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A Political Space that Wasn't There Before

An Interview with Loretta Ross

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Abstract

This interview with Loretta Ross, a foundational figure in the Black feminist movement and a co-creator of the Reproductive Justice framework, provides a comprehensive overview of her life's work and political perspectives. The discussion, which took place on March 5, 2025, begins with Ross's personal experiences with reproductive oppression and sexual violence, which she identifies as the catalysts for her lifelong activism. She offers a nuanced explanation of how the concept of Reproductive Justice, which a group of twelve Black women developed, expands upon the traditional "pro-choice" movement. Ross highlights that true Reproductive Justice encompasses not only the right *not* to have children but also the right to have children and to raise them in a safe and supportive environment. The conversation further explores Ross's insightful critique of how mainstream media often sensationalizes and overdramatizes reproductive issues. She also discusses the adaptability and universality of the Reproductive Justice framework, explaining how it can be applied to and expanded by diverse groups to address their specific vulnerabilities and concerns. The interview concludes with Ross's thoughts on strategies for engaging men in the movement, emphasizing the importance of highlighting how these issues affect them and their communities. She also shares her forward-looking perspective on the future of reproductive

justice in the face of a global rise in far-right, pro-natalist politics, offering a hopeful vision of resistance.

Keywords

Reproductive Justice, Black Feminism, African American History, Oral History, US History

Background

This interview was conducted via Skype on March 5, 2025 and is part of a research project started in 2022 by Bruno Walter Renato Toscano during the writing of his doctoral dissertation. The project aims to collect oral histories from activists involved in Black feminism, reproductive rights, and other women's political movements in the United States since the 1960s. Its central goal is to create an archive of oral sources that, using a transnational lens, contributes to the history of feminism in the United States.

Loretta Ross was born on August 6, 1953, in Temple, Texas. She majored in Chemistry at Howard, in Washington DC There, she was involved in Black Nationalist and Marxist-Leninist political groups. Her activism in reproductive rights began in the 1970s and was informed by her own experiences of racial and gender-based violence. In 1979, Ross became the Executive Director of the first rape crisis center in Washington, DC In 1985, she was the co-organizer of the delegation of over 1100 African American women that participated at the UN World Conference on Women held in Nairobi, Kenya. In the 1990s, she co-founded SisterSong and Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective. She was one of the twelve Black women who, in 1994, developed the term "Reproductive Justice." Ross has published several books, won the McArthur Prize, and since 2022 has continued to work at Smith College (Northampton, MA), where she teaches a course on "White Supremacy, Human Rights and Calling in the Calling Out Culture." She is also the author of the book *Calling In: How to Start Making Change with Those You'd Rather Cancel* (2025).

Bruno Walter Renato Toscano is a Post-doctoral Researcher at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy. His research explores the history of grassroots activism in the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s – focusing on radical African American organizations – as well as the transnational history of the population control movement and family planning during the Cold War. He is now working on his second monograph, based on his Ph.D. dissertation on the history of the Third World Women's Alliance, one of the most important women of color organizations of the last Century. He is the author of *Pantere nere, America bianca. Storia e politica del Black Panther Party* (Ombre Corte, 2023).

Toscano: I'm Walter Toscano. Here's Loretta Ross with me. Thank you for being part of this interview, which will be divided into two parts, the first of which is an introduction to your work. The second part is related to how, in your opinion, the media represent Reproductive Justice. I will start with the first question. Could you give us some insight into how you started working, first, on Reproductive Rights?

Ross: I became aware of what we call reproductive oppression through what had happened to me. I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. I became pregnant from incest at age 14. I couldn't control if and when I had sex. And because it was 1968, abortion was not an option when I became pregnant. My only choice at that time was when I delivered the baby, whether or not to keep him. I chose to keep my son, so I went from being an incest survivor to a scared parenting teenager. I think not having self-determination over whether to have sex and not having self-determination over whether to continue an unwanted pregnancy are the things that made me conscious of reproductive oppression issues. When I went to college at 16, I started hearing about the Black liberation struggle, Black feminism, and everything other people were going through. I came from a very conservative family, so I didn't hear about any of those things at home. Then, it sparked my interest in challenging what had happened to me and trying to work so that it didn't happen to others. That's where my consciousness around Reproductive Justice came from. Obviously, we

