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Reproductive Justice and Its Discontents: Recent Representations in American Popular Culture

An Introduction

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Introduction: Reproductive Justice and the Politics of Pop Culture

The rollback of federal abortion protections in the United States – culminating in the Supreme Court's decision *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (June 24, 2022) overturning *Roe v. Wade* (January 22, 1973) – marked a pivotal moment in American politics. However, the reproductive landscape that emerged in the wake of *Dobbs* is shaped by more than judicial decisions and legislative battles; it is underpinned by an ideological apparatus that merges state-sanctioned pronatalism with

conservative culture war rhetoric. In this terrain, pop culture operates not only as a reflection of the political climate but as an engine of political imagination, moral narratives, and affective regulation.

To understand and critically engage the present moment, we must look beyond institutional policies to interrogate the cultural forms – symbols, narratives, aesthetics, and myths – that organize meaning around reproduction. These include depictions of motherhood, abortion, family, and gender; social media and public discourse that reduces medical and scientific realities to polarizing slogans; and celebrity-driven provocations about fertility, population, and the nation. These elements emphasize the need to delve into a deeper examination of how reproductive politics are mediated through culture: in this context, the articles collected in this Special Section reflect on representations of reproductive issues in current American pop culture. As the US government intensifies its effort to police reproductive autonomy, culture becomes both a weapon and a site of resistance.

Pronatalism and the Post-*Dobbs* Landscape

In March 2025, during his first public address as Vice President in Washington, DC, JD Vance enthusiastically declared, "I want more babies in the United States of America!" (The Columbus Dispatch). Framed as a pronatalist call to action, Vance's statement implicitly linked opposition to abortion with anxieties over the country's declining birth rate. By no means an isolated viewpoint, Vance's rhetoric reflects a growing chorus of right-wing figures sounding the alarm over a "birth dearth" – a demographic shift that, in reality, results from a complex interplay of economic precarity, evolving gender norms, expanded access to contraception and more equitable family planning options.

One of the most vocal figures in this discourse is Elon Musk – former head of the Department of Government Efficiency under Trump and father of fourteen – who has used his massive online platform to push pseudo-scientific claims about birth control, female health, and fertility. Musk's alarmist claims, such as his posting that hormonal birth control makes women "fat and sick, doubles the risk of depression and

triples risk of suicide,"[1] illustrate how cultural provocations are used to reframe reproductive health as a site of national crisis. His rhetoric mirrors a broader strategy to separate reproductive health from science and healthcare, and instead tie it to nationalist, racialized, and moralistic agendas. Unsurprisingly, abortion has become the primary recipient of such ongoing political efforts, as anti-abortion militants and policymakers now collectively assert that abortion is never medically necessary, echoing a century-long history of grassroots activism and, subsequently, professional campaigns aimed at stigmatizing abortion (Luker). This dangerous (im) position has fatal consequences, particularly in the aftermath of *Dobbs*: reproductive autonomy devolved into a state-based patchwork, with a dozen states enforcing near-total abortion bans, others affirming access, and many depending on a variety of legal conditions based on gestational duration, health of the pregnant person, fetal anomaly, rape, and incest.[2] The uneven geography amplifies pre-existing inequities, placing disproportionate burdens on the most marginalized communities.

The conservative policy blueprint *Project 2025's Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, a 900-page document published by the Heritage Foundation in April 2023, codified these cultural arguments into a sweeping plan to restructure the federal government in case of a Republican presidency. Although Donald Trump initially distanced himself from the document, claiming with a post on Truth to "know nothing about Project 2025," many of his key advisors contributed to its formation.[3]

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[1] See <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1758569518442701250?lang=en>.

[2] For useful information on current state abortion laws and restrictions on access, see Guttmacher's fact sheet at <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/state-policies-abortion-bans>.

[3] See <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/112734594514167050>. *Project 2025*, edited by Paul Dans and Steven Groves, foreword by Kevin D. Roberts, was written by some of the most powerful conservative thinkers and militants in the country, two-thirds of whom served under the first Trump administration. Its goal is to provide a detailed plan for building a right-wing America. See Jessica Valenti's Substack *Abortion, Every Day* at <https://jessica.substack.com/p/project-2025-abortion-explainer?utm_source=-substack&utm_medium=email>. Valenti offers a detailed (and terrifying) reading of the passages about reproduction included in *Project 2025*. She argues that it is "a step-by-step plan on how the government can force American women out of public life and back into

Upon re-election, Trump's administration enacted several of its core proposals through executive orders, included dismantling federal agencies, restricting abortion access, banning the use of gender identity terms, rolling back LGBTQ+ and DEI protections, and aggressively regulating public education.

