

# Coalitional Accountability for Feminist Rhetoricians in a Post-Roe World

Megan Faver Hartline, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and

Maria Novotny, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

**Abstract:** In the wake of the reversal of Roe, we argue for the importance of accountability in feminist reproductive justice scholarship and activism to address the competing sociopolitical factors and positionalities that surround reproductive care and advocacy. We argue for four processes of accountability when engaging in coalitional reproductive justice work: inclusive listening, embodied risk taking, reciprocal action, and reflective recommitment. By using these practices iteratively to ground reproductive work, feminist scholars can consider not only how to contribute to broad notions of increasing local, state, and/or national reproductive justice but also, and perhaps more importantly, how to remain accountable to those most affected by reproductive issues in their own communities and the activists already leading this work.

**Megan Faver Hartline** is an assistant professor of English at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga where she teaches courses in community literacy, professional writing, and rhetoric. Her scholarship examines how people learn to enact local community change, analyzing the informational, material, and institutional barriers they face and the structures that enable them to connect their interests in social justice with local action. Megan has co-edited two collections, *Writing for Engagement: Responsive Practice for Social Action* (2018, Lexington Press) and *Mobility Work in Composition* (2020, Utah State UP), and she has published articles in *College Composition and Communication*, *Communication Design Quarterly*, *Reflections*, and *Community Literacy Journal*.

**Maria Novotny** is an assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her research considers how reproductive health patients advocate for care through her organization The ART of Infertility. Her co-edited collection *Infertilities, A Curation* (2023, Wayne State University Press) portrays the myriad voices and perspectives of individuals who experience infertility and recurrent reproductive loss using art and writing as mediums for personal healing. Other scholarship related to the intersections of infertility, rhetoric, and advocacy has been published in *Communication Design Quarterly*, *Community Literacy Journal*, *Present Tense*, *Reflections*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine*, and *Technical Communication Quarterly*.

Keywords: accountability, coalition building, feminist action, reproductive justice

## Introduction: Post-Roe Exigence for Feminist Rhetorical Action

The U.S. Supreme Court's decision to repeal *Roe v. Wade* and effectively end a person's right to an abortion has led to an influx of national (i.e., NARAL), regional (i.e., Midwest Access

Coalition), and state-based (i.e., WI Abortion Fund) organizations working to ensure abortion access. The polarizing impact of this decision calls for coalition building across groups that work toward gender, racial, disability, criminal, and religious justice to reinstate these key rights to bodily autonomy, and feminist scholars should be a part of these collaborations. For feminist *rhetorical* scholars, this moment offers an unprecedented exigence to work across difference (Cagle) and determine how we might “coalesce with other groups working toward social justice” in order “to create coalitions situated in lived experiences and feminist praxis” (Matzke, Maraj, Clark-Oates, and Rankins-Robertson). We view reproductive justice (RJ<sup>1</sup>) as a successful framework fostering coalition building and advocating for the most marginalized reproductive bodies, and we believe that adopting a feminist scholar-activist approach may support current reproductive justice coalition aims.

Coalition building has been imperative to reproductive and sexual health movements well beyond the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to repeal *Roe v. Wade*. For instance, coalitions like the “Army of Three” consisting of Pat Maginnis, Lana Phelan Kahn, and Rowena Gurner, which formed in 1964, were essential to ensuring the right to have a safe and legal abortion. Yet, it wasn’t until 1994, thirty years later, that the term “reproductive justice” came to be. The term’s introduction ultimately led to the creation of SisterSong, the organization credited with creating and advancing the reproductive justice movement, which went beyond a reproductive rights framework by defining reproductive justice as the “human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities” (n.p.). To date, SisterSong remains the leader in reproductive justice organizing and coalition building. We overview the history of reproductive justice in the U.S. in order to emphasize caution to those who may unknowingly adopt a reproductive justice framework to their teaching/research/service *without* accounting for the bodies and histories that have shaped and informed this coalitional force. Feminist rhetoricians should and rightly will take interest in issues of access to reproductive health care, yet to do so without attending to the histories and labor of the BIPOC-led movement does a disservice to its well-documented coalition building success.

To respond to that concern, we evoke the concept of “accountability” as a necessary practice that addresses the competing sociopolitical factors and positionalities that surround reproductive care and advocacy. Accountability, for us, requires critical awareness of the histories that have shaped community-focused processes and mandated more public outcomes and assessments of our scholarly work beyond traditional feminist rhetorical research outcomes like books, articles, and presentations. We argue for four processes of accountability when engaging in coalitional RJ work: inclusive listening (Baker-Bell; Crenshaw; Martinez; McCoy; Ratcliffe; Fishman and Rosenberg), reciprocal action (Alvarez; Riley Mukavetz; Opel and Sackey; Shah), embodied risk taking (Cedillo, et al.; Tetreault), and reflective recommitment (Diab, et al.; Harper). By using these

---

1 We use abbreviations throughout this text: 1) reproductive justice (RJ) refers to the activist approach developed by Black women to address a broad range of reproductive issues, 2) rhetorics of reproductive justice (RRJ) refers to the field of scholarly study.

practices iteratively to ground reproductive justice work, feminist scholars can consider how to contribute to broad notions of increasing local, state, and/or national reproductive justice and how to remain accountable to the Black women and other activists who have been leading this fight for decades and to those most affected by reproductive issues in their own communities.

In this article, we illustrate accountable feminist rhetorical practice through a storying approach, narrating moments from our RJ work, which has included storytelling, lobbying, legislative research and training, and more (though not all are detailed here)—all done in partnership with long-term activists across the country. Following a review of literature that situates our work within feminist rhetorical studies and defines accountability, we discuss and story each of the four processes of accountability listed above, sharing how we, particularly as cis white women, have included accountability within our own work and, through a visual heuristic, how others might enact these processes as well. Throughout, we argue that to engage feminist rhetorics in the social and material concerns of our day, we must center accountability and shift discussions from institutional critique to responsible community action. Ultimately, we share how the act of being accountable serves and supports coalition building in reproductive advocacy organizing.