didn't coin the term until 1994, several decades later, when my son was born in 1969. But the concept crystallized for us, the twelve Black women who created it: while the pro-choice movement fights for the right not to have children, using birth control, abortion, or abstinence, that was an incomplete articulation of what we as Black women needed. In fact, another part of my reproductive history is that I was sterilized when I was 23 years old by a doctor who said, "Well, you've already got one baby, so this shouldn't be a problem for you." That doctor should not have had that kind of attitude towards my reproductive future. Reproductive Justice as a framework also articulates that we have the right to have the children we want to have and the conditions under which we want to have those children. And then, once the children are here, we critique both the pro-choice and the pro-life positions, where they only seem to care about the pregnancy and its outcome. Still, they don't seem to care for the children or, at least, speak up as strongly for what happens once the children are born, what conditions under which they are raised, what both the biological and non-biological conditions that affect their futures, like unfair tax policies or gun violence or things like that. And so it was that lived experiences that drew me into reproductive politics. However, thlived experience also helped me define what Reproductive Justice would become.

Toscano: Who were your political references? Who were the women with whom you worked from the beginning?

Ross: Well, the woman who introduced me most to feminism is Nkenge Touré.[1] She is the woman who brought me to the Washington DC Rape Crisis Center. And that is where, beyond my experiences at Howard University, I discovered a Black feminist activist community. Nkenge Touré is probably the one most responsible for me becoming a Black feminist outside of what had happened to me at Howard University. But then, at Howard, I majored in chemistry and physics, so I didn't have much time for activism. I remember protesting gentrification and protesting

[1] On Nkenge Touré see Shay Dawson. "Nkenge Touré." *National Women's History Museum.* <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/nkenge-toure>.

against Apartheid in South Africa but not a lot of work on feminist issues. So that happened after I left University. Even though I was at Howard, another thing happened: I got pregnant my first year at college, and I had an abortion when I was a first-year student. But even that did not spark feminist activism in me because I was fortunate enough to be in Washington, DC, which decriminalized abortion the summer before I needed one. So, I was able to go to a hospital and have a perfectly legal and safe abortion for a perfectly affordable price. Because it was not an issue, it did not become an issue for me. I don't know if that makes any sense.

Toscano: Absolutely. And so Nkenge Touré introduced you to reproductive rights, let's say.

Ross: Into feminism.

Toscano: Okay. And what about reproductive rights?

Ross: Well, my entree into feminism was through violence against women: I was more conscious of having experienced incest and rape. So that is why I foregrounded that over the pregnancy. I don't know if that makes any sense, but my cousin, who was 27 years old and married, should not have been getting me drunk so that he could have sex with me when I was 14. That, to me, was a much bigger issue than the fact that I became pregnant as a result. So, my entree into feminist thinking was through fighting violence against women, not fighting reproductive oppression. But, of course, the two things are closely related. At the Rape Crisis Center, I learned to start telling the story of what had happened to me, and then it all got entwined, the sexual oppression as well as the reproductive oppression. They became part of the same story. But I have to be honest and say I wasn't motivated by the teen pregnancy so much as I've been motivated by sexual violence.

Toscano: Speaking about reproductive rights, how has the visual media, like television, cinema, or other platforms, portrayed reproductive rights?

Did something change regarding how reproductive rights are portrayed, generally speaking, from those kinds of media?

Ross: Well, media, by definition, can only stay in business if they portray extreme drama. Because that's what sells, if it bleeds, it leads, right? And so I've never felt that mainstream media offers a fair view of abortion, for example. They only talk about the stories where people "Oh, I had regrets that I had an abortion, and now I want to kill myself." Or the people who had the lousy abortion stories, or the people who were denied the right to an abortion… So they always portray the most dramatic stories because that's their media. That's their job. They can't stay in business under a capitalist system by telling the truth about women's lives. They just can't because our lives are infinitely boring.
I mean, it'd be hard to make a movie out of my abortion story: it was safe; it was legal; it was at a hospital; my boyfriend paid for it. Where's the drama in that?

Toscano: Well, that was all.

