

Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger
Reproductive Justice: An Introduction
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Reviewed by Camisha Russell, 2018

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Reproductive Justice: An Introduction was written as a primer. The goals of its co-authors--an activist (Ross) and a scholar (Solinger, historian)--are to introduce readers to reproductive justice as a "creative vision for achieving human rights protections," and to distinguish that vision from the more limited pro-choice/anti-abortion debate that has dominated the national conversation on reproductive rights for half a century (1).

They do so by offering a concise history of reproductive injustices since the establishment of settler colonies on the land now known as the United States. They then provide an overview of the current state of reproductive (in)justice. From there they specifically address the ways in which US law and government attempt to "manage" the fertility of suspect or marginalized groups. Finally, they focus on the right to parent, how such a right can be understood, and the various threats to that right faced by marginalized groups. The epilogue of the book is dedicated to showcasing the stories of reproductive justice activists and organizations, and highlighting a few issues around which they have organized and built coalitions.

I suspect that, at just two decades old (and with the movement still fighting multiple marginalizations), the reproductive justice perspective will still feel like a fresh (and refreshing) alternative to the audience for this book. That audience is *not* people already conversant in the reproductive justice framework--though experienced activists and academics may find the breadth and clarity of the work (along with its careful attention to language and intersectionality) quite useful for purposes of pedagogy and proselytizing. Nor is that audience limited to people in possession of a PhD. Not everyone who could benefit from an introduction to the reproductive justice framework reads English at a college level. Those who can, however, will be able to read and understand this book. And that same audience will be able to use the information in this book to explain reproductive justice to others. This, to me, is the authors' greatest triumph. They have not sacrificed complexity for accessibility--they have achieved both.

The need for, and deep relevance of, this book was brought home to me the very week (June 2018) that I read its first chapter, "A Reproductive Justice History." I was standing among a hundred or so protesters who had gathered in my college town to oppose the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) policy of separating children from their migrating parents at the US-Mexico border. The organizer of the protest, a white, first-time activist, described how she was moved to act because, as a mother, she could imagine the trauma of being separated from

her two daughters. Her speech was followed by those of a midwife, a psychology professor, and members of several local groups with upcoming meetings or actions. Then a woman whose participation had clearly not been arranged in advance was handed the microphone. Her intervention was very short, rather quiet, and completely nonconfrontational in tone.

She explained simply that she was a Native woman, that this sort of thing (separating children from their families) had been going on since Columbus, and that she was a bit surprised by the protesters' surprise over this particular government policy. These statements were not exactly rejected by the crowd, but neither did they seem to actually be taken in. Nothing further on the topic was said or discussed. What appeared to be quite an obvious connection to someone who had just read a condensed but fairly comprehensive history of reproductive (in)justice seemed to exceed the framework of the event in which I was trying to participate. The protesters, it seemed, were ill-equipped to shift their perspective from a conviction that the policy was immoral and fundamentally un-American to a recognition that the policy was *both* immoral *and* perfectly in keeping with the commitment to white supremacy upon which America was founded.

Yet this is precisely the kind of shift this book seeks to effect. The authors use the metaphor of shifting lenses and the experience of an eye exam to explain "how reproductive justice can change what we know about the past, how we interpret the present, and how we envision the future" (58-59). They write:

As an eye doctor shifts multiple lenses during an examination, asking the patient to pick out the lens that provides the sharpest perception, so each of us needs to find the correct lens through which we can "see" our own experience and its context and tell our story. We need to identify the lens that gives us clear vision and allows us to describe our life experiences, our reproductive experiences, from where we stand. (59)

Of course, the authors acknowledge that "No single lens can work for all," so we may not wish to blame my fellow protesters for not having connected previous reproductive injustices with the one we were protesting (59). At the same time, however, the authors urge an embrace of *polyvocality*--"many voices telling their stories that together may be woven into a unified movement for human rights" (59). What I wish is that, in that small crowd of concerned individuals, the Native woman's voice could have been heard, not literally but metaphorically. To return to the vision metaphor, I wish that people might have tried to see the world through that woman's lens, blurry though that vision might have been. Conversance in reproductive justice might have made such a shift more possible.

As the authors delineate and then elaborate, reproductive justice is centered around 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" (9, original emphasis). Moreover, it "demands sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being" (9). Such principles cannot rely on mere freedom from government interference for their realization--though there is a great deal of such interference from which all people (marginalized and otherwise) should be freed. They instead require "access to specific, community-based resources including high-quality health care, housing and education, a living wage, a healthy environment, and a safety net for times when these resources fail" (9).

As is clear just from this short list, reproductive justice has what the authors admit is "an enormous agenda" (168) and one that "aims not for simple inclusiveness but for changing the rules of the game" (117). If there is anything in this book that might frustrate readers, it is the sense that the authors feel every problem in the world is a matter of reproductive justice, along with the sense that there is no way to know how to start tackling all that and no possibility of ever finishing. Yet such a concern would not surprise the authors, and they might counter it in a couple of ways.