## **Feminist Rhetorics, Reproductive Justice, and Accountability**

We draw on feminist rhetorical scholarship that values lived experience, multiple ways of knowing/doing, and a commitment to amplify stories that have been erased or marginalized. Feminist rhetorics has been paramount in creating legitimacy for feminist projects spanning: recovery (Glenn; Royster), mentoring (Eble and Lewis Gaillet), digital rhetorics (DeVoss; Frost and Haas), Black feminism (Browdy; Carey; Kynard), and more. The uptake of feminist rhetorical studies has also led to interdisciplinary scholarship such as: embodiment (Knoblauch and Moeller), gender and sexuality (VanHaitsma; Licona and Chávez; Rhodes), fat rhetorics (Manthey), and motherhood (Osorio; Vinson). In sum, feminist rhetorical approaches have enabled scholars to expand who, what, and how they study to better account for the lived realities of people of marginalized genders.

Given the embrace of more interdisciplinary approaches, coupled with contemporary threats harming bodily autonomy, feminist rhetoricians have aligned their scholarship more explicitly with a reproductive justice framework, including Heather Adams on rhetorical shame and blaming within reproductive health, Sara DiCaglio and Lori Beth De Hertogh's special issue on futures of feminist health literacy, Kimberly Harper's work linking Black motherhood to unjust police violence, and Sharon Yam on visualizing birth stories. Collectively, these scholarly contributions have made space for rhetorical scholarship to contribute to contemporary and historical study related to discursive issues impacting reproductive bodies—shaping the subfield commonly referred today as rhetorics of reproductive justice or RRJ.

Rhetorics of reproductive justice is defined “as the study of how discursive activities mediate individuals, groups, and communities as they work to address the ‘intersecting oppressions’ and ‘power systems’ (SisterSong) that influence reproductive bodies and related healthcare policies” (Novotny and De Hertogh 375). We appreciate the scope of this definition and its intentional linkage between RRJ scholarship and social activism. Yet, we are concerned by the lack of discussion around the stakes by which one may, even unintentionally, appropriate reproductive justice for their own scholarly advancement. Similar concerns about academic use have been offered up by rhetorical scholars. For instance, John Gagnon and Maria Novotny write about using personal and/or trauma stories as a form of data scholars can analyze and ultimately “use” to support their research claims. They call for changes to the “limited and limiting paradigm” where “trauma stories are institutionally exploited and commodified as research narratives, circulated largely to the benefit of the system” (Gagnon and Novotny 497). We, too, echo similar concerns about paradigms that protect the academic over the individual and/or community in RRJ. And we find similar lines of concern with the blind use of a reproductive justice framework within feminist rhetoric scholarship and caution against its use when connected only to scholarly purposes.

Listening to reproductive justice movement leaders informs our caution concerning feminist rhetoricians’ use of this framework. For instance, in tracing the origins of the term “reproductive justice,” Loretta Ross explains that “reproductive justice was never meant to replace the reproductive health (service provision) or reproductive rights (legal advocacy) frameworks. Instead, it was an organizing concept intended to amplify and shed light on the intersectional forms of oppression that threaten Black women’s bodily integrity” (290-291). Ross’s words serve as a reminder about the purpose and intentions of reproductive justice, underscoring how it is intentionally designed as an intersectional framework that dissects and critiques systems of oppression through praxis. Reproductive justice praxis “puts the concept of reproductive justice action by elaborating the connection between activism and intersectional feminist theory” (Ross 287). Embracing a praxis orientation can prove challenging for feminist rhetoricians as it demands situating the aims of one’s scholarship beyond more traditional forms and into more community-engaged, public, even critical-creative forms of scholarly action. Additionally, reproductive justice as a praxis takes time to produce and document, both of which are often antithetical to more traditional and institutional Western colonial academic models.

We sit with these tensions and raise them for readers to contemplate the practices that may best guide feminist rhetorical use of reproductive justice as praxis. For Megan and Maria, who are both cis white women who have been invested in issues of reproductive justice for over a decade, we rely upon *accountability* as a guiding practice to best address not just the aims of feminist rhetorical work related to reproductive justice but accountability as a practice that helps ensure proper use and outcomes of our RJ feminist rhetoric work. The work we describe later in this piece is explicitly shaped by long-term reproductive justice leaders in the community, not the university—following the lead of Black feminist scholars like Angela Davis and Audre Lorde to remain account-

able to those who are most affected by, in this case reproductive, injustice in our communities.

Accountability is a concept with its own histories and trajectories. Patricia Hill Collins writes extensively about valuing intersectional experiences as exercising accountability to social change, explaining “although Black feminist thought originates within Black women’s communities, it cannot flourish isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups” (41). Accountability is an independent practice that does not reassert the individual experience/need but a more universal/communal experience/need. Hill Collins enforces this point when quoting Sonia Sanchez who states: “I’ve always known that if you write from a black experience, you’re writing from a universal experience as well...I know you don’t have to whitewash yourself to be universal” (Hill Collins 41). Black feminist thought produces a practice of accountability that invites “groups who are engaged in similar social justice projects... [to] identify points of connection that further social justice projects” (Hill Collins 41). This practice of accountability can also support coalition building.

Adopting Hill Collins’ approach to accountability requires a critical consciousness and awareness of one’s embodied privileges and purviews. Accountability requires that we do not assume a singular reproductive experience nor privilege a particular reproductive need over others. For instance, reproductive justice work that fails to include trans persons and perspectives should not be claimed as work upholding reproductive justice aims. Reproductive justice work must be intersectional in that it accounts for multiple embodied experiences, including race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and class to name a few. Additionally, reproductive justice work must account for reproductive bodies *beyond* access to abortion services and should embrace the multi-pronged tenets of SisterSong’s reproductive justice definitional framework. These examples illustrate the need to adopt a critical consciousness to question who and what our social change work accounts for. We also must account for the historical, structural, and system inequities that produce ourselves and the world around us. Ann Russo’s “praxis of accountability” invites “a process of scrutiny” that is “not about calling out individual or organizational failures as anomalies, but rather about making visible the fault lines of structural inequities that distort and undercut the relational possibilities for individual and social action and transformation” (10). These are critical inclusions to any practice of accountability, particularly so when accounting for the multiple bodies, positionalities, experiences, and needs in reproductive justice.