Ross: If I offer a critique of the media, it would be with recognizing their constraints regarding what stories they tell. They can't stay in business telling boring stories. So their job is to exaggerate the more dramatic stories, even if that's the minority of the stories. I don't like that media model because journalism should be committed to telling the truth. But it's very hard under this climate, to say the truth and stay in business at the same time.

Toscano: But what about books or other media?

Ross: I love that there's been an absolute proliferation of writings by women over the last twenty years, telling more of the truth and stories. My latest book is coming out in September, which I've co-written with Marlene Gerber Fried. She was the lead writer on it, and it's called "Abortion and Reproductive Justice." In doing the research for that book,

I was astonished at how many thousands of titles there are now writing about this topic, which was not true thirty years ago.

Toscano: True.

Ross: And so, yes, if you review the literature, there is a much more nuanced and wide-ranging coverage of the topic in terms of if you look at the alternative films that are out there, there's a whole cottage industry of feminist produced films about reproductive politics. But you don't see those books or films represented in the mainstream media.

Toscano: Do you think the term Reproductive Justice has found any space in the mainstream media?

Ross: Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, I was just reading a report from the Black women's group *In Our Own Voices*, and the Congress has set up a Reproductive Justice task force. I think that reads pretty mainstream.

Toscano: Do you think there is a bad side to this attempt to talk about Reproductive Justice in a more mainstream way?

Ross: No. I'm not one of those persons that do language policing. If you use the term, I'm gonna be okay with how you use the term for the most part. I will not say, "You can only use the term if you use the exact definition of the term I use!" I believe that even misusing the term creates political space that wasn't there before. I used to get into this fight with my mentor, Shula Koenig because she was the mother of human rights education. Truly, she spent her life building human rights education organizations around the world. And she was so frustrated because she insisted that most people using the term human rights didn't mean it the way she meant it. And I always argued with her: "Sheila, it's a win for us when they say the term human rights. Even if they don't mean it the same way we want them to, they've entered into the public discourse, creating political space for us to have the conversation!" But she was insistent that they shouldn't use it at all if they didn't use it right. I'm not one of those language policers.

I should add that there is not widespread agreement in the Reproductive Justice movement because there are people who believe that if you do not use it precisely the way Black women intended it, you shouldn't use it at all. I don't agree with that either.

Toscano: What is the specific kind of definition that you are referring to?

Ross: Well, for them – and I'm only representing a viewpoint I don't agree with – Reproductive Justice emanates from Black feminist theory. Any use of it has to center Black women in the narrative. I think Reproductive Justice has a universalist quality. And who is in the center of the narrative depends on the material conditions of who's talking about it.

Toscano: Sure.

Ross: So Indigenous women in the United States are gonna talk about sovereignty as a Reproductive Justice issue, which Black women won't do because we're not tribes. We don't have treaties with the US government. Undocumented women are gonna talk about citizenship and birthright citizenship in particular as a Reproductive Justice issue – again, which is not a necessary issue for most African American women. What I love about Reproductive Justice is its adaptability. So, I resist people who insist upon a fixed definition of it.

Toscano: In terms of trying to explain or share the issue of Reproductive Justice with other people, my question is: how can we create new ways – symbolically, for example – to discuss Reproductive Justice? Is there any narrative that could improve women's lives and reproductive experiences regardless of race and class?

Ross: What surprises me is that Reproductive Justice became a way to bring human rights home to the United States. We were illiterate as a country when it came to understanding human rights. I think of Reproductive Justice as a very US-specific term because most countries have already embraced the human rights framework or at least the human

rights language. It was not happening in the United States. I'm saying use whatever works in your particular location. Like in Ireland, they like using Reproductive Justice because it provided political space that talking about abortion rights didn't offer because they were going up against the Catholic church there. So, in those situations, use whatever language works for you. But suppose you're in a Nordic country that already puts a lot of emphasis and inclusion of human rights standards into your social welfare contract. In that case, I'm not sure how Reproductive Justice adds to that value when you are already human rights-focused and are already giving protection to pregnant and parenting people. So it's specific to whatever conditions that you're dealing with.

Toscano: Reproductive Justice seems to be discussed mainly by women because they write about it and express concerns about their increasing vulnerability. They also share stories on the topic. But sometimes I'm perplexed about the fact that there are not a lot of men who talk about reproductive justice…

Ross: … or reproductive politics – except for controlling them!

