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Contemporary Mural Art, Personhood, and Utopic Visions of Reproductive Justice

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Abstract: This essay argued that, in the post-*Dobbs* era, reproductive justice-themed mural art serves a memorializing function as well as a site of utopic imagining in a time of declining access to reproductive healthcare. The author has used personal experience as a clinic escort to ground a visual rhetorical analysis of three reproductive justice-themed murals across the United States. The essay has identified recurring aesthetic elements in the murals' compositions, including the female gaze, flowers in bloom, haloes, bold directional symbols, and affirming text. Drawing on reproductive justice scholarship and feminist rhetorical theories of place, the author argued that these aesthetic elements counter fetal personhood rhetoric and assert reproductive justice principles.

Keywords: reproductive justice, abortion, mural art, feminist, rhetoric

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As a clinic escort at Planned Parenthood, I am one feature in the rhetorical assemblage that makes up the street politics of abortion. Patients, anti-abortion protesters, bullhorns, healthcare workers, police, police cars, mural art, city signs, business signs, security guards, metro buses: so many elements exist in that clinic's physical space, competing to either provide access to reproductive healthcare or impede it. Protecting access to care in this assemblage makes visceral the knowledge that visual rhetorics are symbolic action: they perform actions with social consequences, constructing reality itself (Swiencicki, 2024). Here is one small rhetorical action I have taken there that may illustrate this point. One afternoon on my clinic escort shift, I noticed a tiny plastic fetus placed in the cracks of the brick wall of our Planned Parenthood building. On that wall, facing the street, is a huge mural of a woman, surrounded by flowers, releasing a bird that is taking flight. The text beside her face states that "your body is your story . . . and only you can write it." About an inch in length, the plastic fetus attempts to undercut a huge artistic rendering of patient-centered care, agency and self-authorship. I removed the plastic fetus, and a new one reappeared the next time I volunteered. What exchange of visual rhetorics are we engaged in, the anti-abortion protester and I? What is it a proxy for?

This experience and others on my escort shift have made me reflect on reproductive justice, visual rhetorics, and street art. In particular, I'm thinking about how our engagement with such visual rhetorics matters for the imaginative horizons of our feminist political activism. My short essay is not a systematic rhetorical study of the vibrant mural art that has emerged across the country around the time of the *Dobbs* decision in 2022, although such a study is needed. Instead, this essay identified the striking similarities in such murals despite their different purposes, artists, sponsors, and locations. I focus on three murals—in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Atlanta, Georgia; and the Planned Parenthood in my city of Rochester, New York—and have argued that they offer examples of "everyday utopias" (Cooper, 2014). In this context, an everyday utopia functions to assert a flourishing reality of reproductive justice amidst a deeply desperate time for reproductive health access.

We need such utopic visual rhetorics because arguments for fetal personhood are ascendant in the United States. In her history of the U.S. fetal personhood movement from the late 1800s to the present, legal scholar Mary Ziegler (2025) shows the durable, mutable nature of this rhetorical frame for the anti-abortion movement. Fetal personhood is an erasure of birthing people from the scene of reproduction. It is enacted through street activism, legislation, and judicial decisions that grant fetuses (and in some cases embryos and fertilized eggs) the same rights as a person. While the question of when life begins remains open for physicians, medical researchers and ethicists alike, Ziegler observes that in the framework of fetal personhood, it is a settled fact that life begins at conception or sooner (implantation). The warrant of the fetal personhood argument is the fundamental threat that the pregnant person poses to their own pregnancy. The warrant does not engage with the social context of the pregnant person, refusing a consideration of the material conditions in which reproduction occurs. The framework leads to the criminalization of miscarriage, surveillance of fertility and pregnancy for any action perceived as harmful to the fetus, restricted access to reproductive healthcare and hormones, refusal to provide healthcare in some states, and refusal of pregnant person's end-of-life directives to favor fetal development in extreme, recent cases.

Access to safe, legal abortion is decreasing, and in its wake emerges the surveillance and criminalization of pregnancy (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2022, p. 427). During this repressive rollback of rights, it is critical for reproductive justice activists to continue to communicate the right to abortion in inclusive, agential, relational terms (Yam & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2023, p. 5). In the *Dobbs* era, a project that examines and promotes reproductive justice visual rhetorics, like mural art, may seem out of touch with the present moment, a kind of retreat into aesthetics when so much harm is being unleashed onto gestating people. Yet public art, whether digitally produced and circulated, or art that is made in the built environments of civic and community spaces, can uniquely communicate the intersectional, queer, antiracist, and decolonial commitments at the core of reproductive justice. Visual rhetorics like public art offer a critical space for invention—for learning anew the feminist hopes, spheres of influence, and the symbols that best meet our political moment.

Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective created the four premises of reproductive justice: the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, to have children, to not have children, and to parent children in safe, healthy environments. It is a movement originated by Black women in 1994 to make visible the ways that inequalities and oppression structures people's decision-making about childbirth and parenting (Ross, 2018). In terms of abortion, reproductive justice rejects the oppositional binary fetus/pregnant person in the scene of reproductive healthcare. This movement insists that abortion be understood through the agency of the pregnant person as they are enmeshed in specific material contexts, precarities, affordances and constraints. I am called back to these four premises time and again as I search for recent mural art across the U.S. that features abortion rights. Artist-activists are aligning around the question of how abortion-seeking people might be rendered in a reproductive justice framework that rejects patriarchy and its many handmaids: racism, ecocide, colonialism, binary gender logics, ableism, misogyny, theocracy. In the pages that follow I have described a few significant aesthetic trends in public mural art featuring reproductive justice arguments. This mural art supports community organizing about reproductive threats and rights; this support happens in many ways, but two that are most striking to me are murals that serve primar-

ily as memorials to those who died while being denied reproductive healthcare, and murals that primarily feature reproductive justice utopias. I focused on the "conceptual lines" featured across these recent murals, the combination of textual, design, and compositional elements that carry the ideological weight of the work (Cooper, 2014). Conceptual lines are dominant rhetorical tropes within cultural logics; conceptual lines make cultural logics visible, giving them shape, form, and narrative realization (Ratcliffe and Jensen, 2022, p. 28). In observing how these conceptual lines recur across states and artists, I have witnessed a coherent aesthetic emerge. In compositions that feature flowers in bloom, directional symbols, haloing, and a compelling, assured female gaze, these conceptual lines achieve two goals: they refigure the repressive visual rhetorics of fetal personhood, and make powerful statements about the relation among agency, the state, and the material conditions of reproduction.

An example is seen in the 2025, Atlanta, Georgia mural "Born Together" by Jasmine Nicole Williams. "Born Together" sheds light on how Georgia's 6-week abortion ban disrupts medically necessary reproductive healthcare and disproportionately impacts Black women (Dahunsi and Kallis, 2025). The mural memorializes the deaths of Amber Nicole Thurman and Candi Miller. Amber Thurman died in 2022 in the hospital from sepsis due to an incomplete medical abortion. A ProPublica investigation (Surana, 2024, September 14) revealed that her death was determined by Georgia's maternal mortality committee to be preventable, a casualty of Georgia's new 6-week abortion ban which prohibits care for women outside this timeframe. Candi Miller died at home in 2022 of complications from a medical abortion, managing it alone, as a second *ProPublica* investigation described (Surana, 2024, September 18), because she feared repercussions from Georgia's 6-week abortion ban. By honoring their lives, murals like "Born Together" inform community members about the new threats to abortion care from laws unrelated to standard medical protocols. Thurman and Miller are centered in the composition and surrounded by a halo of yellow light. The two women meet the viewer's gaze, smiling and self-possessed. Through this portrayal the mural refuses to allow viewers to cast aspersions on the women's dignity; or suggest each woman's death was an individual case and not part of a newly imposed political framework; or generally erase the tragic impact of this legislation. Indeed, Williams wanted her design decisions, like framing the composition with a gold chain and green bandana print, to suggest the persistence of Black and Latina cross-cultural solidarity amidst reproductive oppression (Dahunsi and Kallis, 2025). The placement of magnolias in bloom on Thurman and Miller's torsos suggest an honoring of their fertility, bodies agential and free from the state's policing, penalizing, and experimenting with the lives of women of color.