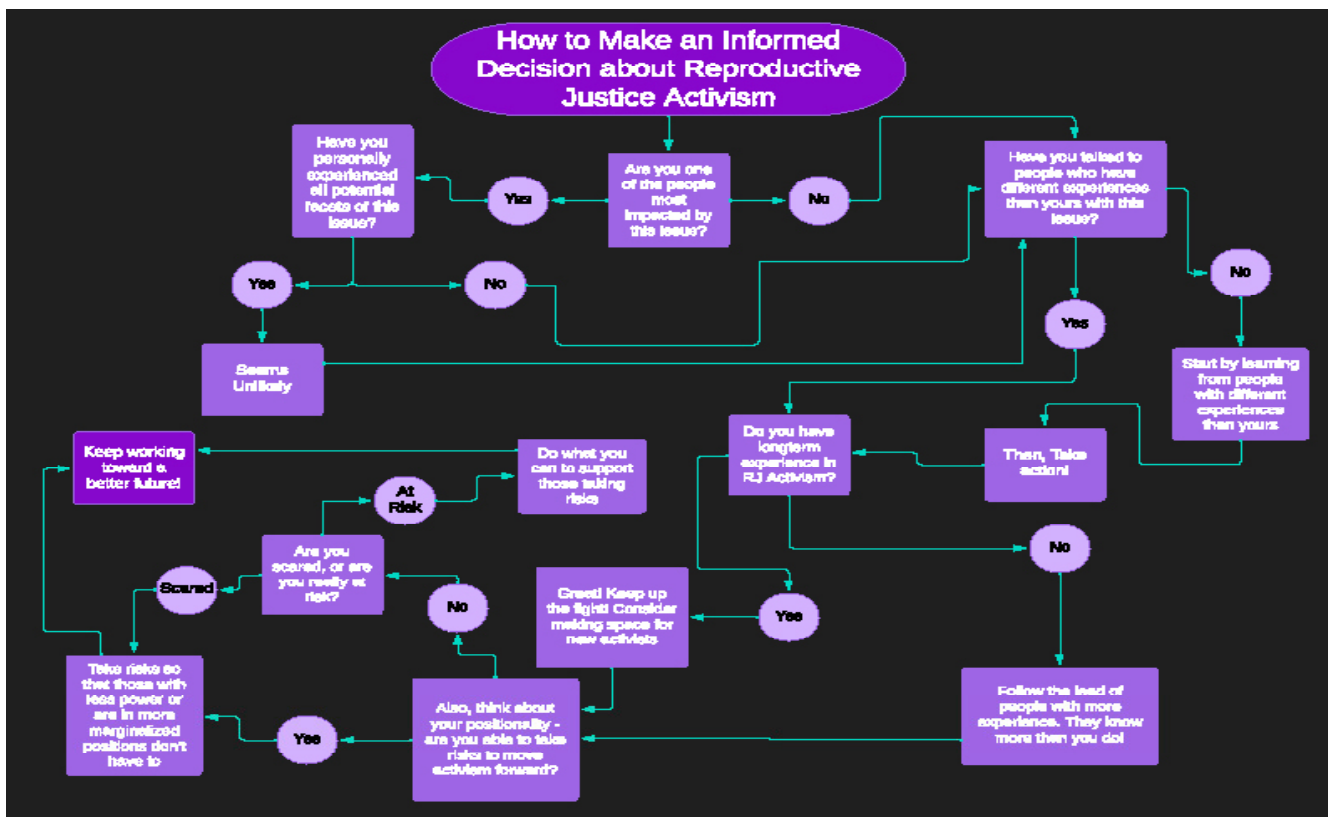
For us, practicing accountability rests on four iterative processes: inclusive listening, reciprocal action, embodied risk taking, and reflective recommitment. We propose that using these processes, which we define and illustrate next, can enable feminist scholars to consider more critically how each step of their RJ work is accountable to broader communities, taking a coalitional rather than individualistic approach to their scholarship and activism.

## **Approaches to Accountability in Two Reproductive Justice (RJ) Projects**

In what follows, we story accountability practices by offering examples from our own reproductive justice (RJ) work, using moments from our projects to illustrate what coalitional work might look like for feminist rhetoricians. Specifically, we share moments of our work that align with the accountability processes we list above:

1. Inclusive Listening
2. Embodied Risk Taking
3. Reciprocal Action
4. Reflective Recommitment

Additionally, we have created the following heuristic for considering how to work through these processes



Though both our narratives and the heuristic offer a linear approach, we recognize that RJ work rarely happens in such a fashion, but we didn't want to clog up the graphic with a million extra arrows. Take these with a grain of salt and understand that your version of these practices is going to happen according to who you talk with in your community, what you learn about specific needs and goals, and how you, in your own positionality, can move forward to contribute to (likely) already built coalitions and expand capacity for RJ activists. Our stories aim to showcase not only what these processes are but how messy they can be. But the messiness is where coalitional work can form—in maintaining flexibility and willingness to shift based on ever changing needs. To be frank, the stories we share below are not meant to be taken as “exemplar” models of enacting the various approaches supporting accountable practices. Rather, we share them in order to illustrate what reproductive justice as praxis often entails and how we have attempted, often in fits and starts, to remain accountable to our communities beyond the university.

### **Inclusive Listening**

Reproductive justice scholar-activists must consider experiences different from their own to better understand how RJ issues are intersectional. Critical inclusion of voices/experiences is regularly called for across the field (Baker-Bell; Martinez; Crenshaw; McCoy), and rhetoric scholarship on reproductive justice is no exception. We must draw on diverse scholarship and, more importantly, diverse understandings of reproductive justice by those who are most affected. We posit that listening—engaged in as a rhetorical form (Ratcliffe) and literacy practice (Fishman and Rosenberg)—is one action that supports more inclusive approaches to reproductive action. We recount stories that illustrate how we practice inclusive listening within community settings to make visible a practice *often assumed* to take place but rarely accounted for in rhetorics of reproductive justice scholarship.

