had my son, after three abortions, right, that finally I happened upon a reproductive justice founding mother who was a mutual friend of another ... A friend of, we had a mutual friend at a party, I'm overhearing what she does for a living, and I'm just like, "Oh, what?" And so I just asked her. She talked to me, she said that she would totally teach me about my body. She did. She asked me if I wanted to volunteer. Volunteering turned into her asking if I wanted to be on her board. That later turned into an opportunity for a paid position as a health educator and campaigns coordinator for her organization, and I jumped at the opportunity. Why? Because, well, first of all, I thought what she did was amazing. Second of all, it seemed so where I needed to be. I don't think I really realized how much I needed to be a part of this movement, and I say sometimes that I didn't choose reproductive justice, but I totally feel chosen by reproductive justice.

Jenn Stanley: Cherisse worked at reproductive justice organizations in Chicago before moving to Memphis and founding her own organization, SisterReach.

Cherisse Scott: SisterReach is a reproductive justice organization and the only one, actually, here in the state of Tennessee, and we do our work from a three-pronged strategy of education, policy, and advocacy, all of that centered in a framework called reproductive justice, which was crafted by black women in '94 who didn't see our lived experiences, our cultural experiences, our disparities really represented in healthcare reform, even during the Clinton administration, and wanted to make sure that our lived experiences were not only amplified, but that we led our stories, and so for SisterReach, that's what we're doing here is trying to make sure that we center those who are most vulnerable in the City of Memphis, which is over 60% African American, but in a state where we're only at 17% of the state.

However, the issues really impact our lives, that happen in legislation, so we do our work through comprehensive reproductive and sexual health education policy and advocacy for women and girls of color, poor women, rural women, teens, and their families.

Jenn Stanley: Back when she was still in Chicago, she started hearing about anti-choice billboards in Atlanta that called abortion a black genocide. After moving to Memphis and founding SisterReach, she realized they were popping up all across the country. In Chicago, they evoked newly elected President Barack Obama, saying that Planned Parenthood was killing the next black leader, and then they came to Memphis, and SisterReach fought back.

Cherisse Scott: You've got this beautiful black girl on a billboard, and she's quote - unquote "an endangered species," she's unwanted. She's not unwanted. What's unwanted is the way that systemic oppression plays out in the lives of black and brown people. What's unwanted is having to fight just to be able to make decisions about my own body. You're not here if I pick my nose, but you got to be here if I have an abortion? You're not here if I'm raped, when I'm being raped, but you got to be here if I want to consider an abortion? You're not here to make sure that I'm eating, right? But you can be sure to make sure that I don't have an abortion? I mean, so those things, it just doesn't line up, is not a good argument, and so by the time they made it in 2015 when they were here in Memphis and erected here, not only did we already have a strategy, we were able to deploy it quickly. We were able to mobilize people quickly, and not just any people, but advocates, preachers, fathers, right?

Because they were targeting black fathers, basically saying, "This is dad's little princess, and her heartbeat," or something like that, "She has a heartbeat after 18 days," or something like that. False. Not even like scientifically correct, so that's what has been ... Like I said, it's been a very disingenuous tactic of the religious right, to be honest, because really, we got to say who it is, is doing it. It's the religious right, that are also behind these types of billboards. We were able to get the ones here down, and we did our own campaign, and we were able to erect our own billboards with messaging that was comprehensive.

First of all, "Trust Black Women" was, that was very prominent on the billboard, but the other thing that was very prominent in the billboard are the things that a mother was supposed to need, or a baby is supposed to need, or a family is supposed to need, or a young person is supposed to need, so that that abortion is the last option. Unless it's just something that they wanted to do, right? So you want to make sure that ... You care? If you care, then make sure my mommy has access to healthcare and a good-paying job, keep my family together, make sure my daddy has what he needs, make sure I have what I need. We can expand Medicaid. Make sure we got comp sex ed, make sure we got access to condoms. That's what our billboards said, right?

And they kind of blew up all over, kind of within our movement, it was one of the, I guess, one of the first times that black women, or that we'd taken back the language in a kind of public way that way, and it was really impactful, and since then, there have been other types of billboard campaigns. And I mean, the history of billboard campaigns don't begin with SisterReach, because billboard campaigns have always been, really, a very important piece of how folks were being able to mobilize large groups of people, and even us. I look forward to being able to do new billboards about other issues or even more synthesized messages about the same issue, to be honest, to make sure that, at the end of the day, it's not even just about trusting black women. Just trust women, period. Trust any woman.