Figure 1, "Born Together"

Along with the halo surrounding the two figures, the flowers in bloom are linked to a second, related trend I have seen in community-based, reproductive justice mural art: utopic representations of justice achieved. In case studies of what she calls everyday utopias, Davina Cooper (2014) investigates the ability of "adventurous social spaces" (p. 227) to impact what we can imagine as we galvanize a social justice politics of change. Everyday utopias are where "imagining and actualization intertwine" (p. 221). They work through "proximity" to everyday life (p. 221), revealing the potential of imagined futures in and among the constraints, abuses, and challenges of the now. If the rhetorical force of everyday utopias happens "through concepts in which imagining and actualization appear to converge" (p. 224), I'd argue that the concept of flowers in bloom—like the magnolias in the foreground of the "Born Together" mural—imagine for viewers the right to health, and the freedom to manage one's fertility with the support of medical professionals. That imagining could translate into actualizing those rights in the form of spreading awareness, collational activism, and pressuring representatives. The title "Born Together" suggests that a strong, uncompromising solidarity movement for reproductive justice was "born" in the wreckage of these women's deaths. This title implies a critique of the logic of fetal personhood—which demands the requirement of forced pregnancy and gestation and an erasure of the pregnant person's agency—the very logic that undergirded the abortion ban that prevented Thurman and Miller each from receiving proper care. The title seems to invoke this logic in order to critique it and confer a kind of new birth to Thurman and Miller. If everyday utopias marshal "the capacity of concepts to condense the movement between actualization and imagining," it means that "some lines will socially triumph over (potential and actual) other ones" (Cooper, p. 225). In expressing lives cut

short, the conceptual lines in the mural combine to represent Thurman and Miller as figures of access, rights, and justice, potentially influencing public vocabularies, practices, and notions of rights (Condit, 1989, p. 8-9).

As we see in "Born Together," the reproductive justice movement has offered an important intervention in the fetal personhood frame. Reproductive justice has asserted that reproduction happens in a complex web of social relations and material constraints. Within the claim that people have the right *not* to parent is a scene of agency, invention, and exigence. Centered is the agency of, for example, the pregnant person where a competitive notion of personhood is replaced with one that the ethicist Margaret Little (1999) might define as one of consent, one that is relational, enmeshed, and complex (p. 305; p. 312). As a scene of invention, the pregnant person holds the decision for action based on the assessment of the kairotic horizon of possibility: what is a family to me? How do I want to craft one? Within what conditions and structures of support? Is parenting possible, safe, or desirable to me now? Like any rhetorical situation, pregnancy is a scene of exigence: when is the right time to create a family? What is the opportune moment to be seized and how? The acknowledgement of birthing people at the helm of the exigence of pregnancy assaults theocratic, hierarchical constructions of fetal personhood. Reproductive justice first rejects this warrant and then replaces it with a scene of invention occurring in feminist materialist, decolonial, antiracist ecologies of access to care, social support, and physical safety.

In recent murals featuring abortion rights and access, utopic conceptual lines persist across mural compositions: the strong female gaze, flowers in bloom, haloes, directional symbols. Added to these elements are winged creatures, outstretched hands, and written text arguing for the value of personal story and agency. These additional utopic visual rhetorics of reproductive justice flourishing are essential responses to new limits to accessing abortion, to reproductive and hormonal regulation and surveillance, and to criminalization and punishment of those seeking care. An example is this 2019 mural residing on the Planned Parenthood clinic in Rochester, New York, mentioned earlier, spanning the length of the wall facing the street. It is part of a series of murals by Sarah Rutherford (2019) featuring women community organizers titled "Her Voice Carries." The composition is horizontal and has three parts: a bird; a textual affirmation; and the figure of a woman standing before a pink door. The woman is the Mexican-American poet and Rochester community organizer Rachel McKibbens. She is rendered gazing upward, framed by a golden, jeweled halo. Her face is determined, placid, purposeful. McKibbens is adorned by a garland of roses in full bloom that sweep around, behind, and across the length of her arm. Indeed, like Thurman and Miller in "Born Together," her body is rendered as blooms. Following the length of her outstretched arm and open palm, she releases a bird that is taking flight. The image behind McKibbens is a pink door, a reference to the Pink Door Writer's Workshop, a writing retreat she founded for LGBTQI poets of color that culminated in public readings across the city. In an interview on the "Her Voice Carries" website (Rutherford, 2019), McKibbens sums up her motives for doing literary, antiracist, queer-positive work: "It makes us less killable."