#### Megan

My largest reproductive justice project to date started with an email a few months into my first semester out of my PhD—2017, year one of the Trump administration when so many people began seriously paying attention to reproductive rights issues (a term I use purposefully to distinguish those who had been working toward reproductive justice long before). I was the Associate Director of Community Learning at Trinity College, and I knew I wanted to throw myself into activism in my new community, and I, like many others, was particularly concerned about reproductive issues. My students and I began partnering with Erica Crowley and NARAL Pro-Choice CT on their work to limit deceptive advertising practices from Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs). While showing up to help with a city council public hearing was the seed of a long-term relationship between Trinity College and Pro-Choice CT whose work continues today, I want to focus on the listening Erica did *long before* that public hearing, detailed in “Coalition Building for Reproductive Justice” (Hartline et al.). Erica had started working for Pro-Choice CT as a community organizer

when St. Gerard's Center for Life opened a new office under the name "Hartford Women's Center" right next to the Hartford GYN Center, the only independent abortion clinic in the state. She saw their deceptive practices in action through her office at the GYN Center and her work as a clinic escort: CPC workers gave the appearance of a well-trained medical staff, they told confused GYN Center patients that their appointments were at the Women's Center, and repeatedly said they would give people seeking an abortion information they needed but delayed until an abortion could no longer be performed. Erica, a cis white woman, knew this was happening and wanted to address it, but she also recognized that she was not in the population most affected by this issue. She writes: "CPCs disproportionately target poor women, women of color, medically underserved communities (like Hartford), people without health insurance, LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, young people, college students, and other marginalized populations and experiences addressed in the reproductive justice framework" (Hartline et al 130). To address that fact, she and her team spent a significant amount of time collecting stories from the young Black women who were targeted by the CPC and tricked into going there instead of their appointments at the GYN Center. Stories were shared anonymously by writing their experiences down without their name and giving permission to organizers to share them with local legislators and read them aloud at a public hearing. The foundation of this work, which eventually led to both a Hartford-specific local ordinance and a statewide law limiting CPC deceiving advertising, lay in listening to people who were most impacted by the issue. By listening to these women and allowing them to tell their stories in ways that made them feel comfortable, Erica and her team practiced inclusive listening to guide their activist work, which in turn shaped my and my students' RJ work with Pro-Choice CT.

## Maria

My reproductive justice scholarship has largely been informed from my community-engaged work pertaining to infertility and access to alternative family-building care. Like most feminist scholars, I incorporate my research into my teaching, mentoring, and service as I position myself as a scholar-activist. So, when I learned of an open call to create a funded "laboratory" of sorts at my university, I jumped on this and emailed my colleague, Rachel Bloom-Pojar, who was also engaging in reproductive health research. Reviewing the call, Rachel and I discussed at length two criteria: (1) the formation of an interdisciplinary research team; and (2) how we may frame the focus of this laboratory. For us, both criteria informed each other.

It was a stipulation of the laboratory's application that we construct a lab composed of scholars outside of our discipline/department. Knowing the need to stress interdisciplinarity, we had to develop a project broad enough to support a variety of disciplinary perspectives. By discussing the criteria, we identified a series of graduate students and faculty members from a variety of disciplines whom we could ask to participate. Talking through the disciplinary expertise identified (geography, psychology, Puerto Rican studies, writing and rhetoric), we mapped the various ways our scholarship related to reproductive health connected. One faculty participant came to the



lab with research related to biopolitics and race connected to Milwaukee's infant mortality reduction program. Another lab member was well-versed in RJ because of their qualitative research on experiences of obstetric violence in Puerto Rico. For many graduate students, their disciplinary expertise was still developing, yet they saw the opportunity to join the lab as an alternative learning experience ripe with available mentorship. Our various perspectives led us to question what we should call or theme the laboratory. For instance, we asked: should we call this "The Reproductive Health Story Lab?" Such a title captured the humanities-based method of storytelling dominant in the lab, yet it also seemed to be less inclusive of those who had expertise in fields of social science, who didn't have much experience with story as method. As such, we proposed a more general title, "The Reproductive Justice Collaboratory," which at its core represented SisterSong's tenets and wove together all of our individual projects and scholarly disciplinary training. Notably, there was a felt unease with claiming this title largely because of our own embodied orientations: six out of the nine members were cis white women. And while there was some BIPOC representation, it should be noted that the three BIPOC members occupied more precarious positions, one was an undergraduate student and single mother, one was a graduate student who lived 90-minutes away from the university, and one was an academic faculty member who taught five sections of students each week.

Knowing the collective history of reproductive justice and its roots in BIPOC reproductive experiences, we spent much time at the beginning of the collaboratory reading, reflecting, and discussing what it means for us to claim this title given our collective representation. In this way, we situated the history of reproductive justice as a way to listen and learn from influential leaders of the RJ movement (i.e., Loretta Ross and Monica Simpson) to consider how we may maintain inclusivity by amplifying diversity, despite the majority of our lab being white cis women. As we sat and wrestled with this during meetings, we openly acknowledged the limitations of our positionality with this term but also used this awareness to guide the various projects we wanted to fund with the monies granted. Such actions were an attempt to listen to those not at the table and ponder how we could be accountable to those perspectives not actively there.

*For both Megan and Maria, listening was key to starting reproductive justice work, finding the stakeholders most affected by an issue and hearing from them about what steps should come next. Erica led that process for the long-term work Megan took on with her students in Hartford, and Maria and Rachel worked collaboratively with the multiple lab participants who wanted their work represented in the name and description of their work while considering the relationship of the name to other community-based RJ organizations. Listening for us is then a multi-faceted practice guiding out accountability.*

## Embodied Risk Taking

To work toward reproductive justice in coalition with others requires accounting for one's own positionality. Depending upon how a scholar-activist comes to reproductive justice work, they may need to de-center themselves not only in how they listen but also how they act. Such personal accounting for one's own embodied orientation to an RJ project is important given the origins of reproductive justice, which are rooted in BIPOC experiences. To claim reproductive justice work as part of a scholar's identity, they must account for how that scholarship benefits or addresses the most marginal in order to align with the objective of how and why RJ as a coalitional term formed. This action demands a more *critical* embodied approach to reproductive justice work. Meaning, while bodies and attention to embodiment have always been important to advancing reproductive justice, we believe there is a need and value to adopting a more critical embodiment orientation to RJ. A critical embodied approach understands that "feminist rhetorical studies often recenters the needs of the most privileged" and in response "choose[s] to attend to the specific needs of BIPOC, queer, trans, D/disabled, M/mad, and im/migrant peoples whose gender, worth, and entelechy are determined by their utility" (Cedillo, et al.). Adopting this approach demands then that RJ scholar-activists consider how their positionality is critical to what actions they can and should take. For our work to yield reproductive justice, not only must we account and be consciously aware of our own embodied positionalities and privileges, we must also not be limited by them. That is, for us as cis white women, we believe in the need to embrace the uncomfortable and to take risks when they appear to align and support the needs of the most marginal. It also means recognizing moments where we need to step aside or back down.