Toscano: Yeah, especially in this climate, I would say… I am interested in your opinion on the kind of distance that men sometimes take on the issue. Is there any way to include men more effectively in this struggle and discuss it?

Ross: The best way to get anybody to care about an issue is to show them how it affects them. So, for example, when I was in Mississippi organizing against the Personhood Amendment – that's when they tried to write personhood into the state constitution so that they can prohibit abortion – when I talk to men, I ask them, "How would you like to start paying child support from the moment your girlfriend gets pregnant? She hasn't even had the baby yet, and you're already paying child support. Because if this law passes, that child that hasn't even been born is gonna be called

a person that you have to pay for." I think that persuaded many men… it showed them they were interested in that topic. So it wasn't just "I can't get pregnant." You're at risk if you have unprotected sex for the rest of your life. Because if you have sex with a woman and she becomes pregnant, you have to start paying even before it's proven that the child is yours. And if you don't want that to be your future, maybe you should support women.

Toscano: Do you think that only the money argument is enough to convince men to join in the discussion?

Ross: Responsibility, too. Men should care about whether or not children receive an adequate education or have to suffer from gun violence or those kinds of things because that speaks to the health and well-being of the community in which they live. Do you want a whole bunch of children with mental health issues obtaining guns and shooting up their schools or their movie theaters? All those things have already happened. And so even if you're not directly affected by your body, you're socially traumatized by what happens. One of the things we tend to talk about more is socialized trauma, not just individual trauma. Anytime a mass murder event occurs, that's social trauma, even if you're not personally affected. So that's another way to talk about it.

Toscano: Do you think education plays a role in this? For example, does teaching a young man about the importance of Reproductive Justice strengthen his commitment to the cause?

Ross: Oh, yeah. My first – and only – experience teaching middle school students was as a sex educator. And honestly, young people are eager to learn the things that adults tend to hide from them. Once they had access to more information, they started making smarter choices – because that's what people do. When we know more, we make better decisions. I strongly believe in evidence-based sex education for all ages. In fact, I think it should begin as early as infancy. For example, when my son was a baby, he loved playing with his penis – that's masturbation. I wasn't going to ignore

that. Babies instinctively do what feels good to them. Every time he had the chance, he would touch himself. So I had to talk to him about that so he doesn't feel shame or think he's doing something wrong or all that stuff.

Toscano: True.

Ross: I wanted to raise a sexually healthy child. And the time at which I was parenting mattered because my son was coming of sexual age when the AIDS crisis was coming about. And so failing to educate my son about sexual safety felt like a death sentence. In the early 1980s, the world was just becoming aware of AIDS. I felt very irresponsible to be parenting a son in that period and not assume about sex and sexual safety.

Toscano: You told me about the universality of Reproductive Justice. And I was wondering if, in your opinion, this kind of framework could include the whole spectrum of the LGBTQ+ community. I was thinking especially of the transgender community.

Ross: Not at first: when we created it in 1994, we defined it in a very heterospecific way. And so a decade later, the Queer People of Color Caucus within SisterSong added the fourth pillar, which is "the human right to sexuality, to gender identity, to sexual pleasure." And so it's been amended to add a less womb-specific expansion. But the 12 women who created it originally… we were all heterosexual women. So we made it from the standpoint where we were. But we're not against it being expanded to include LGBTQ+ people. As I said, it can be adapted for anybody. As I said, Native American women adapted it, and Asian American women adapted it because it's based on human rights, and everybody has the same human rights. You can use the intersectionality framework to examine people's advantages, disadvantages, or vulnerabilities. And so, even though everybody has the same human rights, you have to pay attention to people's vulnerabilities to see that those disadvantages can be addressed so they can enjoy the same human rights. For example, if every child has a human right to an education, then a blind child might need books in Braille, but you must pay attention to her vulnerabilities. It isn't that she has more human

rights. Still, you use intersectionality to examine which vulnerabilities must be addressed, the same way you would look at the vulnerability of someone who's undocumented, or the vulnerability of someone who's queer, or the vulnerability of someone who didn't go to college or lacks a computer. All of those are vulnerabilities that you have to address. That's why I love the human rights framework; it includes everybody. But with the specificity, sure, that each individual deserves.