While the administration promotes a pro-family stance and Donald Trump famously advocated for a new "baby boom" and increased access to IVF on his campaign trail,[4] its material policies – including cuts to the infrastructure required for fertility care, child support systems, and early education – reveal a disciplining logic at the core of US pronatalism. In fact, its tenets seem to be less about reproductive empowerment and more about controlling the reproductive capacities of specific populations – particularly cisgender white women – while surveilling, restricting, or criminalizing the reproduction of others: people of color, the poor, the disabled, the incarcerated, and gender-nonconforming individuals. This contradiction sits at the heart of Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger's seminal critique of state power in *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (2017). As they argue, so-called "pro-life" politics in the US have always been racially coded: reproductive rights are not expanded or curtailed according to universal ethical standards, but in alignment with demographic goals rooted in white supremacist, eugenic, and settler colonial ideologies (Ross and Solinger 18).

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the home" through strategies such as supporting traditional gender roles within marriage and dismantling early education (pre-k) while "diverting funding to 'offset the cost of staying home with a child' and 'home-based childcare.' Who will be at home providing this care? I think we all know." See also Steve Contorno for CNN at <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/11/politics/trump-allies-project-2025>.

[4] President Trump's speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference, CPAC 2023, on Saturday, March 4, 2023, at National Harbor in Oxon Hill, Md, is available online. During a Women's History Month event at the White House on March 26, 2025, Trump nicknamed himself the "Fertilization President." See the White House official YouTube Channel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37yfOP8cVPQ>.

Reproductive Justice: Origins and Framework

In 1994, twelve Black feminist activists[5] coined the term Reproductive Justice (RJ) during a women's health conference in Chicago. Working in the tradition of the Combahee River Collective (Silliman et al.), these activists challenged the narrow focus on legal access to abortion and individual free choice rhetoric of the (predominantly white) mainstream reproductive rights discourse. Instead, RJ articulated a broader and bolder vision based on three primary principles: 1. the right *not* to have a child; 2. the right to *have* a child, and 3. the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments (Ross and Solinger 9). As such, RJ goes beyond merely being a response to the pro-choice/pro-life debate. Reproductive Justice – the combination of reproductive rights and social justice – is a bold, human rights-based approach that demands the right for all people to control their bodies, sexuality, labor, and reproduction, free from systemic oppression, coercion, and exploitation (Ross; Price). It insists that reproductive freedom cannot be separated from systemic oppression.

By framing reproductive freedom as an issue of justice rather than individual choice, the Reproductive Justice movement challenges the dominant legal and cultural narratives that isolate abortion from other social concerns. It links reproductive autonomy to struggles against white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, economic injustice, environmental violence, incarceration, and colonialism. In fact, Reproductive Justice fundamentally integrates intersectionality in its theory and praxis, foregrounding the voices and leadership of Indigenous women, Black women, immigrants, queer and trans people, disabled people, and other subjectivities whose reproductive lives have historically been marginalized or policed. In doing so, RJ provides not just a critique of state power but a plan for liberation that reimagines reproductive autonomy as a collective and communal right.

Out of this vision grew the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, founded in 1997 by Luz Rodriguez, then director of the

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[5] Their names were Toni M. Bond Leonard, Reverend Alma Crawford, Evelyn S. Field, Terri James, Bisola Marignay, Cassandra McConnell, Cynthia Newbille, Loretta Ross, Elizabeth Terry, 'Able' Mable Thomas, Winnette P. Willis and Kim Youngblood.

Latina Roundtable on Health and Reproductive Rights. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, and including many independent organizations across the country, it continues to be a leading force in the movement that amplifies the voices challenging the multiple intersecting oppressions that shape reproductive lives globally.[6] As SisterSong has long emphasized, reproductive choices cannot be separated from the material conditions in which they are made. Therefore, RJ fights the structural inequalities that have long undergirded reproductive policy in the US and beyond – including forced sterilization, medical racism, access to housing and education, criminalization, and family separation.