Trust that ... If you make sure that she has everything that she needs, or you don't hinder her of getting the things that she can ... To get the access that she wants, then you don't have to help women make these type of health decisions. We're still being handled like we aren't fully human.

Jenn Stanley: The anti-choice backlash hit hard, targeting Cherisse in a Facebook ad campaign that used her photo and full name, and then they started attacking her on Twitter.

Cherisse Scott: And initially, I was terrified. I was. I needed to make sure I had security cameras. I really wasn't sure what to expect, like some of the things that happened kind of after that was the attacks on Planned Parenthood and folks walking into Planned Parenthoods with guns, and these are very real things that are happening, so I'm always concerned about those of us who are on the frontline of this movement, and because we worked so hard to make sure that we center women and girls of color. We've also got to understand that in centering them, also, there is a requirement of safety, right? And so I was afraid, and so I fell off the scene for a minute. We talked about other things. This was, other staffers, I pushed them forward to talk about other issues.

Jenn Stanley: She was her afraid for her own safety and for her sons, but she also received an outpouring of support that inspired her to keep going. Cecile Richards, President and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, called her to thank her for her work and make sure she was okay.

Cherisse Scott: So Cecile reached out to me. I hadn't given her my cell phone number, which means, so she looked for it. She went and got it from someone, so that was A, okay? We weren't on a kind of friendship type of basis at that moment. It was in that moment that I realized that she wasn't even like this figurehead of Planned Parenthood, but she's a mamma like I'm a mamma. She's an advocate out here fighting for women like I am, and she called and was just like, "Hey, Cherisse, this is Cecile from Planned Parenthood, and I'm just really calling to check up on you. Are you okay? Is there anything that you need?" And she thanked me for being brave enough, being brave enough to share, being brave enough to push back, being brave enough to fight in Tennessee. I thought that was really, really dope, and I really appreciate her, and I appreciate what they do.

Jenn Stanley: SisterReach is growing fast, and Cherisse finally feels like she's starting to gain some financial security for her and her son. SisterReach fills a big gap in the state of Tennessee, where by law all sexual education in public schools must be abstinence-based, so SisterReach works with churches in the community to bring comprehensive sex ed to young people, which in Memphis is a matter of life and death. The city has one of the highest HIV rates in the country, and 83% of all people infected in Shelby County, where Memphis is located, are black. It's possible that thousands of the people infected with HIV in the city don't even know they have it.

Cherisse Scott: Comp sex ed, for us, is far more, is far deeper than just the comp sex ed piece. It is mobilizing whole communities. It is finally trying to put an end to what we call generational, intergenerational sexual health ignorance. That's what it is. That's what it is. If comp sex ed is not something that is offered, to me, then you're basically saying you don't care, and you're fine with people dying.

Jenn Stanley: Her son is 14 now and very involved in the work his mother does.

Cherisse Scott: So yeah, my son knows exactly what I do. He absolutely knows that I was going to have an abortion. He also, and I've been kind of, a little bit at a time, kind of piecing together the truths around his dad, because that's a very painful piece for him in his life, because in the midst of all of this, there's still another person to consider the fact that he does not have access to his father, right? But he is definitely excited about the work that we do. Sometimes I'm sure I get on his nerves, but he's one of our youth ambassadors. Tomorrow, they'll have their second meeting. They get two meetings a month, so he's one of our SisterReach youth ambassadors and has been since 2012. He's a well-informed child. He's the kid, because I work at home, and a lot of our supplies are here, that goes in here and takes condoms to school and gives them to his friends who he knows are about to have sex.

That's who he is. He can tell them how to use them from beginning to end. He's educated about his body. He knows that he can come and talk to me, so that, he's one of my biggest supporters and directly benefits from this hard work. Jeremiah 29:11, my favorite Scripture, that says, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end." So my expected end is victorious. My expected end is a legacy that pushed against the grain here in the state of Tennessee, it is my child, and that despite all of the things, we made it, and we're still making it, and we're fighting every day together to be a family and to try to make space for other families, one woman and girl at a time.

Jenn Stanley: This story was produced by me, Jenn Stanley, for Rewire Radio, with editorial oversight by Marc Faletti, our Director of Multimedia. Jodi Jacobson is our editor-in-chief. Brady Swenson is our Director of Technology. Music for this episode was by Doug Helsel, and our storyteller is Cherisse Scott, from her 2003 album Moans. Thank you to all the staff at Rewire, especially Rachel Perrone, Lauren Gutierrez, and Stacey Burns, our communications and social media team, for getting the word out about CHOICE/LESS. For more information on SisterReach, visit our website, rewire.news/choiceless. Thanks for listening.