

## Teaching Reproductive Politics and Intersectional Empathy through Ethnographic Case Studies

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### Recommended Citation

Howes-Mischel, Rebecca () "Teaching Reproductive Politics and Intersectional Empathy through Ethnographic Case Studies," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 3.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss2/3>

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### Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to Kimberly Kelly for the incisive editorial work and the anonymous reviewers for their generative comments, as well as to Megan Tracy and Mary Thompson for their generous reads.

## Teaching Reproductive Politics and Intersectional Empathy through Ethnographic Case Studies

Amidst a shifting landscape of reproductive politics, our classrooms offer opportunities to move beyond addressing reproductive justice via abstract thought experiments or polarized positions and, instead, center the intersectional relationships between rights, beliefs, and real people's bodies. Over 10 years teaching anthropology and gender studies in a public university in a "purple" state, I've developed an empathy-driven approach to reproductive politics that encourages students to engage people's reproductive decision-making through ethnographic case studies (Crawly et al., 2009). Employing feminist pedagogical principles that stress learning as situated within relations of collaborative inquiry (within the classroom and with course material) and as involving both critical analysis and self-reflection, these activities give students pragmatic resources for addressing the cultural politics of reproduction.

At its heart, ethnography offers a situated process of learning from others "for better understanding the social forces causing suffering and how people might somehow find hope; and ... for being perpetually pulled beyond the horizons of one's own taken-for-granted world" (Nayaran, year, as cited in McGranahan 2020, p. 91). This social immersion is classically linked to the ethnographic research, but can also be cultivated through deep reading of ethnographic texts. Linking ethnography and *empathy*, I highlight emotional and interpersonal dimensions of seeking to understand beyond one's own affective responses in ways that do not reduce the complexity of another's position (Shannon et al., 2021). This pedagogical stance emphasizes that rights emerge in context as they are accessed and understood and prompts students to ask questions about *how* rights are embodied and realized, or challenged and constrained. Finally, the affective dimensions guide students away from a formalist analysis of reproductive choices and toward centering peoples' voices as a source of knowledge, echoing reproductive justice activists' focus on storytelling (Zavella, 2017). This analytic unpacking uses ethnographic case studies for in-class activities that combine feminist pedagogy techniques of critical inquiry and self-reflection. Class assessments reflect the class's emphasis on curiosity and uncertainty and incorporate metacognitive reflections about the learning process of taking seriously experiences different from students' own.

### **Ethnographic Empathy in Practice**

First, students' existing expectations are destabilized through close attention to how seemingly familiar politics take shape in unfamiliar contexts. For example, to uproot students from their taken-for-granted expectations about the universality of U.S. abortion politics, I introduce material from Cuba (Andaya, 2014) or Mexico (Singer, 2022) where participants articulate moral values and

ambivalence using frames of State care and collective responsibility rather than more familiar U.S. debates about individual rights. Almost all students (regardless of political perspective) hit a sticking point with this material; for example, why Cuban women who do not oppose abortion morally say their abortion rates are a problem (Andaya, 2014). Class experiences lean into these “record scratch” moments by untangling both what is happening in the case material and also why it provokes student resistance. For example, students may select examples that challenge or surprise them and work together to identify both cultural, economic, and political forces that influence individuals’ experiences and resources they use to navigate both constraints and opportunities. Next, they visually organize their lists into concept maps and discuss what they learned from close analysis. This final discussion emphasizes the processual nature of analysis and self-reflection rather than a predetermined outcome. Students develop an awareness of how to use cultural relativism—understanding a phenomenon in its own terms and context—as an analytic technique for understanding how reproductive rights are articulated in context alongside deeper awareness of how their perspectives are also shaped by culture.

After outlining the messy worlds of reproductive politics as experienced by asking “what do we need to know about this context to understand how it shapes peoples’ decisions?”, students next apply a reproductive justice lens (Price, 2010; Ross & Solinger, 2017) to situate individuals’ experiences within intersecting matrices of power. For example, we might visually diagram examples from scholarship on the racialization of reproductive injustices from Bridges (2008) or Davis (2019) to ask questions about how racism materializes in the everydayness around pregnancy and birth. In this activity, students first list micro- and macro- influences that contribute to a situation they’ve read about and then visually organize the tangled connections between them. They become attuned to intersectionality in this process by identifying *how* racism, misogyny, and national politics interact (Image 1).

We end by considering “how people might somehow yet find hope,” returning to their concept maps of reproductive injustices to imagine alternative politics of reproductive justice. Drawing on the work of scholar-activists and their own hopeful visions, we rearrange cultural, political, and economic forces to identify potential sites of transformation and map out a vision of social change (Image 2). This concluding exercise reminds students that they too are agents participating in the politics of reproductive justice.

Through these engaged activities, students learn to apply feminist theory to questions about how formal politics shape the diversity of everyday experiences and perspectives inside and outside of the US context. Grounding concepts like the body politic, reproductive aspirations, and bodily autonomy in specific contexts helps students understand these concepts as always embedded in

a broader matrix of power and liberation and as mobilized in both politicized and ostensibly non-political domains.