### Megan

One important example of embodied risk taking that has been key in my RJ community-campus partnerships is speaking out at public hearings. When my students and I first approached Erica about helping with the Hartford city ordinance, she asked if we would be willing to read testimony from those directly impacted by the CPCs who were uncomfortable discussing their experiences publicly. As Erica explains, "Because of the stigma around abortion, particularly in Black communities in Hartford, none of the women felt comfortable publicly testifying" (Hartline et al. 131-132). My group of mostly white students from outside of Hartford had the embodied positionality that made them safer to testify publicly. Additionally, as current Hartford residents they were able to join a coalition of Hartford residents and activists to speak back to the largely white, largely non-resident opposition. Similarly, when the legislation moved to the statehouse, voices were again needed to share their stories and support, and, especially, to read testimony from those most affected.

In our collaborative article, Eleanor Faraguna shared her experiences reading testimony in the Legislative Office Building (LOB) for the Committee on Public Health. In addition to her discus-

sion of why people may not want to divulge their private medical information to a public audience, she notes the way that public hearings are set up to discourage large portions of the public from showing up to share their concerns. Eleanor writes,

Certain populations targeted by the CPCs, such as working-class communities, are also systematically disenfranchised in legislative proceedings because of the time, access, and privilege needed to navigate this system. Here my positionality and privilege as a white person and a college student provided me access to a process that other people are denied. I stayed in the building for extended hours and testified without great risk to myself, but that is not the case for many others, which is an essential shortcoming of this system of justice. (139)

She, and all of the mostly white collaborators in this community-campus partnership, recognize that we stand to lose much less than others by taking public stands for reproductive justice, but we also recognize that we are not the population most impacted by these issues and do what we can to raise the concerns brought to us by those who *are* deeply impacted and want to see change but are also more at risk when sharing their own experiences and goals.

## Maria

As the lab wrestled with our embodied positionalities, we used our meetings as a space to openly reflect and process how to move forward on a collective reproductive justice project. Many of us were interested and invested in how reproductive justice issues impacted Milwaukeeans. For instance, we frequently circulated news articles that claimed Milwaukee as a city with particularly alarming racial and ethnic disparities in maternal and infant health outcomes. Alarmed by the statistics and traumatic stories these articles included, we thought that our lab could develop a collective project related to this local issue. However, as we discussed that idea, more hesitation emerged. First, none of us (to my knowledge) had direct lived experience with this topic. The lack of embodied lived experience would create significant challenges with how we built trust with those who had experienced, for instance, Black infant or maternal mortality. Second, as we began investigating the topic, we became aware of multiple local, grassroots organizations and community doulas who were already doing much of the “on the ground” work. The optics of a university-funded laboratory, consisting largely of cis white women, attempting to create a project on the topic seemed in many ways antithetical and harmful to the work already established by these organizations. To account for the ways in which our embodied positionalities (because of our collective race, sexuality, and university-affiliation) served as a productive process to guide how we move forward as a lab, we asked: How could we de-center our embodied positionalities in order to build connections and trust with leaders in Milwaukee, many of whom occupied more marginalized positions? This question served as a guiding framework to assess any community reproductive justice project we, as a collaboratory, wanted to take on. And in centering such a question, we had

to accept risk. Risk in that our collective, privileged positions could pose a threat and even be a barrier to doing reproductive justice work in our community. Simply stated, we knew that because of our own embodied positionalities, some community members would perhaps reject our outreach; and, ultimately, we had to become comfortable with that reality and accept the risk that we maybe should not be pursuing such work.

*In both projects, Megan and Maria saw that they needed to de-center themselves as people who were not most impacted by the issue at hand, but their positionality did put them into particular positions to move their issues forward. De-centering, however, does not mean excusing oneself from the issue and the action needed to improve justice. Rather, de-centering requires the ability to de-privilege oneself and thus become more uncomfortable in spaces perhaps where one is often more comfortable than multiply marginalized individuals. By de-centering, and thus de-privileging our perspectives, we become not only more accountable but more suited to work alongside those whose embodied experiences are not our own*

## **Reciprocal Action**

As our work continues, we always have to consider what makes our actions reciprocal by asking how is this work mutually beneficial for all parties involved? Community writing scholars have frequently discussed why reciprocity and accountability matter (Alvarez, Riley Mukavetz, Shah, Opel and Sackey) in ensuring that work advances the community, not just a scholar's career. To be scholar-activists who take on coalitional reproductive justice work, our actions must be deeply embedded in reciprocal partnerships and that these partnerships may require rethinking for whom and how our work benefits those communities most impacted. Reciprocal action in this way may move us towards producing less traditional forms of scholarship and, instead, ask us to reimagine how our positions as scholar-activists can redirect or repurpose our institutional privileges in order to advance the needs of community organizers.