Toscano: Was there a specific book you used when you started to talk about reproductive rights within the framework of human rights, or did this connection emerge just by being part of a general movement in the 1990s?

Ross: No, there wasn't a particular book, but we, the SisterSong, decided to create Reproductive Justice in July of 1994. Three months later, there was an international conference on population development in Cairo, Egypt. That's where I learned about people using the human rights framework to make the same demands we were trying to fit under the US Constitution, and it wasn't working. So it wasn't a book. That was my wake-up call. But the movement of the Global South, women from the Global South who were demanding that you not impose population control without addressing systematic underdevelopment… That was the point that women from the Global South were making. If you're passing out birth control pills or are inserting intrauterine devices in our communities, and you're not addressing the lack of a public health infrastructure, you're practicing population control… You're not going at the systematic underlying issues that are human rights violations. You're violating our human rights by imposing population control without looking at the uneasy and uneven relationship between the Global North and the Global South.

Toscano: It was not far from what Black women said at the beginning of the 1970s.

Ross: Right, exactly. But, at the beginning of the 1970s, I only encountered Toni Cade Bambara and another woman who mentioned human rights in

her writings. So, it took 20 years for the phrase human rights to reappear and become popularized in Black women's writings. And that's largely because of our work, our solidarity work globally, because we had more to learn from people in the Global South than we had to teach.

Toscano: Sure. I have just another question about pop media. Did you use them to raise awareness about Reproductive Justice or not?

Ross: Well, not me, but people in our movement did. I remember I was invited to give a speech to a group called the *Hollywood Women's Political Caucus*. These were women who worked in the film and TV industry, and they wanted to hear about Reproductive Justice from me. And they did. But that didn't mean I would park myself in Hollywood and try to influence Hollywood. I let the women who already live in Hollywood and work in their history carry that message. I have to add that there's a generational difference that I'm observing because, like Monica Simpson, who succeeded me as SisterSong, she was at the Grammy Awards. So, she is bridging the divide between celebrity culture and reproductive politics. That wouldn't interest me, but I was very proud to see her dressed up for the Grammy Awards, you know? She got there because of her work on reproductive justice, networking, and working with people in Hollywood.

Toscano: But do you think that in that way it's easy to avoid that kind of dramatization of Reproductive Justice, you were talking about before? It is possible to merge the issue of Reproductive Justice with this part of the media culture that is more interested in dramatizing everything about abortion rights and so on?

Ross: No, I'm not saying avoiding it. Different ways of communicating are going to reach different audiences. And so the way people do it is through dramatization, through Hollywood, reaching a specific audience that I'm not interested in reaching. But it does work. Let me think about something analogous. You remember when Beyoncé did her tour and she put the word "feminist" behind herself on the stage? A lot of people criticized Beyoncé

because they're like, "How can a woman sitting up there with all this sexual imagery represent a feminist?" And I'm like: "But hell! Beyoncé is reaching millions of women we couldn't even reach in our fondest dreams!" How can we criticize her for her ability to reach people not enrolling in our women's studies courses? We should be supporting her.

Toscano: My last question. Considering the situation that we are facing in terms of the – I would say – worldwide rise of the far right, what do we have to expect about the struggles we face in Reproductive Justice? What is the future of the Reproductive Justice struggle in this global scenario?

Ross: Well, one of the things that I find most interesting is that many of these far-right governments are trying to impose very pro-natalist policies on their people. And I don't think they're going to work. Because pro-natalism, by definition, depends on women stopping their educations and stopping their participation in the workforce so they can stay home and raise babies. And I don't see that succeeding as a pitch to women who have educational and economic opportunities, that they will voluntarily divest themselves of opportunities to get education, participate in the workforce, and earn their own money. I think these guys are demographically doomed because their whole plan is based on convincing women to act stupid right now [laugh]. That's not going to happen.

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I want to thank Loretta Ross not only for granting me this interview but also for the support she has given me – and continues to give me – since I first met her in 2022 during my research at Smith College. Most of all, I want to thank her for the greatest lesson she has taught me: being politically active means helping others, listening to them, and resisting the pull of the individualism we are so often pushed toward by society.