Critical pedagogical practices teach students that their ideas are not unimportant, but rather that their perspectives are also shaped in time and context. This technique recenters the material realities of people most affected by reproductive inequities as experts of their reproductive decisions and refocuses discussion about students' learning on what they gain by trying to make sense of those decisions rather than whether or not they agree. Accordingly, I assess students based, first, on their ability to recognize and apply core theoretical concepts to explain *how* reproductive politics materialize in a given scenario and, second, on what they can learn from that how-ness. Both course design and assessment emphasize engaged critical thinking, metacognition, and self-reflection rather than either my or their opinions.

### **Concluding Reflection**

I drafted this commentary in the wake of the *Dobbs* decision struck by the rise of public abortion storytelling (Shah, 2022) and person-centered reporting about the decision's impact on pregnant people. Notably, much of the latter coverage has focused on how pregnant people experiencing obstetrical emergencies are caught by restrictive policies that ostensibly exempted them—emphasizing the tragic and material consequences of previous debates that focused only on abstracted positions. I suggest that this proliferation of news stories illustrates how developing empathy for individual people as caught in shifting politics can be a first step toward understanding how they reflect more generalized patterns. Yoking the exceptional to the everyday, this analytic approach helps students (and publics) develop more nuanced and contextualized engagement with reproductive justice.

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Howes-Mischel: Ethnographic Empathy  
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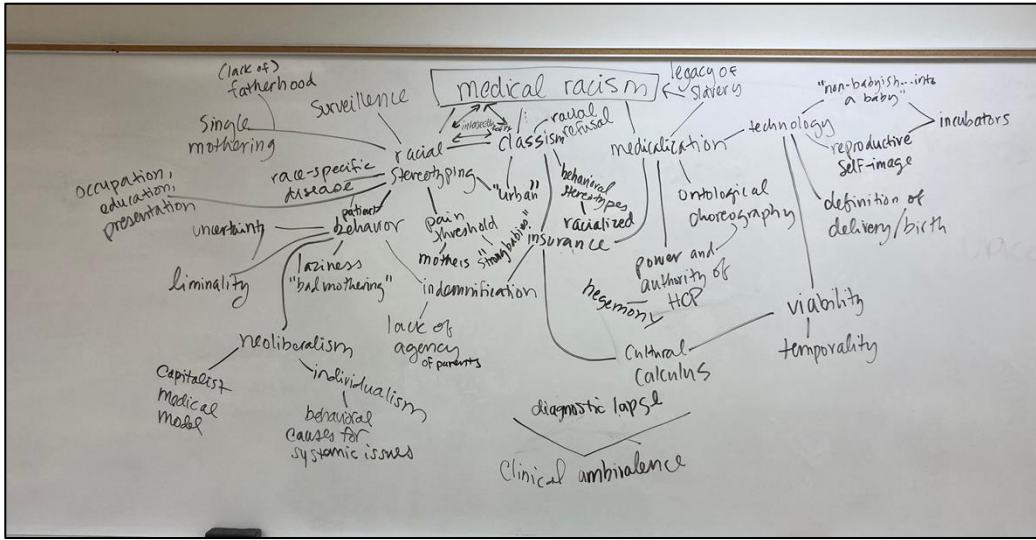


Image 1: Concept map students drew based on ethnographic material from Davis (2019) focused on how medical racism shapes reproductive experiences.

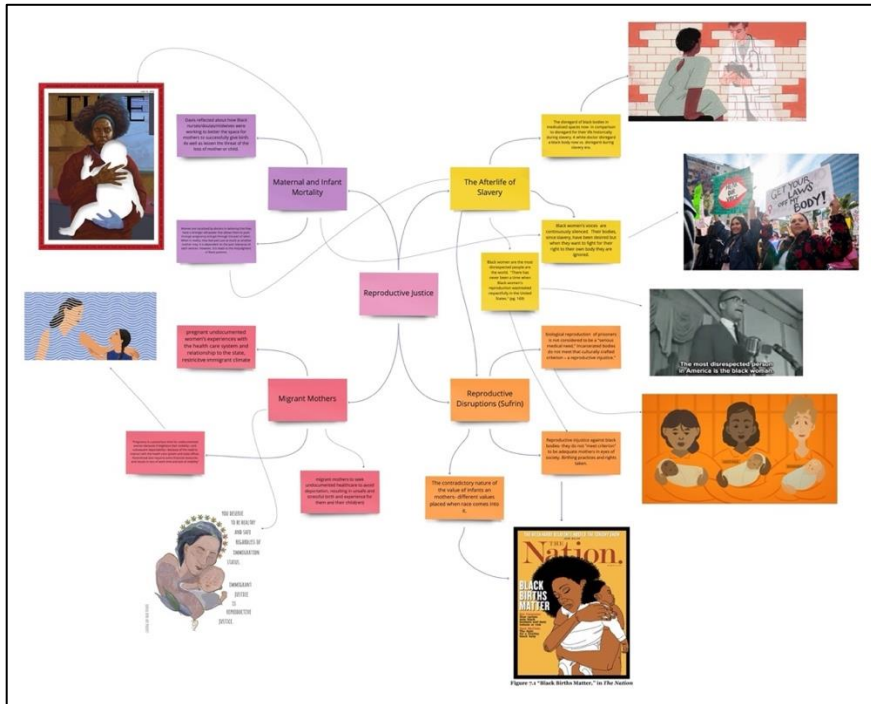


Image 2: Students drew on course material to identify nodes of reproductive injustices and added textual and visual materials to articulate their vision of reproductive justice using the online collaboration platform Miro.