## Megan

For me, reciprocity hinges on doing work that is focused on moving toward justice, no matter what that looks like for my career. Partnerships require push and pull, give and take. My collaborations with Pro-Choice CT never started and ended within the confines of the semester or stuck within the parameters of the specific projects we designed. Those projects were built to extend Pro-Choice CT's capacity and produce work they might not have been able to do otherwise, while also deepening student understanding of the intricacies of social action, policy research, and how inward and outward facing communications foster change. But my (and many of my students') work with Pro-Choice CT did not stop there. A lot of what we did involved showing up: for hearings, for rallies, for discussions, for the people and organizations that existed in coalition with Pro-Choice CT, for the bills that forwarded justice, and for the people of Hartford. I've

attended outdoor rallies for reproductive justice in the rain. I've spent hours in the LOB waiting to testify. I've brought in Pro-Choice CT as speakers at activist meetings and college functions. I've lobbied my representatives on bills forwarded by Pro-Choice CT's coalition toward social justice. I've cheered on and commiserated with Pro-Choice CT staff. I've watched a CT legislative vote on my computer in Tennessee as a bill that I helped work on was finally passed four years after it was initially introduced. None of those moments were in my annual review materials. They aren't on my CV. I don't get "credit" for doing them except, I guess, in that I'm talking about them here in this article years later. But these are the moments that make up coalitional, reciprocal action, and detailing the less flashy work of these partnerships makes visible the reciprocal action that is more about the *activist* part of being a RJ scholar-activist, than the scholar part that shows up in publications, presentations, and course projects.

## Maria

As the lab gained more knowledge about those leading reproductive changemaking in Milwaukee and the issues at stake, we began to question what actions the lab could and should take. Who would our work benefit? What would be of use to those who were already embedded in the reproductive justice landscape of Milwaukee? How could we redirect our funding and various privileges we had because of our university affiliation? In asking these questions, we began to identify what we offered based on (or given) our positionalities and expertise. *Individually*, many of us were working on story-based projects<sup>2</sup> related to a reproductive health topic (infertility, reproductive loss, COVID-19's impact on reproductive care, and experiences of Latinx health promoters). Story was a consistent theme across our work and seemed relevant to many of the reproductive justice organizers who were circulating stories as a strategy to resist legislative threats brought about by the reversal of Roe. *Collectively*, we remained invested in community experiences of reproductive justice and in experiences that more ethically incorporated community knowledge and expertise in university settings.

By mapping our collective and individual orientations, we arrived at the conclusion that there could be benefits to bringing together Milwaukee's reproductive justice organizations in order to better understand and discuss how they see and use storytelling as a tool for RJ organizing. Such a realization sparked the idea for an event titled "The Power of Stories in Advancing Reproductive Justice." The aim for this event was to create a space where researchers and RJ community advocates in Milwaukee could work together to identify how they use and center story/ies to advance action around reproductive justice. We saw this as a way to evoke reciprocity and action in our program design and in the labor required to participate.

First, the event program was a space for participants to collectively share their own repro-

---

2 At this point, the two lab members with social science expertise were no longer able to actively participate and as a result the lab took on a more humanities-based identity.

ductive health projects with each other, learn more about what others across the city were doing, and foster future connections to further collaborations. Second, the labor to participate was minimal. The event was *intentionally* free: there were no proposals to submit, and participants could bring what they wanted (some brought handouts/brochures, others brought just themselves). We made these decisions as we recognized the labor they were already doing as RJ leaders. Finally, we fed everyone and fed them with *good* food. This mattered because not only did it sustain conversations, but it was a small gesture to thank those who showed up for their work and commitment to doing this work and sharing their knowledge with not just us but with all who attended the event. Through these small, micro decisions, the action we took did not consist of grand gestures but rather the action of planning and hosting this event consisted of small steps facilitating moments for us to learn from those already “doing the work”; thereby de-centering our experience and allowing us to slowly build community relationships, and hopefully trust, that could further any next steps we would perhaps want to take as a laboratory.

*Megan and Maria both prioritize small, unflashy moments as the heart of what they consider reciprocal action. It isn't giving a speech or taking credit. It's doing what we can to expand capacity, not take charge or overshadow, of the excellent work already being done. This leads to the question: how do we shift institutional systems so those most affected feel more comfortable centered within the advocacy work? Asking such a question is imperative if we believe universities (and those that work for them/study at them) are accountable to their communities' needs.*

### **Reflective Recombination**

Reproductive justice, like all kinds of social action, is not a static process, and these accountability practices must happen iteratively as this work rarely follows a precise linear timeline. For instance, Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, and Beth Godbee write about sustaining commitments to racial justice and advocate for a framework that encourages “continually doing the self-work and work-with-others...[which supports] a recursive theory-practice-theory- practice life allowing us to never stop learning and acting with our local, national, and international communities” (37). While we contend that a racial justice framework cannot be substituted for a reproductive justice framework, we find Diab, Ferrel, and Godbee’s insights useful to think through a framework necessary to sustain recommitting to reproductive justice. Reflecting and recommitting means doing, as Diab, Ferrel, and Godbee put it, the “self-work and work-with-others” to understand and adapt our approaches to justice to account for the many lived experiences of reproductive issues—including racial justice and, we would add, trans justice.

For us, reproductive justice scholar-activists are answerable to our communities, and taking these reflections forward as we recommit is key for a reproductive *justice* approach that centers those most affected by our contemporary political and social landscape. This work takes time, which can be hard to accept given the increased harm reproductive bodies face with the reversal

of Roe. Nonetheless, we believe that for reproductive justice scholar-activists “tending to the slow work of collaboration can make visible the moments that foster coalitional commitments that center the aims of community-driven research within the community/ies” (Novotny et al. 36).

## Megan

In Hartford, recommitment was not particularly difficult for me. I was in regular communication with folks at Pro-Choice CT. I kept up-to-date on current legislative issues. My students continued to do reproductive justice focused projects. And then I moved to Tennessee in 2020, and recommitment has been more difficult. I immediately tried to jump into similar legislatively focused advocacy work here, but despite several attempts, I never quite found a way to partner with local RJ organizations. I have spent a lot of time reflecting on why it didn't work, sitting in the messiness of what RJ entails and focusing on the broad parameters of SisterSong's definition. What I've come to realize is that the work I have been part of—largely centered around food access and girls' literacy education—is part of reproductive justice work. Even as someone who has spent years trying to work on reproductive *rights* as a means of enacting *justice*, mentally aligning my current partnerships with reproductive justice is difficult, particularly following the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. But when I think of the conversations with Chattanooga residents and organizers over the last three years, the real needs I'm trying to meet are enabling people to “parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities” (SisterSong). Providing access to healthy, locally-grown produce through City Farms and offering strong mentoring relationships and educational opportunities through Girls Inc. are important ways to create safe and sustainable communities where all children, and people for that matter, can thrive. Being a part of that work *is* reproductive justice.