Figure 2, "Rachel McKibbens"

It is unclear if the figure of McKibbens represents a person seeking reproductive healthcare or is rather a kind of clinic escort or guide to those seeking care at Planned Parenthood. Either way she is rendered as an affirming, powerful presence. The statement in the center of the mural is McKibbens's: "Your body is your Story/its chapters full of Adventure & Hardships & Living/& only you can Write It." In this affirmation the mural holds a utopic space for patient consent to gestation amidst a thoroughly contested, embattled scene of healthcare (Swiencicki, 2024, p. 30). Through the metaphor of authorship, McKibbens asserts the right to bodily autonomy, and makes the project of having a body a squarely rhetorical enterprise. By invoking storytelling, McKibbens makes the process of having a body an act of self-interpretation, self-creation, self-expression. The "you"—"only you" alone—must grapple with "adventure" and "hardships" and make meaning of them, not deferring to law or custom. As a clinic escort at this Planned Parenthood, I have observed the way the conceptual lines of this affirmation exist in competition with the anti-abortion protesters' signs and arguments, blaring from a bullhorn, based in misinformation, shaming, and the discourse of sin. That the figure of McKibbens is freeing a bird, while speaking this affirmation, offers a soaring directional arc that hovers above the noise of the street politics of reproductive healthcare. Figuring the healthcare seeker as a bird/non-human may invite a degendering of the scene of authorship and agency in seeking care, creating an inclusive rhetoric most aligned with reproductive justice values (Yam & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2025, p. 366).

These conceptual lines—female gaze, extended arm, open hand, flower in bloom, ascending directional cues—also appear across the country in Alberquerque, New Mexico in the 2021 mural by Jodie Herrera. The mural is sponsored by the New Mexico ACLU for the purpose of raising awareness of SB10 and HB 7, bills that would repeal an abortion ban from the 1860s. Herrera is a photorealist oil painter and muralist of Latina, Apache and Comanche ancestry. Her long-term work is an international arts and activism project called Women Across Borders, illustrating the personal journeys of immigrant and refugee women. SB 10 and SB 7

passed in advance of the 2022 Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs* that removed the federal right to abortion. Herrera writes in her Instagram post on the day of the *Dobbs* decision, "Our fate as American women is not to be an oppressed products of 'circumstance' it is to grow into our full potential, positions of power and full equity!"

Herrera's mural, like the ones in Atlanta and Rochester, is rendered in a feminist declarative mode. The mural features a rendering of Tatiana Garcia, a reproductive rights advocate and aspiring doula.

Figure 3: Respect Reproductive Freedom Mural

Like the Rochester mural, the composition offers a three-part scene. On the left is Garcia making direct, assertive eye contact with the viewer. Her extended arm features a simple, rust-colored tattoo of a band of triangles. The center of the composition repeats the triangle design but horizontally this time, framing the command to "respect reproductive freedom." Unlike the softness of the font in the Rochester mural, the font here is in dialogue with the triangle pattern and reads as structural, reinforced, and permanent. The final third of the composition is in shades of pinkish rust and lavender, a new color scheme, and features Garcia's outstretched palm holding a cactus flower in full bloom, framed in a halo of triangles, a scene of fertility and freedom achieved, the gift of reproductive freedom. The directional lines dominate the composition: the vertical triangles insist that we focus on "freedom," and the outstretched arm running the length of the bottom symbolizes what that freedom means when gestational consent is "respected:" a flourishing, thriving, a flower in full bloom. Garcia's meeting the gaze of the viewer is important: to not turn away in an age of heightened bodily surveillance that is especially targeted at poor women, immigrant women, and women of color. Meeting the gaze of the oppressor echoes an observation by Fixmer-Oraiz in her reflection post-*Dobbs*: "The loss of Roe is not only a grave reproductive injustice and an expansion of the security state. It is also an attack on our capacity to organize for rights and justice in the first place" (p. 428). The cactus flower and the triangles that frame it suggest the indigenous southwest decorative tradition. These conceptual lines are

regionally and culturally specific, and represent reproduction in a non-human form; it may be that in doing so Herrera refuses to erase the "coloniality of gender" (Forchieri, 2025, p. 612), where gender alone is unable to account for the imbrication of patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, cis-sexism, racism, and extractivism present at past and present scenes of reproductive control (p. 613). In reproductive justice visual rhetorics, gender is revealed as a "necessary but not definitive condition to capture the scope of oppression" (Forchieri, 2025, p. 609).