RJ's adaptability has allowed it to evolve across different contexts while maintaining a coherent, intersectional critique of state and cultural power. In her 2017 article "Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism," Loretta Ross notes that "Reproductive justice theory, strategy, and practices emerge out of the distinct historical realities of diverse communities" (300). As long as it remains rooted in its foundational principles and centered on the voices of those most affected, the RJ framework "offer[s] tremendous scope for invention and intervention" (300). In respect of the eleven defining criteria established in 2006 by its founding mothers,[7] "any organization may reformulate its mission and work to embrace the reproductive justice framework" (301).

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[6] Interviewed by the Ford Foundation, Monica Raye Simpson, the current Executive Director of SisterSong, explained that "Our name was given to us by one of our founding mothers, Juanita Williams. She talked about how important it was for us to have different voices all singing in harmony with each other. That's why we're called SisterSong. Maybe we'll be a band one day. Who knows?" (<https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/big-ideas/the-future-is-hers/monica-simpson/>). A queer Black Southern feminist, Simpson has powerfully bridged political organizing with cultural production. By using performance, poetry, and music to advance RJ principles, she works to make space for cultural narratives that reflect the lived experiences and spiritual resilience of Black and Brown communities.

[7] The eleven points that define reproductive justice framework are intersectionality, connects the local to the global, has a human rights basis, links individual to community, addresses the government and corporate responsibility, fights eugenics and population control, supports individual/community leadership that change power dynamics, puts marginalized communities at center, supports participation of those impacted, holds theory-strategy-practice together, applies to everyone. See Ross, "Reproductive Justice as Intersectional

This Special Section draws on the rich scholarship of Reproductive Justice and on Ross's assertion that Reproductive Justice is both context-sensitive and expansive. As women scholars of American Studies based in Europe and the US, who live or have lived for some time in the US and teach US culture to global student audiences, we are compelled by the gravity of the present moment to start an interdisciplinary conversation about issues that affect all of our lives. We embrace the Reproductive Justice framework through our own positionalities and specific perspectives, namely by keeping our eyes fixed on the global political landscape outlined earlier in this introduction, while underscoring that reproductive justice is not just a policy framework but also a cultural and imaginative project that both allows and demands new creative interventions. However, we want to acknowledge our indebtedness to the inspirational Black women who created it and those who further extended its scope. We affirm the core tenets of RJ and recognize that its challenges and insights are not confined to national borders. In the interview with Walter Toscano included in this Special Section, Loretta Ross underlines that "Reproductive Justice became a way to bring human rights home to the United States," whereas other countries may "already [put] a lot of emphasis and inclusion of human rights standards into [their] social welfare contract." (34) We believe that attacks on bodily autonomy, reproductive freedom, and gender equity are interconnected, global, and deeply cultural. Particularly, as literature and media feminist scholars – working from different locations but bound by shared commitments – we need to pay attention to the stories that are told and those we tell, to the pictures that are formed and deformed about our bodies, communities, social positions and institutions. With Ross, we believe that "Reproductive justice provokes and interrupts the status quo and imagines better futures through radical forms of resistance and critique" (292). Pop culture, in this sense, becomes a key battleground for shaping reproductive futures.

Feminist Activism" 301.

Pop Culture as Ideological Terrain

This Special Section explores the realm of cultural production not to catalog isolated instances of reproductive representation in US media, but to examine how popular culture molds public opinion, reinforces or resists dominant ideologies, and configures the cultural conditions in which reproductive politics unfold. Popular culture – in its myriad forms – is not a neutral or peripheral domain; by investing in certain stories and silencing others, it is a primary site where reproductive meaning is negotiated, contested, and lived. This Special Section foregrounds the cultural politics of reproductive justice and asks: how does pop culture respond to, reproduce, or resist the disciplining logics of US pronatalism? What new stories about reproduction, kinship, and futurity are emerging – and what possibilities do they open up?

Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, we approach popular culture as an active site of ideological struggle – a space where dominant meanings are made, circulated, and sometimes subverted. As Hall reminds us, cultural texts and performances do not merely entertain; they produce meaning. This insight is further expanded by John Storey, who frames mass culture as a Gramscian "compromise equilibrium" (10) – a space where hegemony is secured through repetition, but also where alternative meanings can emerge. Storey also insists that pop culture is an especially powerful tool in that it acts on our fantasies by mobilizing public imagination and yearning. It shapes desire, encodes ideology, and provides symbolic resources for both oppression and liberation.