## Maria

In April 2022, we hosted our RJ storytelling community network event. Just before the event, we made the decision to reapply for another year of laboratory funding. This time, however, we would be structured more as a working group rather than a large “laboratory.” This decision was strategic and responded to the realization that we had come to throughout the year: we needed to better understand our lab's identity in relationship to Milwaukee's reproductive justice landscape.

To be honest, we were unsure for a while whether we would reapply at all. Throughout the year, our laboratory organizing felt a bit scattered. While we had intentionally thought we would design a large RJ project focused on Milwaukee, tensions persisted with how we would be accountable to those most impacted by reproductive injustice in the city as well as those leading the conversation and action. At the same time, we also began to connect with new persons across the university who were doing RJ in their own departments but were in search of a more collective, collaborative unit to support the embodied toll of RJ scholarship/teaching. These university needs

encouraged us to ultimately reapply with a slightly larger group of individuals, though still predominantly cis and white. Shortly after our storytelling event, we were informed that we were indeed funded again. This news was largely welcomed as many of the exit surveys we collected after that event indicated a desire to continue offering similar network programming to invest in those who were committed to RJ action in Milwaukee.

To this day, though, some hesitation remains about how we may best move forward with positioning the lab as an entity that supports reproductive justice organizations. The outcome of what continuing our lab means remains murky at best. Perhaps new relationships will emerge with some community leaders, perhaps a collaborative community-engaged project will result, but more likely on-the-ground, experiential learning about what is at stake when committing ourselves to reproductive justice action will emerge. These lessons, while not resulting in a direct CV line, perhaps are more valuable than a six-figure grant. Rather than resulting in an institutionally-desired outcome, this work underscores the value of sowing the seeds and cultivating community relationships for reproductive justice action.

*Recommitment requires reflection—thinking through what is and is not working within our current scholar-activist approaches. For Megan, that means sitting with the lack of direct connection to reproductive rights in her justice work. And for Maria, it involves considering how to move forward to continue offering networking space for scholars and activists while centering the needs of the community. For whom are we (and our work) accountable to and why?*

## Conclusion

Collectively, our stories underscore the reality that to practice accountability for RJ scholar-activists requires a lot of *humility*. As scholars, we are often pursuing knowledge that drives us into a particular niche, becoming one of a handful of people taking on a set of questions, ideas, and processes. Coalitional RJ work is pretty explicitly *not* that. As scholars we have to recognize that we are stepping into a longstanding activist tradition built by Black and Brown women *and* that we are taking on questions and concerns of the body that no one person will ever have *all* the embodied knowledge of. There are almost always going to be other people, particularly RJ activists, who have been doing this longer and have a better understanding of what is needed than we do.

We can join the coalition and take part in the work, but we are likely not going to be leaders if we want to prioritize justice work rather than opportunities and credentials that make us look good. This can lead to tensions for feminist scholar-activists who want to embrace a rhetorics of reproductive justice framework, because those commitments may not neatly align with a tangible scholarly product. We share this fact knowing that Megan and Maria both embody privilege in being cis white women, employed in tenure-track jobs, who have less to risk than our BIPOC colleagues and/or those working in contingent faculty positions or as graduate students. We recog-



nize that positionality and privilege matter for feminist scholar-activists committing to reproductive justice. And we make this clear because we see our ability to do this work at our institutions and to write about our experiences here as an opportunity not everyone has, but we make the decision to write about the importance of RRJ in feminist rhetoric work in order for those in more precarious positions of power to use this piece to make arguments at their institutions about why and how their RRJ coalitional work matters.

These four practices—inclusive listening, embodied risk taking, reciprocal action, and reflective recommitment—offer one way to think through how to be accountable to your community and those who are already doing the work there. Though we have categorized different portions of our stories as relevant to a particular practice, you can also see how these practices are interrelated and co-occurring. Maria’s process of reflective recommitment involved inclusive listening to other RJ activist-scholars at her institution. Megan’s discussion of iterative reciprocal action shows all the ways she is regularly recommitting to the work by following the lead of RJ activists and listening to what would benefit them. We realize that these stories center our experiences and do not account for our BIPOC, queer and trans colleagues who also do this work. That is undoubtedly a limitation to this piece, and we call that into attention as we hope that by sharing our stories readers will ponder and reflect on their own embodied positionalities and experiences as they may consider (re)committing to reproductive justice action. Ultimately, we see this piece as one small step in advancing feminist rhetorician’s ability to contribute as accountable allies to the reproductive justice coalition building happening in communities today.

## Works Cited

Alvarez, Steven. *Community Literacies en Confianza: Learning from Bilingual After-School Programs*. National Councils of Teachers of English, 2017.

Baker-Bell, April. *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*. Routledge, 2020.

Brook Adams, Heather. *Enduring Shame: A Recent History of Unwed Pregnancy and Righteous Reproduction*. South Carolina Press, 2022.

Browdy, Ronisha. “Black Women’s Rhetorics: A Conversation Starter for Naming and Claiming a Field of Study.” *Peitho*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2021.

Carey, Tamika. “Necessary Adjustments: Black Women’s Rhetorical Impatience.” *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2020.

Cagle, Lauren. “Becoming ‘Forces of Change’: Making a Case for Engaged Rhetoric in Sci-

ence, Technology, Engineering, and Medicine.” *Poroi*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1-13.

Cedillo, Christina, et al. “Rhetorical Approaches to Critical Embodiment Diverse Perspectives on Academia, Activism, and Everyday Life.” Call for Proposals. 2023. [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cWmfEOgrHYmtrZKPn5mINe728\\_G42clKQqQcrNsuVJg/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cWmfEOgrHYmtrZKPn5mINe728_G42clKQqQcrNsuVJg/edit).

Crenshaw, Kimberle. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-99.

Davis, Angela Y. and Ibram X. Kendi. Interview by Jeff Chang. City Arts & Lectures, 03 Feb. 2019, <https://www.cityarts.net/event/angela-davis-ibram-x-kendi/>. Accessed 27 May 2023.