The recent murals I have featured in this essay argue against the legal framework of fetal personhood, their conceptual lines revealing a long, sometimes subtle, always high-stakes hegemonic contest. This contest matters, as Loretta Ross (2018) urges us to "work toward the reproductive liberation of people who are socially, culturally, and economically subjugated and whose lives are peripheralized in the arenas of class, gender, and racial struggles" (p. 174). We do this in part, she writes, by paying "close attention to many types of barriers preventing autonomy and self-determination and thereby affecting the symbiotic relationships within communities in which individuals seek to manifest their reproductive options" (p. 174). Scholars examining these barriers as they manifest in visual rhetorics are numerous. Mary Ziegler (2025) and Carol Mason (2022) have carefully charted fetal personhood arguments in the law, and in identity-based Christian nationalist men's movements. Feminist rhetoricians have assessed the visual rhetorics of the anti-abortion movement—from conscripting fetal ultrasound technology to enliven "fetal personhood" arguments (Mitchell, 2001; Wise, 2018); to monuments to the unborn and pilgrimage destinations (Rowland, 2017); to groups occupying campus quads with jumbotrons depicting fake abortion procedures (Mason, 2022); to spectacles of mass assembly on campuses and at clinics, like 40 Days for Life and the March for Life events; to billboards on highways with fear cues about abortion as a Black genocide (Dobbins-Harris, 2017). Taken together, anti-choice visual strategies rely on rhetorics of sin, regret, medical disinformation, spectral horror, conspiracy theories, and the erasure of the pregnant person from the scene of decision-making and the erasure of the context and resources in which decisions are made. These visual arrows combine in the anti-choice quiver to harass those seeking reproductive healthcare (Condit, 1989; Rankin, 2022), or simply act as normalizing, ambient anti-choice messaging for those occupying public space.

As a needed companion to understanding the visual cultures of fetal personhood, we must recognize and create everyday reproductive justice utopias—legislative, artistic, or otherwise. Everyday utopias bring about "new forms of normalization, desire, and subjectivity" (Cooper, 2014, p. 5), and have the potential "to contribute to a transformative politics specifically through the concepts they actualize and imaginatively invoke" (p. 3). The kinds of aesthetics I've featured in this essay are crucial for a post-*Dobbs* landscape. The symbolic weight of these recent murals provoke important questions as we actively imagine a world of reproductive justice. For example, when and how does personhood get figured as human in reproductive justice murals? In murals that serve as memorials to the dead, the human figure seems to matter to retain the memory of what is produced when law becomes divorced from medical protocols, and when religious discourse justifies violence against women. But in murals that serve as utopic visions, we see non-human symbols representing flourishing rights, freedoms, and agency. It seems there is an acknowledgement of the pregnant person as part of an ecosystem of which the fetus is one aspect, an ecosystem that can make the moment an exigent

one for fertility or an impossible one. Centered is a rights-bearing, thinking person in a state of interrelatedness. And yet, how might the fetus be represented in reproductive justice art to communicate the complexity of enmeshment and consent more persuasively? Margaret Little (1999) and Jeannie Ludlow (2008) have separately argued for decades that confronting the reality of the fetus would help the reproductive justice framework clarify its core premises. My battle to remove those plastic fetuses as they get embedded among the bricks of the mural is not helping the larger rhetorical challenge of centering the agency of the pregnant person without erasing the complex scene of decision-making.

We must keep examining what feminist Sara Ahmed (2012) calls "the brick wall" (p. 174): the set of oppressive rhetorical assumptions that structure white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In this essay I have argued that feminist rhetorical approaches to visual culture must continue to make art on "the brick wall," write on the wall, and scale the wall—making deliberate attempts to resist and imagine otherwise. I have argued here for more studies of reproductive justice aesthetics, possibly ones that discuss the ways the current digital and geographic aesthetics align rather than exist in contrast or competition, and help reveal the role of utopic, commemorative, and other activist discourses during times of reproductive healthcare repression. Of the precarity of this moment, Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz (2022) urges that "there is no going back. Moving forward will demand deep imagination and solidarity—and a centering of reproductive justice as a cornerstone most critical to the future of U.S. democracy" (p. 429). With the loss of federal abortion protection, and the increasing state restrictions on services, providers, and legal protections, examining the visual responses to these assaults helps us to understand, develop and promote repeal and resistance.

Biography

Jill Swiencicki is professor of English at St. John Fisher University. Her scholarship identifies rhetorical practices that will increase democratic inclusion and equity. Her recent projects feature contemporary feminist orators in the reproductive justice movement; and the challenges of developing pedagogy in the civic humanities for the present time. Her work appears in such journals as *Prompt: A Journal of Academic Writing Assignments, Women's Studies in Communication, College English, Peitho, Liberal Education*, as well as the recent edited collections *Inclusive Aims: Rhetoric's Role in Reproductive Justice,* and *Feminist Connections: Rhetoric and Activism Across Time, Space, and Place*.

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