First, they might return to the concept of a lens, arguing that many or most problems of oppression, marginalization, and inequality do intersect in some way, and reminding readers that reproductive justice offers just one lens or perspective among many on that tangle of issues. Scholars and activists can choose that lens if it is the one that offers the clearest perception. Second, they specifically argue that the many intersections and overlaps between reproductive justice and other major social concerns present not just an obstacle in terms of complexity, but an important opportunity for cross-movement coalitions. As mentioned above, they also provide in the epilogue several examples of such coalitions.

Following a brief introduction of the co-authors and a note on inclusive language, the book develops through four chapters before concluding with the epilogue. Each chapter starts with a description of reproductive justice, describing it in ways that are fully compatible but that make use of different concepts. This repetition and variation is pedagogically powerful and should help the book appeal to people with various conceptual backgrounds and orientations.

Chapter 1, "A Reproductive Justice History," starts with a description of reproductive justice in terms of a human rights framework that recognizes the limits of "the marketplace concept of free, unimpeded individual 'choice'" and turns toward a positive conception of rights and a government's obligation to ensure them (12). The chapter outlines the long history of reproductive injustices against women of color in the US since European settlement, with the aim of drawing attention to "the ways that the history of white supremacy operating in a capitalist system penetrates and misshapes the present" (11). Impressively, while surveying a series of reproductive atrocities perpetrated against African American and Native women and children, along with subsequent nonwhite immigrant women and children, the authors manage to keep sight of the many ways such women "have always been determined to make secret decisions, pursue bold options, share information and resources, depend on the support of sisters, friends, and strangers, and take the risks they needed to take to make the reproduction decisions they could make" (11).

This careful attention to women's agency in oppressive circumstances is striking and crucial. So, too, is the effort to lay out the complex combination of advantage and disadvantage experienced by white women of means during various periods. The authors make very clear that many opportunities for cross-racial solidarity between women around reproductive issues have been missed, with significant negative consequences for women of color. They also make clear, however, the ways in which these missed opportunities endanger the reproductive freedom of even the most valued of white women. In other words, without decentering the experience of women of color, they construct a strong historical case for future cross-racial solidarity.

In chapter 2, "Reproductive Justice in the Twenty-First Century," the description of reproductive justice focuses on storytelling, the importance of lived experience, and the need to empower vulnerable people to tell their own stories. It also offers a history of the reproductive justice movement itself, beginning in the mid-1990s. The authors discuss the emergence and importance of the concept of intersectionality, and expand upon the need for a human rights approach, this time by contrast to attempts to work within or change the US legal system. They introduce the following maxim: "*Reproductive justice is the application of the concept of intersectionality to reproductive politics in order to achieve human rights*" (79, original emphasis). They also define and discuss American neoliberalism in a clear and helpful manner free of disciplinary jargon.

Chapter 3 describes reproductive justice as a movement for reproductive rights uniquely committed both to comprehensive health care as a human right and to the need for any human right to apply to all people. The chapter then focuses on the various laws and policies in the US that protect or limit rights to abortion. Particular attention is paid to the Hyde Amendment (1976 to present) and its enduring impacts on the US reproductive landscape. Again, people of color are at the center of this analysis as populations whose fertility is "marked for management," but the harmful effects on reproductive freedom in general and the possibilities for coalition building are emphasized.

Finally, in chapter 4, "Reproductive Justice and the Right to Parent," the authors turn to arguably the most revolutionary aspect of the reproductive justice vision: its aim "to build a world in which all children are wanted and cared for, in which supports exist for families of all sizes and configurations, and in which societies give priority to creating the conditions for people to be healthy and thrive in the United States and globally" (168). It opens with a description of reproductive justice that highlights the historically and culturally variable but always highly politicized nature of motherhood. After introducing the concepts of dog-whistle racism, sexual citizenship, and the economics of motherhood, the authors lay out reproductive justice analyses of several issues. They cover (if briefly) coercive reproductive medicine, the racial politics of motherhood, trans issues, adoption and foster care, disability, and assisted reproduction. They then touch on other reproductive justice intersections "beyond biology," including immigration, incarceration, gentrification, education, and environmental issues.

The epilogue, "Reproductive Justice on the Ground," builds on the final chapter by offering what the authors call "a sample of six ways that reproductive justice occupies the heart of an organization that began with individuals, became a community, and is thriving as a vital center of collective action" (238). It is made up of six short pieces written by representatives of different reproductive justice organizations describing either their formation, their mission, or a specific campaign in which they have engaged. All the writers are women of color, carrying through to the end the authors' stated commitment to centering those voices. The pieces also showcase many of the key ideas promoted in the body of the book, including intersectional analysis, alliance building, the centrality of lived experience, self-determination and self-help, and attention to the condition and history of specific communities. This wisely chosen epilogue format not only serves as a culmination of the earlier work in the book but also enables the reader to emerge from the book moved and motivated, rather than despairing.

I commend the authors and series editors for a much needed, well considered, and expertly executed reproductive justice primer. The reproductive justice approach will have much to teach both scholars and activists working on a wide variety of issues for years to come.