DeVoss, Dànielle. “Formidable Females: Pink-collar Workplaces, Computers, and Cultures of Resistance.” *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practicie: Communities, Pedagogies, and Social Action*, edited by Kris Blair, Radhika Gajjalaand, and Christine Tulley. Hampton Press, 2009, pp. 345-384.

Diab, Rasha, et al. “Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable.” *Performing Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*, edited by Frankie Condon and Ver-shawn Young. Parlor Press, 2017, pp. 19-39.

DiCaglio, Sara, and Lori Beth De Hertogh. Rhetorical Pasts, Rhetorical Futures: Reflecting on the Legacy of Our Bodies, Ourselves and the Future of Feminist Health Literacy. A special issue for *Peitho*, 2019 vol., 21, no. 3.

Eble, Michelle, and Lynée Lewis Gaillet. *Stories of Mentoring: Theory and Praxis*. Parlor Press, 2008.

Fishman, Jenn, and Lauren Rosenberg. “Guest Editors’ Introduction: Community Writing, Community Listening.” *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1-4.

Frost, Erin, and Angela Haas. “Seeing and Knowing the Womb: A Technofeminist Reframing of Fetal Ultrasound toward a Decolonization of our Bodies.” *Computers and Composition*, vol. 43, 2017, pp. 88–105.

Gagnon, John, and Maria Novotny. “Revisiting Research as Care: A Call to Decolonize Narratives of Trauma.” *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2020, pp. 486-501.

Glenn, Cheryl. *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity through the Renais-*

sance. Southern Illinois University Press, 1997.

Harper, Kimberly C. *The Ethos of Black Motherhood in America: Only White Women Get Pregnant*. Lexington Books, 2021.

Hartline, Megan Faver, et al. "Coalition Building for Reproductive Justice: Hartford as a Site of Resistance against Crisis Pregnancy Centers." *Reflections*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2020, pp. 121-50.

Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2008.

Knoblauch, Abby and Marie Moeller. *Bodies of Knowledge: Embodied Rhetorics in Theory and Practice*. Utah State University Press, 2022.

Kynard, Carmen. "'All I Need is One Mic': A Black Feminist Community Meditation on the Work, the Job, and the Hustle (& Why So Many of Y'all Confuse This Stuff)." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2020, pp. 5-24.

Licon, Adela and Karma Chávez. "Relational Litarceries and their Coalitional Possibilities." *Peitho*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 96-107.

Lorde, Audre. "An Open Letter to Mary Daly." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984, 2007, pp. 66-71.

Matzke, Aurora, et al. "Coalition as Commonplace: Centering Feminist Scholarship, Pedagogies, and Leadership. Call for Proposals. 2022. [https://groups.google.com/g/wpa-announcements/c/Fl6bap-\\_e1M?pli=1](https://groups.google.com/g/wpa-announcements/c/Fl6bap-_e1M?pli=1)

Manthey, Katie. "Expanding Feminist Rhetorics; Toward an Embodied Fat Rhetorics." *Peitho*, under review.

Martinez, Aja Y. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. National Council of Teachers of English, 2020.

Mckoy, Temptaous T. Y'all Call It Technical and Professional Communication, We Call It #fortheculture: The Use of Amplification Rhetorics in Black Communities and Their Implications for Technical and Professional Communication Studies. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Eastern Carolina University, 2019.

- Novotny, Maria, and Lori Beth De Hertogh. "Amplifying Rhetorics of Reproductive Justice within Rhetorics of Health and Medicine." *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2022, pp. 374-402.
- Novotny, Maria, et al. "Community-Driven Concepts to Support TPC Coalition Building in a Post-Roe World." *Communication Design Quarterly*, a special issue on "Making Coalitional Practice Visible in Community-Engaged Communication Design and Research", vol. 11, no. 2, 2023, pp. 28-37.
- Opel, Dawn and Donnie Johnson Sackey. "Reciprocity in Community-Engaged Food and Environmental Justice Scholarship." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1. 2019, pp. 1-6.
- Osorio, Ruth. "Constellating with our Foremothers: Stories of Mothers Making Space in Rhetoric and Composition." *Constellations: A Cultural Rhetorics Publishing Space*. 2021. <https://constell8cr.com/articles/mothers-making-space-rhet-comp/> Accessed 01 June 2023.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1999, pp. 195-224.
- Rhodes, Jacqueline. "Slutwalk is Not Enough: Notes toward a Critical Feminist Rhetoric." *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics*, edited by Jonathan Alexander, Susan Jarratt, and Nancy Welch. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018, pp. 99-104.
- Riley Mukavetz, Andrea M. "Towards a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology: Making Research Matter with Multi-Generational Women from the Little Traverse Bay Band." *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization*, vol. 5, no. 11, 2014, pp. 108-25.
- Ross, Loretta J. "Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism." *Souls*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2017, pp. 286-314.
- Royster, Jacqueline. *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000.
- Russo, Ann. *Feminist Accountability: Disrupting Violence and Transforming Power*. New York University Press, 2018.

Shah, Rachael W. *Rewriting Partnerships: Community Perspectives on Community-Based Learning*. Utah State UP, 2020.

SisterSong. "Reproductive Justice." *SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective*. <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>. Accessed 10 May 2020.

Tetreault, Elliot. "'White Women Voted for Trump': The Women's March on Washington and Intersectional Feminist Futures." *Computers and Composition Online*. 2019. [http://cconline-journal.org/techfem\\_si/01\\_Tetreault/positionalities.html](http://cconline-journal.org/techfem_si/01_Tetreault/positionalities.html) Accessed 28 May 2023.

VanHaitsma, Pamela. *Queering Romantic Engagement in the Postal Age: A Rhetorical Education*. University of South Carolina Press, 2019.

Vinson, Jenna. *Embodying the Problem: The Persuasive Power of the Teenage Mother*. Rutgers University Press, 2018.

Yam, Shui-yin Sharon. "Visualizing Birth Stories from the Margin: Toward a Reproductive Justice Model of Rhetorical Analysis." **Rhetoric Society Quarterly**, vol. 50, no. 1, 2020, pp. 19-34.