This tension defines pop culture's double edge. On the one hand, it constructs and circulates hegemonic narratives: maternal purity, fetal personhood, law-and-order motherhood, and neoliberal "choice" feminism. These narratives frequently obscure the structural dimensions of reproductive oppression, framing it instead through melodramatic stories of regret, danger, or personal failure. On the other hand, popular culture provides a symbolic and affective infrastructure through which resistive imaginaries can be articulated. It can foreground stories that disrupt normative scripts – of, for instance, maternity, breastfeeding, abortion, or

men's involvement in abortion – and it can amplify voices that complicate or challenge the narrow frames of reproductive rights.

The articles collected in this Special Section identify popular culture – across genres like stand-up comedy, television, film, and speculative fiction – as a crucial arena for negotiating reproductive politics. A recurring critique is that mainstream narratives often sensationalize abortion, focusing on trauma or punishment, while suppressing more ordinary, autonomous, or joyful reproductive stories. These patterns, as Loretta Ross discusses in the interview published in this issue, serve business under a capitalist system that sells drama, while real-life stories are generally "infinitely boring." "My abortion story," she says, "was safe; it was legal; it was at a hospital; my boyfriend paid for it." Yet, it is our contention that this is exactly what we need to shift our cultural context: "boring" stories that normalize access and approach to medical procedures in our reproductive care. As *Dobbs* reduces abortion to state-level legislations, we urgently need a cultural praxis that does not simply dramatize injustice but engages directly with the cultural technologies and affective economies that sustain or challenge it. This Special Section insists on pop culture as a powerful analytic. It is not a backdrop to reproductive messaging, but the material and symbolic landscape in which bodily autonomy is rendered plausible, not stigmatized, or invisible. What happens, for instance, when reproductive justice advocates collaborate with showrunners or screenwriters to craft new narratives of reproductive agency?[8]

The articles here included exemplify the wide array of venues through which people collectively conceptualize reproductive agency. Despite common assumptions emphasizing popular culture's Manichean depictions and the standard "happy ending motif," the contributions in this issue highlight the capacity of these narratives to represent the complexities entailed in reproductive issues and challenge simplistic binaries. For

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[8] In the past decades, a number of films were written and independently produced by RJ organizations, such as *We Always Resist: Trust Black Women* (SistersSong, 2011), *No Más Bebés* (Virginia Espino and Renée Tajima-Peña, 2016), *Belly of the Beast* (Erika Cohn, 2020) and *All the World is Sleeping* (Bold Futures, 2021), the first full-length feature film made by a RJ organization.

instance, in her article Beth Widmaier Capo investigates how historical fiction, far from merely providing crucial information on the infamous practice of involuntary sterilization, can offer nuance in depicting the latter's implementation: in her review of recent historical novels foregrounding salpingectomy (the surgical procedure through which Fallopian tubes are removed), she underscores how the medical personnel and the social workers involved in the enforcement of such eugenic policy increasingly question the scientific soundness of the practice. Capo's discussion thus not only sheds light on the growing relevance of RJ thematization in contemporary historical fiction but moves beyond simple victim narratives to explore systemic inequalities and illuminate the moral conflict and ethical dilemma faced by the characters implementing the procedures. Similarly, in her analysis of the popular fiction novel *A Spark of Light*, Isabel Kalous argues that Jodi Picoult uses shifting focalizations to present a hostage crisis at a fictional Center for Women and Reproductive Health to reflect the intricate and polarized nature of contemporary abortion debates. Such a narrative strategy is complemented by the use of a reverse chronological order, which first presents the results of characters' decisions and only later explores the circumstances and motivations that led to their choices: in Kalous's view, this approach didactically invites the readership to withhold judgment while delving into the story. As the readers question their own moral responses, they ultimately come to recognize abortion as a legitimate option to achieve reproductive autonomy, as well as reconsider the definition of "life" itself. The urge to rethink that reproductive health matters beyond simple biology is also at the center of Serena Fusco's discussion of breastfeeding, which is presented as an in/visible multilayered issue. In her article, she defines breastfeeding as an "absent presence" in contemporary mainstream screen representations, as it rarely takes a central position despite its recognized public importance. Fusco illustrates how the lactating body is alternatively characterized as either repulsive, unruly, dangerous, sexualized, praised and yet hindered by structural socioeconomic inequalities, according to complex factors of race, gender, social class, and medicalization. In this sense, its complexity and subversive potential are powerfully conveyed by pop culture, which shows breastfeeding as being at once topical and obscured.

