



Birthing in the Fire Traces the History Behind Black Maternal Health Disparities

Created by reproductive health educator, writer, and illustrator Cheyenne Varner, the free 17-chapter digital exhibition explores the history behind today's Black maternal health disparities — and asks what we can influence from where we are.

RICHMOND, VA — August 18, 2026 — The statistics surrounding Black maternal health have become increasingly familiar. Black women continue to die from pregnancy-related causes at substantially higher rates than white women, while racial disparities extend across pregnancy, birth, postpartum, and experiences of maternity care.

A new digital exhibition is guiding readers through what came before our modern disparities. *Birthing in the Fire™*, created and written by reproductive health educator, writer, illustrator, and birth worker Cheyenne Varner, explores more than four centuries of American history to examine how law, economics, medicine, policy, and race has shape reproductive healthcare.

The exhibition is available at birthinginthefire.com, free to the public.

Looking Beyond the Statistic

Varner entered birth work in 2016 in large part because of her growing awareness of the Black maternal mortality crisis. Over the decade that followed, she watched public awareness grow while becoming increasingly frustrated by how often the history behind the disparities remained outside the conversation.

In 2019, she captured part of that frustration in the title of an essay for Blavity: “Stop Telling Me Black Women Die During Childbirth And Start Showing Me How We Can Thrive.”

“I’ve felt that we have a lot of awareness without enough direction,” Varner says. “The attention being paid to Black maternal mortality matters. But if we’re going to understand what we’re seeing now, we also need the context of how we got here — and we need somewhere useful to go with that information once we have it.”

More Than Four Centuries, Connected

Birthing in the Fire begins with Black midwifery before moving through slavery and reproductive control, racial law and wealth, criminalization and family surveillance, American gynecology, structural racism, weathering, obstetric racism, and the distinctions among interpersonal, institutional, and systemic harm.

Across five acts, the exhibition connects events often taught or discussed separately. A 1662 Virginia law determining that a child's legal status followed that of the mother sits within the same larger history as the removal of Black midwives, medical experimentation on enslaved women, racial wealth disparities, and contemporary questions about power and autonomy in reproductive healthcare.

"A law passed in Virginia in 1662 can feel impossibly far away from a labor and delivery unit in 2026," Varner says. "But when you start tracing what happened between those two points, you begin to see the threads."

The exhibition doesn't end with those threads. Its final chapters turn toward the people and organizations working in reproductive justice and birth equity today and ask readers to consider their own position within the systems they've just explored.

"I didn't want to spend seventeen chapters showing people what happened and leave them there," Varner says. "I wanted the history to lead us somewhere — toward the people already doing the work and toward a question each of us can answer: From where I am, with what I have, what can I actually influence?"

Built to Be Explored — and Shared

Birthing in the Fire combines original writing with primary documents, archival imagery, research, federal data, and roughly two dozen interactive and visual exhibits. Every figure is cited and every chapter includes its sources.

The full exhibition takes a little over two hours to read, while most chapters take approximately five to ten minutes independently. It was designed for birth workers, clinicians, public health professionals, educators, students, families, and others interested in maternal and reproductive health — including educators and organizations that may want to use individual chapters for teaching or discussion.

The exhibition is free and requires no account. In partnership with The Educated Birth Foundation, donations support its maintenance, continued research, updates, and growth. Companion workshops and educational materials are available separately for organizations and institutions.

Birthing in the Fire™ is available now at birthinginthefire.com.

ABOUT CHEYENNE VARNER

Cheyenne Varner is a reproductive health educator, writer, illustrator, health equity advocate, and founder of The Educated Birth®, who has spent the past decade making reproductive health education more representative, accessible, and grounded in the realities of people's lives. Since entering birth work in 2016, she has developed hundreds of educational resources and illustrations used by birth workers, educators, healthcare professionals, organizations, and families across the United States and internationally.

Varner's work sits at the intersection of reproductive health, visual education, history, representation, and health equity. She has collaborated with leading researchers and advocates in the field, including medical anthropologist Dána-Ain Davis, PhD, whose dimensions of obstetric racism Varner illustrated, and Karen A. Scott, MD, MPH, FACOG, whose SACKRED framework Varner illustrated, some of which was featured in the CDC Museum exhibition *Health Is a Human Right: Achieving Health Equity*.

Her writing and illustrations have appeared in *American Anthropologist* and other publications, and she has been interviewed or featured by *Refinery29*, *Next City*, *Babylist*, *Virginia Mercury*, *Evidence Based Birth*, and others. Through her writing, teaching, speaking, and visual work, Varner has focused on helping people understand not only disparities in reproductive health, but the histories, systems, and lived experiences that shape them. She is the creator, researcher, and author of *Birthing in the Fire*™.

ABOUT THE EDUCATED BIRTH®

The Educated Birth® is a reproductive health education company creating inclusive, visually engaging resources for pregnancy, birth, postpartum, and the professionals who support families through them. Founded by reproductive health educator and illustrator Cheyenne Varner, the organization develops teaching tools, professional resources, publications, workshops, and educational experiences designed to make complex reproductive health information more understandable, representative, and useful in real-world care.

Since its founding, The Educated Birth's educational materials and illustrations have reached families and reproductive health professionals across the United States and internationally, with resources used by doulas, childbirth educators, midwives, healthcare professionals, training organizations, community programs, and other institutions. Its work spans direct-to-family education and professional teaching tools to larger public-facing projects examining representation, health equity, and the systems shaping reproductive care.

The National Perinatal Task Force recognized The Educated Birth as an Official Perinatal Safe Spot in 2023 for its commitment to equitable, culturally inclusive perinatal care. Today, The Educated Birth continues to pair accessible education with visual storytelling to help people understand reproductive health not simply as a collection of clinical facts, but within the social, historical, and individual contexts in which pregnancy, birth, and postpartum actually happen.

Press + Interview Inquiries
hello@theeducatedbirth.com

Exhibition: birthinginthefire.com