The challenge of critically engaging with stories about (non-) reproductive choices and bodily autonomy beyond simple binaries often comes through in the contributions collected here as a perspective that looks at pop culture narratives in terms of futurity, while staying within mainstream genres. For instance, Michele Meek's article on abortion road trip movies showcases a significant evolution in the portrayal of pregnancy termination in teens that moves beyond punitive narratives to more subtle, empathetic, and medically accurate depictions. In fact, Meek remarks that while early cinematic portrayals of teen abortion presented it as a transgressive and illicit act, often resulting in death or serving as a cautionary tale for sexually active girls, recent teen abortion movies depict characters who are "relatable and likeable," and decide to terminate a pregnancy with reasons presented as sound and embraceable. Meek also points to the rise of the teen abortion road trip movie as a subgenre highlighting the logistical and financial difficulties that emerged since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, a subgenre that in parallel destigmatizes the abortion procedure by accurately describing it as painless and effective. Nonetheless, the article acknowledges the limits of the genre, for instance the "bad boyfriend" trope that, while activating sympathy in the viewer, might inadvertently reinforce narrow ideas about "acceptable" reasons for abortion.

In fact, the involvement of the male counterparts in the contested terrain of abortion politics and, more broadly, in reproductive justice issues, emerges as a particularly sensitive point of this Special Section. Significantly, with the sole exception of Walter Bruno Toscano in his role as interviewer, all contributors to this issue are women: a conspicuous absence that invites a critical reflection on men's awareness and positionality as citizens who are, willingly or not, embedded in and affected by the structural dynamics of reproductive politics and sexual health. Popular culture, by addressing male absence or lack of engagement through recurring and increasingly more original depictions, appears to gesture towards these tensions. Several contributions in this Special Section explore men's involvement in reproductive justice not merely as enforcers of patriarchal oppressive structures or in stereotypical terms, but as potential co-participants in a collective narrative and struggle for bodily

autonomy, equity, and human rights. For instance, Tuula Kolehmainen's analysis of abortion in male stand-up comedy contrasts simplistic, binary-reinforcing jokes with routines that reveal inconsistencies and challenge the "men as outsiders" narrative. Kolehmainen observes that most male stand-up comedy either avoids the subject of abortion altogether or still operates along the lines of common gendered stereotypes, such as the "male as a payer" trope, which reconfigures men's tangible or imagined economic dominance over women. However, she also draws attention to a few comedic routines, like Anthony Jeselnik and Steve Hofstetter's, that underscore male accountability in unwanted pregnancies by employing self-irony in order to dismantle male-centered perspectives in reproductive decision-making. In parallel, Sandra Tausel highlights how the Kamala Harris presidential campaign strategically appealed to male audiences by framing reproductive rights as affecting "the men who love us," an expression used by Michelle Obama to receive the endorsement of a wide audience of men beyond partisan lines. Tausel describes the brand of "protective paternalism" mobilized by Obama, underlining that the campaign aimed to universalize RJ issues and raise awareness in male voters through the use of familiar roles ("your daughter," "your wife," "your girlfriend") and by incorporating male testimonials, in order to frame reproductive oppression as yet another aspect of a broader crisis of the American healthcare system.

This Special Section, then, proceeds on two fronts: it traces how pop cultural forms have narrated reproductive justice and injustice – how stories of forced sterilization, abortion discourse and journeys, breastfeeding, policing and protest – found their way into screens, texts, popular fiction, comedy gigs, social feeds. It also charts the creative interventions, followed by activists and artists alike, which have leveraged those forms to expand public understanding, cultivate empathy, and seed movements. Theoretically, we attempt a cultural study that integrates Storey's equilibrium, Hall's meaningmaking, and Ross's structural intersectionality. We propose that popular culture is not marginal to reproductive justice; it is central as both an obstacle and an opportunity. Reproductive Justice, as we understand it, must operate not only in courts and clinics but also in cultural arenas. Taken together,

these articles highlight how fights to pass legislation must be sustained by fights to transform the symbolic narratives that shape how pregnancy, parenting, and autonomy are imagined. As Ross and Solinger remind us, RJ is not simply about individual "choice" – it is about addressing the intersecting structures of racism, patriarchy, colonialism, and economic violence. Popular culture is essential to this project. It encodes the norms through which these structures become common sense, but it also offers sites of rupture and imaginative possibility. This issue takes up that possibility, treating pop culture not only as a mirror of reproductive politics but as a site of intervention, critique, and transformation.

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